The Pillaging of
Ban Chiang

Artifacts from a site in Thailand feed the illicit world trade in antiquities

The purpose of Early Man is to provide accounts of archaeology in the New World...discussions on all dimensions of this discipline as expressed in research conducted at sites throughout the Americas. But, occasionally, some happening in the archaeology of Africa, Asia or Europe is so poignant, so timely, that we cannot overlook it. Such is the case in the looting of the site of Ban Chiang in northeastern Thailand as reported by the late Dr. Chester Gorman.

—Stuart Struever

By Chester F. Gorman

I have been asked to present the case of the looting and reconstruction of Ban Chiang, a major Southeast Asian archaeological site. The history is not old: Ban Chiang became known only during the middle 1960s, yet by 1972, five or six years later, no major undisturbed areas of the site were left intact. In spite of this, Ban Chiang provides some of the most interesting data for the understanding of Asian prehistory, as...
Red-on-buff pots in a Ban Chiang burial dating to 200 B.C. As collectors and dealers create the market for such antiquities, says the author, so they insure the destruction of a country's cultural heritage.

 well as a case history in the development of organized looting. It is not often that a site reveals totally unknown, yet advanced and innovative, cultures, and there are few sites in the world that span 6,000 years, from the late Stone Age through the beginning of the Historic Periods. Sites matching the size, richness and preservation of Ban Chiang are rare. It is one kilometer long by one-half kilometer wide, and raises seven meters above the surrounding fields. It contains habitation layers and over 15,000 burials, many of them well to lavishly-appointed. In many cases, even wood, fiber and silk have been preserved over the last 4,000 to 5,000 years. Ban Chiang is indeed a rare and beautiful site. Unfortunately, the ways in which it has been and is still being looted are common and in many ways grotesque.

Ban Chiang, both the current village and the archeological site, is located on the northern basin of the Korat Plateau, a high rolling plain comprising northeastern Thailand. It was first listed as an archeological site in 1960 by an inspector of the Thai Fine Arts Department, region 7. In 1966, the village was visited by Steven Young, an undergraduate student who was impressed by the antiquities he saw, and carried some vessels and shards back to his Thai hostess in Bangkok. His hostess, a wealthy, titled philanthropist and collector, at once appreciated the beauty and uniqueness, if not the scientific value, of the material. However, his hostess did have scientifically-minded friends, and one, Elizabeth
Lyons, then with the Ford Foundation in Bangkok, arranged to have some of the shards dated by the thermoluminescence method at the University of Pennsylvania. The resulting fourth and fifth millennium B.C. dates were released in 1970, and were startling. The discovery was unique and spectacular in Asia; but in universal terms, also, it was very old. During the late 1960s, the National Museum in Bangkok focused its attention on the site, and it was visited by a number of museum officials. Test excavations were carried out by the Thai Fine Arts Department in 1967, and again in 1972. In 1973, joint Thai Fine Arts Department and University of Pennsylvania excavations began, and they continued through 1976. From mid-1976 through 1980, we reconstructed, analyzed and computerized over 16 tons of Ban Chiang artifactual material. Several articles have appeared, and two books, as well as a monograph series, are in the final stages of preparation. Throughout our joint program, the elegance of the site has elicited efforts for similar elegance in excavation, analysis and publication. Where our efforts have produced less than elegant results, the fault has been ours, and not the site’s, even in its battered condition.

The Ban Chiang material has supported and greatly enhanced the view that Southeast Asia was an early and innovative center of cultural development. From what was considered a backward area, which advanced culturally only through borrowing from India or China—hence the name Indochina—Southeast Asia is now contributing data of fundamental importance to the study of the origins of domestication and the origins of metallurgy as they occurred throughout the world. We suggest that rice was domesticated in Southeast Asia, and that metallurgy in this area may also have been of indigenous origin.

What kinds of data are needed to generate—and alone prove—such hypotheses? (Hypotheses which, I might add, are opposite to all traditional archeological reconstructions.) What we need are actual remains: the plant remains or their impressions, the actual metal artifacts and the crucibles and molds used to make them. However, the mere artifacts, even when found and reconstructed, could date to almost any time period; no one doubts that rice and bronze were found in early Southeast Asia. The question is: Were the technologies developed by Southeast Asians? Or were they acquired by Southeast Asians from foreign centers—centers of higher cultural development, such as India, China or even the Near East? To answer these questions, we must have these artifacts in archeological contexts. For:

(a) the contexts denote associations
(b) contexts through associations denote age, and
(c) the contexts through associations, which span time, delineate an archeological sequence.

Only by studying such sequences, often comparatively, can one hope to answer archeology’s most important questions: How did cultures emerge and develop in different parts of the world? How can such developments be explained? And what can be said of the nature of contacts between such cultures? In short, without excellent records, there is no archeology. On huge, rich multi-phased sites such as Ban Chiang, contextual relationships assume even greater importance. For without close stratigraphic control, the artifacts...
can float through seven distinct phases, and through several thousands of years.

To travel to 'Ban Chiang' is on the Korat Plateau in northeastern Thailand. We have some 300 sites in a broad arc across the northern part of the plateau. The area is rich in mineral resources, and is very favorable for rice agriculture. The mound of Ban Chiang is about one kilometer long, half a kilometer wide, and seven meters above the surrounding paddies. In the center are two excavations of the site: the first begun in 1974 and the second in 1975. The area of our 1975 excavations is long and narrow because it is dug under a road, one of the few areas left that had not been completely looted by the villagers.

The site is about four to five meters deep, and totally built up at this point on the debris of human occupation. It is divided into six very distinct and well-dated phases which go from the early Stone Age into the historic occupation.

Red-on-buff painted pottery from the upper layers is what first drew all the attention to Ban Chiang. This pottery was dated, incorrectly, by thermoluminescence to between 3500 and 4500 B.C. We now know it to date much later than that and to be associated with a very ordinary phase of Ban Chiang, the late Iron Age.

Down two phases from this phase, that is, the red and white pottery were found a number of burials covered with pottery containing many kinds of small finds—a wealth of cultural material. This phase dates from about 1600 to about 1200 B.C.; it has been called the Om Kaao Phase because of the very diagnostic quality of all the pieces of pottery from this phase, which have never been found beneath nor above that phase. In a series of Om Kaao burials dug in 1974, we found a wealth of bronze, and we expected to find bronze in 1975. I am going to focus now on the metals in order to show how important it is to have very good contextual information on such otherwise small and insignificant finds as objects of bronze. A typical burial in this phase contains a type of pottery—incised and painted red—which is only found in this phase, and is highly diagnostic. We also found a very characteristic carinated white buff pottery, also diagnostic of this phase. This pottery was spread over the corpses when they were buried.

One burial in the phase, that of a small child, probably female, contained several pieces of jewelry. In 1974, we uncovered considerable findings of bronze in these Om Kaao Phase burials. What is unusual about this bronze is its association that of a wealthy child, for her jewelry is iron. On the归来 (to return) of the child was a beautiful cast bronze bracelet with small bosses, and around the outside, twisted and wrapped, is a piece of wrought iron. I think this exemplifies the bi-metallic tradition of this phase. Iron must just have appeared on the Korat Plateau. It is a very early date for iron, one of the earliest dated anywhere in the world for archaeologically-recovered iron. Iron was used by this culture as an ornamental metal. So in this phase, we have both good quality tin-bronzes, and the first appearance of terrestrial wrought iron.

Another finding of these excavations were several crucibles which have swast adhering to the inside. In addition, we found ovens, molds and ingots, almost the whole repertoire of artifacts needed for the metallurgical technology. It is indeed rare to find these kinds of materials in close association in an archeological site.

The first thing I did when I returned from Thailand in 1975 was to section two cast iron spearheads with forged iron blades and cast-on bronze sockets, from the same phase at Ban Chiang, and run analyses on them at our science labs at the University of Pennsylvania. There have been a few other bi-metallic pieces.

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Chester Gorman:
A Biography

Chester Gorman died of cancer at the age of 43 in 1981. His work at Ban Chiang, and earlier work at Spirit Cave in northern Thailand, brought to light an independently developed metallurgical tradition as well as very early evidence for plant and animal domestication that were totally unsuspected less than 15 years ago.

Gorman did his graduate studies at the University of Hawaii and went on to teach at the University of Pennsylvania. In 1974 and 1975, he began excavations at Ban Chiang with the Thai Fine Arts Department. His discoveries challenged the idea that Southeast Asia was a cultural backwater in early times—and indicated that this region was indeed one of the earliest centers of civilization in the world.

Throughout his years of excavating at Ban Chiang, Gorman was witness to the destruction of most archeological sites within a 100-kilometer radius of Ban Chiang. He was working against peasants who simply sought to improve their meager standard of living by selling artifacts, but also against merchants and art dealers with an insatiable collectors' market for antiquities. That Gorman was able to get significant results from the Ban Chiang excavations amidst all the turmoil is indeed a tribute to his dedication to archeology.
unravelling of the sequence with scientific excavation, we can demonstrate technological development in the metallurgical tradition. First, we have the low-tin bronze spearpoint found in the flexed burial. Subsequently, the bronzes have a tin content of about 12 percent as found in anklets noted for burial 38. Above these in the Om Kaeo phase, a binmetallic tradition appears with iron used as an ornamental metal, much as it was in Europe and Egypt when iron first appeared in those sequences. I have seen iron filigree inlaid into gold. The Chinese often made gold sheets to protect iron blades. Iron is very rare and very valuable. Here we have iron appearing much the same way in mainland Southeast Asia and at an earlier date than China or India and comparable with similar dates from the Old World. Are we dealing with contacts? To answer these questions, we need the contexts and we need the sequences.

Finally, at the very bottom of the site, we found a number of burials associated with a very diverse and very beautiful black, burnished pottery. From its placement in our sequence, we know that it must have appeared in a metal-using phase.

In addition to a sequence of ceramics and metals, a scientific excavation produces information on more intangible aspects of ancient life, such as diet. Thus, a good stratified sample of all the dirt which we excavated—of which there were tons—was sent through a battery of machines, from which we extracted small animal remains and rice and other plant material. From the material caught in our sieves and taken from the site, from top to bottom, and working with a rice geneticist and a paleobiologist, we have been able to reconstruct the development of the domestication of rice over the last 6,000 years on the Korat Plateau.

When we first came into Ban Chiang, the villagers were digging under their houses and gardens. They soon found that they were paid the most money for particular kinds of pottery, and so they would send tunnels down, send these shafts down until they hit an area which was roughly at the depth of that phase, and then they would tunnel out.

Often, pieces turned up not far from Ban Chiang, but from other sites nearby. I have looked at this material and have some idea of where it fits within the Ban Chiang sequence. But I have no idea what went with it.

One summer, a Thai student of mine photographed three pots that were out for a collector to look at. With this group of pottery, he photographed two very beautifully made bronze bracelets along with bits of bones, rollers and beads, which came in willy-nilly to be sold. These came from a burial which evidently had bracelets and anklets and other very unusual bronze pieces—a very rich burial. I don’t know what phase it was from, and I have no idea what went with it.

I want to talk just a little about fakes. I have illustrations of Ban Chiang fakes that were made in the village right next to Ban Chiang, completely from scratch, but using the same clays. I have had neutron activation studies done at Brookhaven Laboratory on these pieces and on a series of all the local clays in the area. I can tell you that this was made locally. These pieces are made from the same clay, decorated with the same designs, and worked with the same material as the original pieces. Some fakes are made using an old original piece and attaching it with resin to a new piece, which is then painted. Some of these pieces, which are half-old and half-new, are very hard to distinguish from the original.

I have tried to demonstrate what the site was like when we excavated it carefully and cautiously. We have been able thus to discover a great deal about that prehistoric culture. The villagers on the other hand have looted the sites and made most of them almost useless for any type of modern, reasonably scientific excavation. What exactly started

Ban Chiang: The Exhibition

The story of Ban Chiang—a 6,000-year-old site in northeastern Thailand with evidence of some of the earliest plant and animal domestication and bronze metallurgy in the world—is told in an exhibition that the University of Pennsylvania is mounting in cooperation with the Thai Fine Arts Department. "Ban Chiang: Discovery of a Lost Bronze Age" begins with the discovery of the site and focuses on two issues: the culture history of Southeast Asia and the methods archeologists use to understand the past.

The exhibition was organized by Sites of the Smithsonian Institution and the University Museum in Philadelphia, where it opens November 12. Over the next three years, the show will travel to the Science Place in Dallas, the American Museum of Natural History in New York, the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., Boston's Museum of Science, the Museum of History and Science in Louisville and the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County.
Based in Dallas, the Horchow Collection is one of the largest luxury mail order companies in the U.S., with annual sales of $35-40 million from approximately one million orders. In the August-September, 1981, Horchow catalog, seven pots looted from the Ban Chiang site in Thailand and exported illegally were offered for sale. Horchow received more orders than it could fill, and all of the pots were sold within a month.

The reaction of archeologist Wendy Ashmore of Rutgers University to the offer of Ban Chiang pots for sale in the Horchow catalog was quite different. She pointed out to the company the destructive consequences for archeological sites when antiques are offered for sale. How Roger Horchow, president of the direct mail marketing firm, responded is the subject of the following interview with Early Man editor Kathryn Bard.

**Bard:** Did you know that the Ban Chiang pots offered for sale in your catalog were exported illegally from Thailand?

**Horchow:** When the pots were first offered to me, I asked if this was legal—because I know about illegal excavations and sales. The answer given me was that they were imported legally into this country. Now, I didn’t ask the question whether they were exported illegally from Thailand, but the person from whom I bought them pointed out that they were not in good condition—as if to say no museum would want them anyway.

**Bard:** When you learned about the illicit excavation and export of Ban Chiang pots, what was your reaction?

**Horchow:** By the time Wendy Ashmore wrote me, we had sold every piece. But we’d had many, many requests. I simply said that we had made a big mistake and we wouldn’t dream of offering them again.

**Bard:** Why do you think selling the Ban Chiang pots was a mistake?

**Horchow:** It encourages others to consider the sale of antiques—other mail order companies or other merchants.

**Bard:** Why wouldn’t you offer antiques for sale again?

**Horchow:** Well, antiques in the sense that you’re speaking of. It takes them out of the realm of archeology and into the realm of merchandising.

**Bard:** By decreasing the availability of Ban Chiang pots to consumer demand, do you think you might also have decreased the incentive to supply more of this pottery?

**Horchow:** Yes, I do. The man, for example, who sold me the Ban Chiang pots is unlikely to sell me anything else.

**Bard:** Is there a relation between the destruction of archeological sites by pothunting for artifacts and marketing of artifacts?

**Horchow:** Well, marketing in the broad sense, in that people wouldn’t rob or take things from archeological sites if they didn’t have someone to whom they were going to peddle them. So, yes, there has to be a cause and effect.

**Bard:** Did your action on the Ban Chiang pots have any effect on other direct mail marketing firms?

**Horchow:** No, because how would they know? Gumps in San Francisco, for example, was still selling Ban Chiang pots last year.

**Bard:** I think Nieman-Marcus has offered antiques for sale in its catalog.

**Horchow:** The problem is—the only way you’re going to cause anybody to think twice is by saying that you’re not offering antiques, or by publicizing your actions.

**Bard:** That’s what we’re trying to do.

**Horchow:** That’s exactly the right thing to do. But the publicity can’t be directed just to scholars. The public has to be shown that buying and selling antiques ties back to destruction of sites.

**Bard:** Do people who market antiques have an understanding of the destructive effect this activity has on archeological sites?

**Horchow:** Oh, no, I don’t think so at all.

**Bard:** How might we communicate this?

**Horchow:** Well, probably one way would be to give greater national publicity to some of the activities of other governments—for example, Peru and Thailand, and the various countries that have taken strong stands against the exportation of any of their national treasures. Then carry it one step further to explain why they have come to these conclusions.

**Bard:** You’re on the board of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, so you probably have strong feelings about preserving the national heritage. Would you include archeological sites?

**Horchow:** You know, archeology isn’t really my field, but I do believe we should protect archeological sites because they preserve the history of our culture. By seeing human progression, it helps us better understand the conditions we find ourselves in today.

**Bard:** Is it important to preserve the national heritage in foreign countries as well?

**Horchow:** Absolutely. There are no geographical or political boundaries for this. It’s very important for the history of the world—not just for any one country.

**Bard:** Currently, the Senate is considering a bill that will specify how the U.S. will participate in the UNESCO Convention on Cultural Properties, which calls for the return to the country of origin any artifact illegally removed. Do you feel the present U.S. laws governing importation of antiques should be strengthened?

**Horchow:** Yes, I think they should be changed to strengthen the definition of antiquity, so you know just what you’re talking about. There’s a difference between antiques and antiquities.

**Bard:** What is the difference?

**Horchow:** An antique in the common vernacular is some art object from the past—in general within the past 200 or 300 years. Antiquities are older than this.

**Bard:** How has your brief venture into antiques marketing and the resulting events affected you?

**Horchow:** I wouldn’t offer Ban Chiang pots or artifacts from any other excavations again. But it’s good to be made aware of the link between artifact marketing and the destruction of ancient sites, otherwise you can’t do anything. Most people in our society are skeptical about how effective an individual can be, but one person’s action can make a difference.
A wealthy Thai woman returned to Bangkok with over 100 vessels in her car, and contracts to local villagers to dig and sell more.

Other Thais joined the fashionable trek.

the villagers on the path to looting is one of the things that I want to talk about. After living on the mound for over 200 years, and after digging latrines and thousands of substantial postholes to support their houses, and after planting their trees and gardens, they most certainly knew what lay under the mound's surface. Yet they never systematically dug for the remains. The Thai test excavations of 1967 provided interesting if inconclusive results. Still, there was no major looting. Some local collectors and a few foreigners did visit Ban Chiang and acquired samples of the bronze and pottery. But this was nothing in view of what was to come.

By 1970, the results of the thermoluminescence dates had been reported to Thailand, and rumors were passed about that the pottery had been dated between 3500 and 4600 B.C. As word of this passed to the Bangkok circle of collectors and dealers, many of them immediately organized Ban Chiang pottery market trips.

Let us return now to 1970, and the first reported trip to Ban Chiang, made by the wealthy hostess of the young university student, Steven Young. She returned to Bangkok with over 100 vessels in her own car, and contracts to local villagers to dig and sell more. Other wealthy Thais joined the fashionable trek, and so collectors and antique dealers in Bangkok had access to Ban Chiang antiquities. For the poor subsistence farmers of Ban Chiang, all this attention was a blessing. They used their new income as many of us would have used it. Children went to better schools, and for longer periods of time. Real doctors were consulted for illness, and funds were put aside for a rainy day... the day when their supply of pots would be exhausted.

Between 1970 and 1972, Ban Chiang was subjected to its most intensive looting. In 1972, the Thai Fine Arts Department petitioned the National Executive Council for Thailand to forbid excavations by the villagers. The Prime Minister pronounced it illegal to sell or to transport Ban Chiang material. In early 1972, His Majesty the King sponsored a small excavation in Ban Chiang, and later the Fine Arts Department opened a second Ban Chiang excavation. This official presence and activity in Ban Chiang slowed the illegal trade in antiquities. But in fact the villagers had just about exhausted the upper layers of the site. The Royal excavation was conducted on temple grounds. And the second excavation by the Thai Fine Arts Department was under a road, the same as ours would later be. These were the only undisturbed surfaces remaining.

Faced with an official presence, and a rapidly dwindling supply of pots, the Ban Chiang villagers had two options: first, to fan out and prospect for antiquities under other mound villages nearby; or two, manufacture fakes and sell them as the real thing. They of course chose both. There were many such mounds around Ban Chiang, and with their experience, the Ban Chiang villagers soon located most of the nearby sites. At first, the material was transported to Ban Chiang for sale as genuine Ban Chiang artifacts. But soon, it became apparent that collectors and dealers were as interested in the new sites as they were in Ban Chiang. They were then escorted to these new sites, and villagers and dealers in the surrounding area were sensitized to a new reality. Other villagers began mining their own mounds, and dealers and collectors scoured practically every village within a 100-kilometer radius of Ban Chiang.

Thai and foreign society figures were split in their reactions. Some offered money to have the sites properly excavated. Others used their status and fortunes to destroy totally some of the most important sites on the Korat Plateau. One small site I visited in 1975 had been trenched through the middle by a Thai collector: black ceramics and quantities of bone and bronze littered the surface. It was the earliest Ban Chiang type yet seen. For security reasons involving looters, we were unable to excavate the remains, and a year later it too was completely plundered. In the last five years of survey, no unlooted site has been located.

The market for Ban Chiang material set in motion the systematic plundering of the sites, and it continues. The high social status and/or relatively immense wealth of many collectors puts them above the law and they operate their own "excavations." Dealers offer poverty-stricken farmers a relative fortune for otherwise meaningless pots long buried and forgotten under houses and gardens.

What sanctions can one invoke against a victimless crime—a crime in which everyone gains except the discipline of archeology and ultimately the countries whose cultural heritage is dismembered and strewn across the world? Whatever those sanctions are, the Ban Chiang case clearly indicates they should be directed against collectors and dealers. For as they created the market for antiquities, so they insure the destruction of the Ban Chiang related ancient sites.