The Transition to History in Southeast Asia:
An Introduction

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Studies of the transition from prehistory to history in Southeast Asia have traditionally relied primarily on documentary sources, which tend to emphasize foreign influences, rather than on the archaeological record, which suggests a series of indigenous developments. The papers in this journal issue and the next discuss strategies for using both documentary and archaeological evidence to study the transition to history and the emergence of early states in the region. These papers investigate how political units were structured and integrated in Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, and South China, and illustrate how historical and archaeological data can cross-check each other to inform on Southeast Asian sociopolitical and economic developments during the early historic period.

KEY WORDS: Southeast Asia; early historic period; states; history and archaeology.

INTRODUCTION

Southeast Asia has traditionally occupied a decidedly marginal role in world archaeology. Although the region has actually played significant roles in Asian agricultural development, the establishment of interregional trade networks, and the settlement of the Pacific, most introductory textbooks overlook Southeast Asia in favor of more celebrated Old World regions like the Near East and Europe [but see Fagan (1998) for an exception]. The region fares little better in Asian archaeology, where the sheer scale

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and time depth of archaeological records in China, Japan, and India overshadow most of Southeast Asia’s known prehistoric and historic sequences. Current evidence suggests that Southeast Asia has neither the earliest agriculture nor the earliest metallurgy in the region; in each case, China apparently sets the precedent.

Southeast Asia’s role has also been seen as marginal during the early historic period, the first and second millennia A.D. Although the region continued to contribute importantly to agricultural developments and interregional and even worldwide trade, very few permanent historical records exist to document these contributions. Further, South Asian cultures, particularly those from various areas in India, left such deep ideological imprints on the early states of Southeast Asia that several generations of scholars argued that states arose in Southeast Asia only after Indian contact (e.g., Bayard, 1980; Coedès, 1968; Hutterer, 1982; Wheatley, 1979, 1982, 1983).

**DATING THE TRANSITION TO HISTORY**

Our knowledge of the archaeological record within Southeast Asia has expanded tremendously since the early 1970s (see Bellwood, 1992, 1997; Higham, 1989a, b, 1996a, b), especially for Thailand and other areas with relatively stable political regimes. For political reasons, we know far less about the archaeological record of Burma, Laos, and Cambodia. While the new wealth of archaeological research has changed our understanding of key developments during Southeast Asia’s prehistory, which may have begun nearly 2 million years ago, we have learned surprisingly little about the point in the sequence that bridges the latest prehistoric period and the earliest historic period. This transition to history occurred at different times in different areas. In much of mainland Southeast Asia and in the trade states of the Malay Peninsula and Indonesia, foreign contacts began as early as the mid-first millennium B.C., and the early historic period, with written records, was well under way by A.D. 600. In some island areas like the Philippines, the transition to history is thought to have begun later, perhaps after A.D. 900; the earliest known Chinese records referring to trade with the Philippines date to the tenth century. Studying this transitional period is critical for understanding early state formation in Southeast Asia, because it is thought to coincide with the earliest full state development on the mainland and clearly coincides with an explosion of trading activity in peninsular and insular Southeast Asia. It is also “the most intractable period” (Higham, 1989a, p. 190) and the “twilight zone of history” (Hutterer, 1992, p. 562). Previous reviews (e.g., Bellwood, 1992; Christie, 1995;