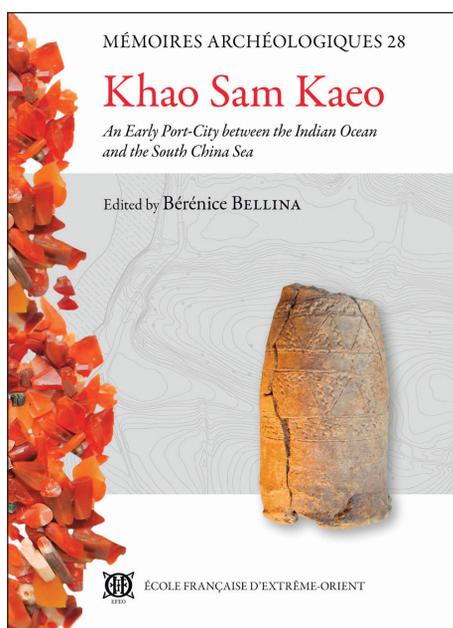


## Reviews

*Khao Sam Kaeo: An Early Port-City between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea* edited by Bérénice Bellina. Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 2017. ISBN: 9782855394275. 65 Euros.



Khao Sam Kaeo (KSK), an early trading port on the upper Thai-Malay Peninsula strategically located on the Kra Isthmus, has furnished abundant evidence for the complex and enduring cultural exchanges between the Indian Ocean to the West and the South China Sea to the East during the last centuries BCE through the early centuries CE. Archaeological excavations between 2005 to 2009, followed by years of intensive research by the Thai-French Archaeological Mission at KSK, have come together in this hefty and significant volume, the twenty-eighth of the “Mémoires archéologiques” series published by the École française d'Extrême-Orient. Prior to this monograph, published data has been limited to articles in various academic journals and preliminary reports. The volume therefore

aims to include in a single large volume the final results of a multidisciplinary and international collaborative effort, incorporating comprehensive site surveys and serious technical analysis of the excavated material.

Bérénice Bellina, the general editor and director of the project, writes that the volume seeks to demonstrate that KSK presents strong evidence of an early urbanism and raises the possibility that it may constitute an incipient city-state (p. 24). To achieve these goals, the Thai-French Archaeological Mission undertook the most sustained and extensive archaeological investigations in Peninsular Thailand up to the present time (Map 1). In sum, the findings of this intensive work have transformed how we view pan-regional late prehistory and its complex extensive network of cultural exchanges going back and forth between the Mediterranean World and the Pacific Ocean.

My review is limited to some general remarks and a brief discussion of the book's overall conclusions, since the details and technical issues of each chapter are beyond

my expertise. In particular, chapters dealing with archaeobotany, detailed pottery assemblages, stone, metal, and glass bead analyses, and so on, would be better assessed individually by experts in these respective disciplines. The volume gathers a total of nineteen different contributions written by twenty-six authors, all renowned specialists in their diverse areas.

The volume is entirely in English, lavishly illustrated with color photos, drawings, tables, and maps. Helpful abstracts and summaries are provided in English and Thai for each chapter and part. The Thai abstracts are especially welcome since they allow easy access by local archaeologists and students. Unfortunately, font problems occur throughout the volume with Thai diacritical marks for superscript and subscript vowels. The book could have profited from tighter copy-editing as issues of style, tedious verbiage, inconsistencies in capitalization, hyphenation, and problems with punctuation, typos, and misprints occasionally appear. It is of course inevitable that such a lengthy book authored by so many non-native English writers contains errors of this kind. The volume also regrettably lacks a general index which would have helped casual readers or hurried scholars to more easily navigate its 675 pages, or to search for specific names and terms. But, in all fairness, the detailed “Table of Contents” (placed at the end of the volume in the French manner, pp. 667–675) is sufficient for a good grasp of the structure of each chapter and its subdivisions.

The general introduction (pp. 17–39) by Bérénice Bellina, in collaboration with Praon Silapanth—Thai co-director of the mission—paves the way for the rest of the volume. They claim that KSK in Chumphon province may be one of the earliest “port-cities” so far identified in the South China Sea, spanning the 4th century BCE to the 1st century CE. Thus it was contemporaneous with the ancient port of Arikamedu in South India, a site identified as an “emporium” in Ptolemy’s *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, and with the Chinese port-city of Hepu, in today’s southern Guangxi, established during the time of Han Emperor Wu Di in the 2nd century BCE (Maps 3\* and 4).<sup>1</sup>

Significant findings at KSK include three so-called Dong Son bronze drums (not necessarily made in North Vietnam), two Han mirrors, numerous seals and shards of Indian wares and Chinese ceramics, as well as stone and glass beads of possible “Indo-Pacific” origin.<sup>2</sup> This material not only facilitated fixing the site’s chronology, but also showed its vital importance in documenting early direct exchanges between Mauryan India and Han China via the Maritime Silk Road. Raw materials and technologies were often imported, but some items were produced and (re)distributed locally and regionally. Based on these discoveries, they argue that KSK (Map 2) saw the emergence of a cosmopolitan society centered on foreign and multiethnic communities, as well as a hybrid industry with production sites feeding various local demands by elite groups especially eager for exotic prestige goods.

As a node for cultural contacts, the authors assume that KSK and other transisthmian sites on the Thai-Malay Peninsula—also investigated by the Thai-French

<sup>1</sup> Map 3 is erroneously numbered Map 4 on p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> For a more recent discussion on the maritime bead trade in Asia, see the special issue of *Archaeological Research in Asia*, Vol. 6, June 2016.

Archaeological Mission—played an essential part in the initially long and complex process of “Indianization” of Southeast Asia. This process began as early as the last centuries BCE, even before the emergence of Oc Eo and Angkor Borei, the two possible capitals of Funan in the early centuries CE. KSK as well as these early peninsular sites, however, are devoid of any major Hindu-Buddhist monuments; the latter only start to appear in the local archaeological record in the mid-to-late 1st millennium CE, along with related religious sculptures, Sanskrit inscriptions, and ritual paraphernalia.

Part I (with contributions by S. Jane Allen, Cristina Castillo, Pauline Burger, Armelle Charrié-Duhaut, Jacques Connan, and Pierre Albrecht) discusses “The Geography of the Upper Peninsula and the Palaeo Environment of Khao Sam Kaeo” (pp. 41–143). Palynological and geo-archaeological studies attempt to reconstruct the ancient landscape at KSK and its uses in relation to regional settlement and trading activities. These investigations show that the site was subject to fluvial erosion, yet both its permanent and transient populations took advantage of the site’s location near the Tha Taphao river to establish a strong rice and millet agricultural base to sustain themselves.

The shorter but crucial Part II (with contributions by Bérénice Bellina, Vincent Bernard, Julie Malakie, and Andrew Bevan) deals specifically with “The Settlement of Khao Sam Kaeo” (pp. 145–227), a site now located 5 km away from the coastline extending over four hills. This part discusses the geomorphology, topography, dimensions, and the internal organization and density of the settlement as well as its chronological sequence based on both radiocarbon dating and inscribed seals. This spatial analysis locates the population density of specific areas delimited by earth walls and those in which various craft activities (iron, copper-base alloy, hard stones and glass production—but no ceramics) emerged. The concentration of funerary deposits in certain areas also points to the presence of ancient burials and a local cemetery.

Part III, the last and, by far, longest (with contributions by Phaedra Bouvet, Aude Favereau, Bérénice Bellina, Guillaume Épinal, Sophie Peronnet, Sachipan Srikanlaya, Hsiao-chun Hung, Yoshiyuki Iizuka, Tessa Boer-Mah, Thomas Oliver Pryce, Mercedes Murillo-Barroso, Lynn Biggs, Marcos Martín-Torres, Laure Dussubieux, Brigitte Borell, and Harry Falk) is dedicated to the “Study of Socio-Technical Systems” (pp. 229–619) and the transfer of skills and knowledge at KSK. It presents and emphasizes the technical results of production sites with their rich industrial manufacture and debris, including stone and glass ornaments, as well as detailed studies of ceramics of foreign origin (Indian Fine Wares, lustrous Black and Red Wares, and Han and other South China Sea-related ceramics), stone adzes, metal artefacts, and South Asian seals. The latter were adorned with various auspicious symbols and animals, and occasionally inscribed with ancient Indic Brāhmī script—palaeographically assigned to between the 2nd century BCE and the 1st century CE in general. Caution is needed, however, regarding the discovery of decorated seals and ornaments in gold and stone or glass beads (almost always recovered by illicit diggers and kept in private collections). While these are undoubtedly among the earliest imported objects from South Asia found in Southeast Asia and are frequently seen as symbols of “Indian influence”, they cannot yet serve as proof of early Buddhist conversions or establishments in the fabled “Land of Gold” (Suvarṇabhūmi) or so-called “Golden Peninsula” (Suvarṇadvīpa), that is, the

Chryse Chersonesos mentioned by Greek and Roman geographers in classical antiquity.<sup>3</sup>

A “Discussion” by Bérénice Bellina concludes the volume (pp. 621–665).<sup>4</sup> The author argues again for KSK’s status as both an early “urban settlement” delimited by boundary walls with multiethnic resident communities divided into several quarters, and an incipient “city-state” similar to Co Loa, Oc Eo, or Angkor Borei which gradually emerged with moated sites or walled cities in Vietnam and Cambodia. According to this interpretation, KSK would illustrate the first “urbanization” phase in Southeast Asia, possibly following Indian models of enclosed cities, in which local elites were presumably seeking new ways to legitimate their rule. This process at KSK would have happened a few centuries earlier than commonly thought—Co Loa excepted—for the rest of Southeast Asia.

We could also discuss at length—and even diverge with certain interpretations—on the related terminology of “port-city”, “port-of-trade”, “port-entrepôt”, “emporium”, “coastal polities”, “city-state”, and the like, that may or may not adequately describe KSK. But one thing is certain: although we do not know exactly the overall size of the site, nor do we know the volume, ethnic mix,<sup>5</sup> and social structure of the resident population in its heyday, this study allows us to infer, because of the site’s cosmopolitan character and social complexity, that KSK was large and sufficiently developed that it could be—at least informally—regarded as an urban center of regional, if not international, significance.

I wish now to examine the overall importance of this scholarly publication by the Thai-French Archaeological Mission. The sheer volume of raw and documented data presented here, often collected from scientific excavations and sophisticated technical analyses, revolutionizes our understanding of local manufacturing industries and the rise of Southeast Asian sociocultural complexity in the context of ancient globalization. At the same time, the range of foreign artifacts found here sheds new light on cultural exchanges between Peninsular Thailand and South and East Asia. In particular, the mission’s results indicate that the so-called Iron Age was more dynamic internationally in this broader region than previously assumed.

Another major achievement of this publication is its presentation of a refined chronology for the main period of occupation at KSK, from the 5th century BCE, based on over thirty-one conventional and seventeen AMS radiocarbon dates obtained from organic elements found in pottery, to the 1st or 2nd century CE, based on stylistic and palaeographic evidence from inscribed seals. This extensive chronology serves as an essential benchmark not only for Thai and Southeast Asian archaeology but also

<sup>3</sup> For a thorough discussion on the advent of Buddhism in early Southeast Asia, confronting archaeological data with myths and legends, see Nicolas Revire, “Facts and Fiction: The Myth of Suvannabhūmi through the Thai and Burmese Looking Glass”, *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2018, pp. 167–205.

<sup>4</sup> For a published Thai translation of this part, with additional illustrations, see Bunchar Pongpanich & Somchet Thinapong (eds), *Suvarnabhumi: The Golden Land*, Bangkok: GISTDA, 2019, pp. 127–166.

<sup>5</sup> Bellina’s assumption that “the likely inhabitants of the upper part of the Peninsula at the time” (p. 664) were of Mon-Khmer origin is speculative. Only Indic inscriptions in Sanskrit, Prakrit, and Tamil are found in Peninsular Thailand during the 1st millennium CE. Local vernacular inscriptions in Thai, Malay, Mon, and Khmer are found exclusively in the 2nd millennium.

for the discipline at large. Prior to these excavations at KSK, our knowledge of Thai Protohistory and Metal Ages came from a handful of sites, mostly situated in Central and Northeast Thailand; only a few radiocarbon dates were available for the Iron Age in the upper Thai-Malay Peninsula. We now, thanks to the steady publications of the Thai-French Archaeological Mission, have extensive chronological information about early Peninsular Thailand. Unfortunately, we have comparatively little or reliable data yet from the neighboring peninsular countries of Malaysia and Myanmar.

In addition, the Thai-French Archaeological Mission has in many ways established an excellent example for future international cooperation, with perhaps here a small caveat. The mission and this monograph were primarily funded by French institutions (mainly the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the National Centre for Scientific Research). Because of so few Thai contributors, the volume may appear at first glance more of a French scientific and financial endeavor than a Thai initiative. This is mere appearance, for, as is duly acknowledged on p. 13, “the project would have never existed without the support of Thai institutions, above all its academic partner, Silpakorn University in Bangkok”. We should therefore celebrate the fruitful and genuine relationship that has developed over the years between local and foreign scholars of Thai archaeology.

A similar collaborative project of this scale, dedicated mainly to late prehistoric Myanmar sites in the upper and lower regions, is on the way and will surely provide more invaluable answers relating to the rise of early city-states in mainland Southeast Asia, particularly regarding the development of coastal polities in the upper Thai-Malay Peninsula. Indeed, the current Myanmar-French Archaeological Mission has already carried out two seasons of excavations and surveys at Maliwan and Aw Gyi in the southernmost state of Tanintharyi (Tennasserim),<sup>6</sup> with a third season currently ongoing. It is still an open question whether Maliwan, the earliest identified port-settlement in southern Myanmar on the Kra Isthmus, enjoyed direct links with KSK, located on the opposite side of the transpeninsular route in today’s Thailand.

To conclude, this volume, despite a few trivial reservations, is an outstanding collective achievement that has set a very high standard for excavation analysis and the publication of future archaeological reports from Thailand, Myanmar, and mainland Southeast Asia in general. This volume will be a long-lasting contribution to the field and is a must-read for academics focusing on Asian global studies.

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<sup>6</sup> Bérénice Bellina et al. “Myanmar’s Earliest Maritime Silk Road Port-Settlements Revealed”, *Antiquity*, Vol. 92, Issue 366, December 2018.