



The Curators Write

The Museum's Ban Chiang Project

GREGORY L. POSSEHL

It is my privilege, after the untimely death just over a year ago of my friend and colleague Chet Gorman, to write the foreword for this special edition of *Expedition* devoted to the site of Ban Chiang in Thailand. Chet and I arrived at the Museum the same year, 1973, as Assistant Curators in what was then the South Asia Section. This must have been an interesting happening for the old time staff since the two youngsters had the entire Section to themselves. Ban Chiang was very much a part of the Museum's interests even then, and Chet was obviously going to have an extraordinary site to work on. But this was not the first time he had been involved with something important.

Gorman's undergraduate degree in Anthropology with honors came from Sacramento State College in 1961. From there he went to the University of Hawaii and entered a Ph.D. program in Anthropology under the guidance of Dr. Wilhelm Solheim, a pioneering intellect in Southeast Asian archaeology. Bill Solheim sent him to Thailand for the first time in 1963-64 to supervise a salvage archaeology program in the lower Mekong Valley. During this time, Chet discovered the site of Non Nok Tha, where subsequent excavations carried out by Solheim, Chet's classmate Donn Bayard and Ham Parker, signaled the potential significance of Thailand as an area for ancient metallurgical innovation.

In 1965 and 1966, Chet was in Thailand for his doctoral research but his focus shifted from the plains to the Thai hills along the Burmese border. He found Spirit Cave in the course of painstaking and arduous exploration seeking a record of Stone Age occupation of this remote region. The botanical remains recovered from his excavations, the first plant remains ever recovered from a Hoabinhian cave site, were surprisingly suggestive of incipient Southeast Asian plant domestication. This is not to say that everything Chet,

Solheim and their colleagues said was immediately accepted. Indeed, there were then, and there still are today, many who are quite skeptical about the state of affairs in Southeast Asian archaeology. But such criticism is a normal part of scholarly work and it is a small price to be paid for seeking information in unknown regions which most scholars have spurned as being dull, or even worse—cultural backwaters.

The professionalism and sensitivity with which Chet conducted the Spirit Cave excavation earned him not only international renown but also the respect of the Thai archaeological community. These are the reasons that Fro Rainey recruited him to be the Museum's representative for a large-scale investigation of Ban Chiang. More of the story of how we became involved with Ban Chiang is told by Lisa Lyons and Fro Rainey in their contribution to this issue of *Expedition*.

Ban Chiang became one of The University Museum's most ambitious excavations as well as an immense analytical undertaking which Chet had conceived in a way that has allowed us to carry on the work without his guidance. This is due not only to the manner in which the site was excavated, recorded, and then organized in the laboratory but also to the strength of cooperation and understanding that existed between him and his co-director, Khun Pisit Charoenwongsa, and the rest of the staff of the Royal Thai Fine Arts Department, especially Director-General Khun Dejo Savanananda. The Project, a landmark for international archaeological research, is genuinely bilateral in nature with each partner sharing the burden of finance, staffing, and bringing together a team of creative researchers.

As a complement to the scientific reports, Chet planned a major travelling exhibit on the site, intended to bring the results of this work to the attention of a broader public. The Smithsonian Institution Travelling

This, the third of a series of short articles reviewing developments in the fields of research to which The University Museum contributes, differs from the former articles in that it is also the introduction to this number of *Expedition* which is concerned with various aspects of the Museum's work at Ban Chiang in cooperation with the Thai Fine Arts Department.

Exhibition Service has been working with The University Museum for over three years on this venture; the show will open here on November 12, 1982. The exhibition, titled "BAN CHIANG: Discovery of a Lost Bronze Age," will have its own catalogue which will review the site in a comprehensive fashion. The current *Expedition* is intended to complement the catalogue by bringing together reports from some of the individual researchers as well as a number of Ban Chiang stories which have not been told elsewhere.

A glance at the Table of Contents will show that the range of research on the site is enormous. Here you will find preliminary statements or condensed versions of research on the human remains, plants, and animals. There are also reports on the laboratory analysis and computerized data management undertaken at Penn, and on fieldwork investigating the environment and Ban Chiang related sites. All of this is, of course, a part of the contemporary team approach to archaeological work, but it has been superbly conceived and orchestrated by Chet and Khun Pisit.

Ban Chiang has already proved to be a major instrument in the re-evaluation of Old World prehistory, and particularly the interpretation of the prehistory of the eastern regions of Asia. In a region until recently considered a mere recipient of cultural developments from India and China (hence the name "Indo-China"), the excavations at Ban Chiang and related sites have revealed a hitherto unknown vital and innovative prehistoric cultural tradition. The Ban Chiang data have made fundamental contributions to our knowledge of the prehistory of settled agrarian villages, and the domestication of rice, water buffalo, pigs, and the dog, as well as other plants and animals of Southeast Asian origin. The presence of an advanced metallurgical tradition in such a context is quite unexpected and revolutionary, even with a revision of the chronology. While future research will clarify many unresolved issues, the sophistication of this tradition challenges the conventional preconception that major cultural innovations were made in only the regions traditionally identified as centers of 'High Civilization.'

Bringing together some of the results of this collaborative research effort in this issue of *Expedition* is a fitting tribute indeed to the memory of the late Chester Gorman—the chief source for the drive and inspiration behind prehistoric research in

Southeast Asia today.

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