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Ancient Southeast Asia is one of the world’s most important and archaeologically obscure regions. Innumerable human groups have traversed its seascapes and settled its landscapes for nearly two million years to produce fossils that confound palaeoanthropologists; histories of plant and animal domestication that attract international interest; and ancient civilisations that offer rich comparative histories for studying state formation. Despite more than half a century of hard work by Southeast Asian archaeologists, few practitioners outside of the Asian region know the place or its ancient history today. One reason is that we need more regional syntheses to communicate Southeast Asian archaeology to students and comparativist archaeologists.

Why have so few archaeologists dared to synthesise Southeast Asia’s past? The region’s immense geographic scope (more than 4.5 million square kilometres), its demographic scale (more than 623 million inhabitants today) and its cultural diversity (all the major world religions and more than 170 languages in mainland Southeast Asia alone) pose major obstacles—as do the region’s myriad and divergent archaeological traditions. Characterising millennia of colonisation and migration, technological innovation and cultural transmission, and stasis and change across montane, coastal and maritime landscapes is certainly not for the faint-hearted. We should all thank John Norman Miksic and Geok Yian Goh for their labours in producing this volume, which is a welcome effort to understanding Southeast Asia’s past.

Ancient Southeast Asia is organised into eight chapters. The first two frame the authors’ approach by merging processual archaeological and historical approaches to assert that: a) Southeast Asia is a meaningful region to study, despite its nearly continuous interaction with neighbouring areas; b) blending multiple macro-regional frameworks (e.g. World Systems theory, globalisation, cultural evolution) helps us to comprehend the region’s long-term history; and c) we can only understand the critical two-millennium period before the Early Modern Era (i.e. 500 BC to AD 1500) by plumbing the region’s ‘prehistoric’ past. This last notion is critical to understanding the logic that structures Ancient Southeast Asia, whose ambitious scope reflects a deep knowledge of pan-regional dynamics during these millennia that the authors periodise using New World archaeology as their inspiration.

Chapter 3, ‘Prehistory: two million to 2,000 years ago’, starts by reviewing the history of research on Southeast Asia’s Palaeolithic period and the major themes raised in previous studies, such as the utility of the Three Age system and culture-history notions of diffusion and migration. Their nine-page review of Pleistocene developments focuses primarily on Indonesia, and forms the weakest component of this very useful synthesis. Alfred Russel Wallace first alerted scholars to the importance of Southeast Asia for understanding human evolution, and Southeast Asia’s Pleistocene sequence has garnered the most international recognition for this region, which has turned heads since Eugene Dubois’ early twentieth-century announcements regarding Pithecanthropus erectus through to the more recent and utterly mystifying Homo floresiensis, which palaeoanthropologists fondly describe as the Hobbit. Readers are advised to consult other sources to understand Southeast Asia’s Pleistocene and early to mid Holocene (i.e. Hoabinhian) periods. Subsequent discussions of the Early Metal Age and moated sites are marginally more useful, but it is the latter section of this chapter (beginning with ‘The growth of trade’) in which this synthesis becomes deeply useful to non-specialists and Southeast Asian archaeologists alike. No previous work has discussed the full constellation of coastal (and possibly trade-based) sites along mainland Southeast Asia’s coasts and in Island Southeast Asia’s eastern archipelago by the second century BC. The authors’ interaction sphere model is a useful starting point for discussion.

Chapters 4–7 (the ‘Protoclassic’ through to the ‘Late Classic’) fill a significant gap by synthesising pan-regional developments over a 1,400-year period. The strongest sections of these chapters weave together threads from archaeology, epigraphy and art-history

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to illuminate ideology, economy, settlement and dynastic succession in the emergence of the region’s first-millennium and early second-millennium AD states. The authors’ attention to historical accounts that archaeologists frequently ignore, combined with their regional focus, offers new perspectives on region-wide developments. This lacuna is particularly acute in archaeological research on the first millennium AD, a period that archaeologists rarely studied before the 1990s, and that few scholars have attempted to knit together thematically in previous publications (but see Stark 2006). Miksic’s deep and field-based experience in several of Southeast Asia’s countries provides a rare familiarity with the forms that early states assumed during what the authors call the ‘Early Classic’ period, from AD 600–900.

Their eighth chapter, on the ‘Middle Classic’ (AD 900–1200), also charts developments in several parts of the region, but it is at this point in the book (and in the historical sequence) that art-historical and epigraphic information ascend in importance as primary sources for reconstructing the past. Chapter 7 (‘Late Classic: 1200 to 1400 CE’) reflects the fact that few archaeologists have gravitated towards the first and second millennia AD, preferring instead to labour in prehistoric periods. Maritime archaeology provides an important exception for this period, as illustrated by sections in Chapter 8 (‘Postclassic, 1400 to 1600 CE’) that review shipwreck excavations.

Any regional synthesis of this scope invites critical review. One might query the utility of neologisms such as ‘Seasia’, or the rationale for adopting a New World-derived chronological periodisation. The biggest challenge, however, for any synthesiser lies in forging thematic coherence for material that has such vast geographic and temporal scope; offering multiple theoretical perspectives does not create a unified whole. Readers might wish for a map in every chapter that identifies site locations, and for a chronological table that is repeated throughout the volume with time periods and summary information. The text could have been trimmed considerably (particularly Chapters 1–3), although the authors could also have used more connective tissue between their examples. Mostly, however, we could use 100 more archaeologists working on the ‘Classic’ period, from the mid first to the mid second millennium AD.

John Miksic and Geok Yian Goh’s synthesis reflects a phenomenal effort and impressive scholarship; it is just such work that may inspire the next generation of archaeologists to research the past of Southeast Asia.

References


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