Introduction to Life Through Death

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Published in:
Fishbones and Glittering Emblems

2003

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Fishbones and Glittering Emblems

Southeast Asian Archaeology 2002

Anna Karlström & Anna Källén, editors

Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities
Östasiatiska Museet
Stockholm 2003

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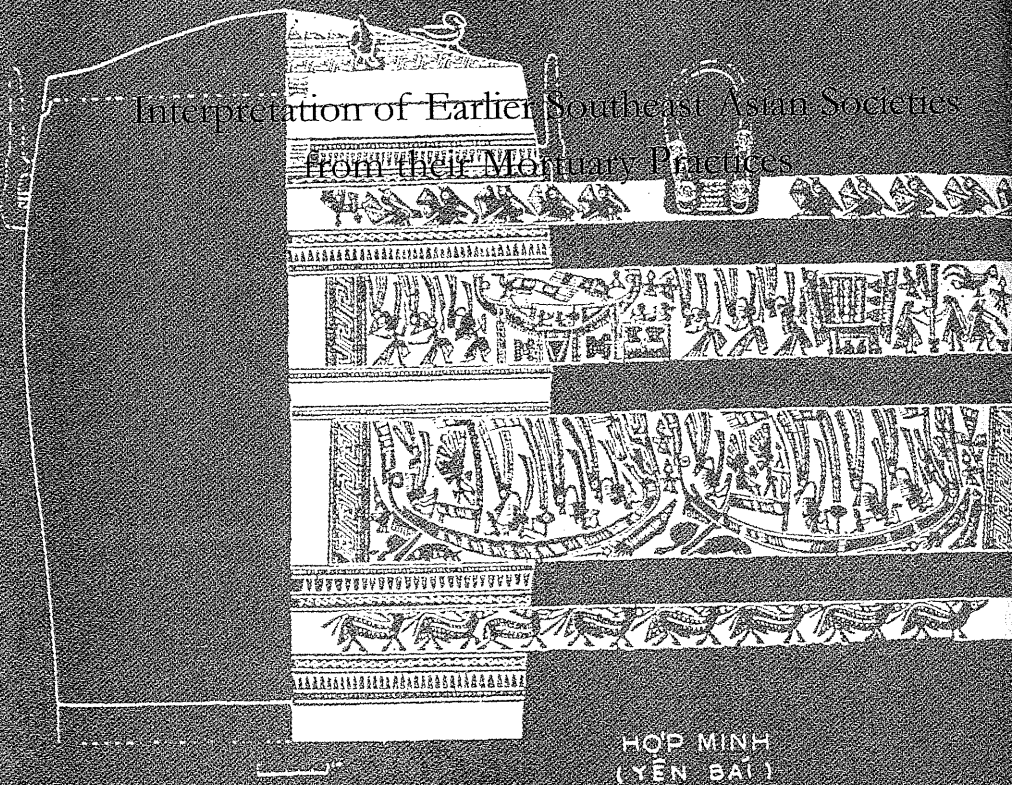
Life Through Death

Interpretation of Earlier Southeast Asian Societies from their Mortuary Practices



HỢP MINH
(YÊN BÁI)

Introduction

Kristina Jennbert

Being an outsider at the international conference of the European Association of Southeast Asian Archaeologists was thought provoking in many ways, not at least as a chairperson at the session *Life through death – The interpretation of earlier SE Asian societies from their mortuary practices.* Being an outsider in this context means that I do not work with archaeology in Southeast Asia, but in Scandinavia. Thus, I am inside the field of archaeology, but not Southeast Asian archaeology. The problems inherent to archaeological research and interpretative frameworks are familiar to me, not least through my interest in Norse pagan rituals. The Scandinavian approach was therefore my platform listening to the different papers in Sigtuna. The nature of archaeological research and the complexity of interpreting material culture appear to be very much the same.

Archaeology is, in my opinion, consistent with its contemporary context. Research traditions and the questions asked result in different kinds of archaeology, and in different views of what sort of knowledge archaeology communicates. The role of archaeology today was another of my tenets on entering the conference in Sigtuna. At the conference, I was astonished. I was truly enchanted by the glitter and beauty of bronzes and the arrangement of monuments, but above all by the abundance of material. I felt more like a positivist than ever before. The papers presented were amazing in the exposure of objects. Mostly the objects were numerous and in many ways extraordinary. The presented material culture was completely different from the scanty fragments of Scandinavian prehistory (with a few exceptions to the case).

The potentials to interpret mortuary practices are manifold, and the archaeologists at this conference dealt with questions of *Life through Death* in very different ways. Since not all of the papers are published in this conference volume, I will first give a briefing on the various aspects presented

at the session. Charles F. W. Higham presented an overview of excavated moated sites and mortuary practices in the Nakhon Ratchasima Province, Northeast Thailand. A demonstration of inter-site connections made an intricate pattern of relationships in time and space, from the Neolithic to the Iron Age. Brian Vincent discussed the social importance of elite female potters in a major 2nd millennium BC potting centre at Khok Phanom Di, Thailand. There, mortuary rituals included special burial jars with symbolic marks, a type of coded insignia interpreted as active symbols of social identity. Rasmi Shoocongdej presented head style coffins in a tradition of log coffin burials from 2.200 - 1.200 BP, in the highland Pang Mapa district, Mae Hong Son province, Thailand. Unique features of ornate coffins were placed on posts and in caves at the top of limestone cliffs. From central Burma, Jean Pierre Pautreau and Patricia Mornais reported from excavations of Iron Age cemeteries. They pointed to patterns of distinct and different burial practices in inhumation burials at Hnaw Kan (Malhaing) and Ywa Htin (Pyaw Bwe). These were interpreted as reflecting communities with culturally specific burial traditions, with relations to other neighbouring countries such as China and India.

Among the papers published in this volume, Jiang Zhilong showed impressive mortuary finds from the Yangputou site, Guandu District, Yunnan Province, China. Items made of bronze, iron, gold, jade, agate, lacquer and ceramics were found at this site, one of the cemeteries of the Dian Kingdom. From Vietnam, Nguyen Viet presented mortuary practices from Hoabinhian to Dongsonian times, about 20.000 to 6.000 BP. Magdalene von Dewall talked about Southeast Asian cultural traditions of ritualised mortuary practice. She used a child burial in a container burial found in Hop Minh, Yen-bai Province, North Vietnam as a point of departure for a discussion of the social dimensions of these material expressions. The papers in the session indeed expressed a multitude of aspects on mortuary practices. The published papers in this volume, in fact, demonstrate three very dominant perspectives on mortuary practices that were expressed in Sigtuna. Jiang Zhilong presented exclusive objects. Nguyen Viet wished to explain changes in mortuary practices in a long-term perspective. Magdalene von Dewall used one single grave as a focus for a detailed discussion on ritualised mortuary practice.

These three perspectives on mortuary practices might very well be exponents of a worldwide range of archaeology of *Life through Death*. Naturally, mortuary practices have changed in a long-term perspective. The way to take care of the dead are bound to the structure of society as well as

cultural and mental norms. Therefore, burials are expressions of ideology, religion and political circumstances. Thus, the archaeological study of mortuary practices has a multitude of approaches: health and status, power structures, relations between production and consumption, and social identity. Common people, aristocrats and ancestors have been actors in regional or local traditions of mortuary practices. In my opinion, rituals of death and burial are expressed in relations to cultural norms and values regarding the individual and society. From an archaeological point of view, there are no simple explanations or interpretations of rituals and mortuary practices. Further, as archaeologists, we do not have the tears, the dances or the songs. We do not have the performers and their performances. We cannot ask about intentions. I see rituals of death and burials as reflecting visions in the present of the past and the future. Mortuary practices are not just celebrations of death. They are constituted by practices and actions related to values and norms of society. We can understand burials as a sort of idealisation and stage-setting with references to the ancestors but always with a vision of the future. As such, the contextual construction of time and space relations is important. Rituals change continuously. Rituals are performed; they transform and are transformed by the people performing them.

Before I went to the Sigtuna conference, it struck me that on this occasion, archaeologists from different parts of the world would come together due to a common interest in Southeast Asian archaeology. Would these scholars represent different research traditions? Would ethics in archaeological practice be mentioned? I wondered about the role of archaeology in the different countries in Southeast Asia, and what kind of ideas the archaeologists had. In his keynote address, Ian Glover very clearly stressed that the research history of Southeast Asia provides the preconditions for the modern archaeological research. The colonial beginnings of archaeology have been followed by local archaeologists who have taken the lead in archaeological research in Southeast Asia. In my opinion, the conference in Sigtuna proved to be a constructive meeting between different archaeologists. Afterwards, I continue to speculate and marvel about the societal significance of archaeology in Southeast Asia, and its obvious relevance today for archaeologists from a wide range of countries around the world.