

Sema Hin Isan, the Origin of the Temple Boundary Stones in Northeast Thailand

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Abstract: Sema Hin stones, or Temple Boundary Markers have their origin in megalithic culture from a prehistoric community in Southeast Asia. Evidence of this culture exists today in rock formations found throughout Southeast Asia. These stone circles can be found surrounding hills and dirt mounds in valleys and along river banks in Northeast Thailand. The arrival of Buddhism into the region after 300 BE created a cultural fusion between Buddhist philosophy and the indigenous cultures of Southeast Asia. The outcome of this interaction created the first adaptation of the original stones. Evidence of this cultural fusion is in the form of stone pillars and slates representing the Buddhist philosophy of different Mahayana sects. A total of 6 philosophies or sects have been identified so far. These include *Ariyasaja Si*, *Makmatchimapatipatah*, The *Soonyawat* sect, The *Yokajarn* sect, The *Jitramatawat* sect and the *Tantrayan* or *Montrayan* sect. The Sema Hin stones that have been discovered around temples and monasteries were the 2nd adaptation of the stones as they were influenced by Buddhist philosophy of the Theravada Nikaya School and moved to mark boundaries. The stones have since been used and understood in modern times only as temple boundary stones. A third adaptation is currently causing the stones to be destroyed and lost. Sema Hin stones today are being included as decorations and becoming art collectables.

Key words: Sema hin, temple boundary stone, bai sema northeast Thailand, Isan

INTRODUCTION

Archaeological artifacts reveal the advancement and activities of a community reflected in the material and non-material created. Different types of culture influence one another. The patterns and styles of artifacts can be used to categorize the origin, historical background and allows us to understand the activities and beliefs of that community in that particular time frame. It also explains the specific characteristics of that ethnic group and their community. Many approaches were used to study the cultural history behind the origin of the Sema Hin stones. The study of cultural background, their unique characteristics, the timeline of Buddhism's influence and the evidence from other archaeological finds have unlocked the origin and development of the Sema Hin Stones in Northeast Thailand.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research area: The focus area for the research included the study of Sema Hin stones in the Province of Kalasin in Northeast Thailand. Field research was conducted primarily at the ancient community of Muang Fah Daed

Sohn Yang where 432 Sema Hin stones have been identified and registered with the Department of Fine Arts. Other Sema Hin stones located in National Museums in the Province of Kalasin and Khon Kaen were also included in the study along with the remnants and stones of the ancient Stone Age rock culture that are scattered throughout Northeast Thailand.

Data collection: Preliminary Data collection was conducted primarily from document analysis in May, 1987 and Primary data was collected from field research and extensive analysis of documents and research papers from December 2005 to May 2007 (18 months). The sample group consisted of 150 people in the province of Kalasin. Key informants consisted of the Abbots of rural temples and the official Royal temple of Kalasin. Qualitative research methods and Historic Approach methods were used in the study and analysis was undertaken by using descriptive analysis.

RESULTS

The shapes and styles of Sema Hin stones have their origin in Buddhist philosophy and are influenced by

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various Buddhist sects. The interaction between indigenous communities and Buddhist philosophy created a cultural fusion which influenced the development of Sema Hin stones. Sema Hin stones can be found everywhere in Thailand. But the highest concentration is in Northeast Thailand or Isan. Most are located at the ancient community of Muang Fah Daed Soon Yang in Kalasin Province in Northeast Thailand. There are many ancient stone formations scattered throughout Northeast Thailand and many have misunderstood these formations and their purpose as the same as Sema Hin stones. Many of the ancient stone formations are in truth created for a different purpose. Many Stone slates that look like Sema Hin Stones actually belong to a different cultural group. These stone slates and formations belong to a megalithic culture of a prehistoric era. Analysis of the tools and methods used in the construction of these stones are very similar to prehistoric communities where Dolmens, Menhirs, Cromlechs and stone alignments were common.

Three Ancient Stone Age stone circles have so far been discovered in Thailand. It is believed that megalithic culture spread from Western Europe into Northern Thailand. Two of them are located in Northern Thailand at the Sariem forest located in the District of Hod in the Province of Chiangmai and the other circle is located in the District of Mae Sarieng in the Province of Maehongson. The third stone circle is located at the village of Bahn Hin Tang in The district of Soongnem in the Province of Nakorn Ratchasima in Northeast Thailand. Archaeological evidence suggests that prehistoric burials in caves in Northern Thailand changed and moved to burial grounds in plains and valleys. As tools and communities developed, stones were arranged in circles to mark burial grounds and sacred places.

Fifteen thousand years ago the Central Thailand plains were flooded and the communities that lived along the river banks of the Mekong, Mun and Shee rivers in Northeast Thailand relocated to the high grounds of the plateaus. Small groups of people banded together into communities and then they banded together to become cities or Muangs. As communities evolved and prospered, these Muangs came together as a state and formed the building blocks for Southeast Asian Empires and Kingdoms. The wealth of the region in history and culture was such that ancient Indian texts refer to what is now modern day Southeast Asia as The Land of *Suvarnabhumi* or the land of gold (Smith and Weston, 1979). The use and purpose of the stones changed from Stone Age period from being grave markers into marking the boundaries of religious sites and buildings. By the

time of the Ayuttaya period, the burial stones original purpose was totally forgotten and were used to represent belief in Buddhism and Brahmanism. Many stones from Stone Age burial grounds were reused and developed into Sema Hin stones or *Bai Sema* stones which were used as boundary markers in Thai buddhist temples, which separate the sacred from the profane area (Wikimedia, 2007).

Buddhism from India entered Thailand after 300 BE (Buddhist Era) and was widely embraced by the local communities during the Mon or Thavaraawadee Kingdoms. Buddhism belief of the Theravada sect from Sri Lanka later entered the Suvarnabhumi region during the Sukhotai and Ayuttaya Kingdoms in Thailand. During this period the Sema Hin stones had a set pattern and application. They were used to mark Buddhist temple grounds and areas. Four sided and 8 side stone column patterns were the most popular forms of Sema Hin stones. Stones slates which were adapted from ancient burial ground stones were also reused over and over again. Many temples engrave the temple's history and inauguration on the faces of the Sema Hin stones that they reused. In some cases the stone slates and columns were just moved from other locations. Natural rocks were also used to imitate Sema Hin Stones.

The meaning and development of sema hin stones: Many different types of Sema Hin stones can be found throughout Northeast Thailand but the most important archaeological site in the Northeast is at Muang Fa Daed (Eliot and Bickersteth, 2003) or the ancient community of *Muang Fah Daed Soong Yang* in Kalasin Province in Northeast Thailand. Analysis of 432 Sema Hin Stones at Muang Fah Daed Soon Yang show evidence that these stones were re-used and influenced by the ancient burial stones.

Sema Hin stones or Bai Sema is generally 1-2 meters high. A close analysis of Sema Hin stones of the shape and patterns found in Northeast Thailand can be categorized into 6 styles.

- Sema Hin pillar with a square base. With an inclining point at the top in the form of a bunged lotus blossom petal
- Sema Hin pillar with an octagonal base. An inclining point at the top in the form of a bunged lotus blossom petal
- Sema Hin slate with no engravings
- Sema Hin slate with a bridge in the middle with engravings
- Sema Hin slate with a pagoda engravings
- Sema Hin slate with Jataka stories engravings

Analysis of the design and Buddhist philosophy reflected in the Sema Hin stones are in accordance with the timeline of the arrival of Buddhism sects and Brahmanism from India. Archaeological evidence can explain the origin of the Sema Hin stones as follows, as reflected by elements of Buddhist philosophy symbolized in the stones. The 6 types of Sema Hin stones match the 6 philosophy of Buddhism beliefs.

- Buddhist Philosophy of the *Ariya-Sacca Si* or the 4 holy truths in Buddhism (Brandon, 1972). *Ariya-Sacca Si* is the most important principle in Buddhist philosophy. Archaeological evidence of the concept of this philosophy is embedded in the Sema Hin stones that haven't been relocated from the original locations in Northeast Thailand surrounding dirt mounds. The stones are located atop dirt mounds. At the base of the pillar just above ground level is a horizontal engraving representing the base of a throne or Chair. The Throne represents the residing place of Buddha. The area above the throne represents the heart of Buddhism's doctrine that was gained from his en-lightment and the finding of the true meaning of life which is called *Ariyasaja Si*. The Inclining lotus petals represent the umbrella above the throne which is influenced by the Buddhism Philosophy of the Theravada sect that spread into Thailand in 4-6th Century BE
- Buddhist Philosophy of the *Makmatchimapatipatah* or the Middle Path. During 6-7th century BE, the Buddhist school of Mahayana spread into the Suvarnabhumi region which is current day Myanmar and Thailand. The Buddhist doctrine representation changed from the square pillar of *Ariyasaja Si* to an Octagon column. The 4 sides of the square pillars were changed to 8 sides representing the belief in *Muk Paed* or the 8 paths to end all suffering which is in accordance to the belief of the middle path. The inclining top representing an umbrella above the throne is still preserved
- Buddhist philosophy of the *Soonyawat* sect of the Mahayana school of thought. The *Soonyawat* sect philosophy spread into Suvarnabhumi and Northeast Thailand in the 7th century BE. The main doctrine of the *Soonyawat* sect is that all things under heaven do not happen by themselves, do not rely on anything, does not happen by itself and do not happen through the combination of events. The *Soonyawat* sect's belief is reflected in the Sema Hin stones in the engravings. The stones changed from using columns to using stone slates instead. The stones are carved into large spear shaped slates with

an incline at the top imitating a bunged lotus blossom petal. The Spear shape or leaf shape of the Sema Hin stone represents the boundary of the universe. The universe is affixed on a throne which is an engraving carved at the base of the slate. There are no engravings in the middle of the slate which represents the relationship of all of the elements of the universe that is emptiness or called *Soon Tah*

- Buddhist philosophy of the *Yokajarn* sect from the Mahayana school of thought. The *Yokajarn* sect's main doctrine is that all material objects in this world do not exist. What we see, feel or touch is only a vision that we create from the heart and mind. The reason that we feel regret, sorrow and retribution is because we do not know the truth. It is like walking in complete darkness and stepping on a piece of rope and thinking it was a snake. But once we realize the truth then all fear is gone. The *Yokajarn* sect's philosophy spread into Suvarnabhumi and Northeast Thailand in the 8th century BE. The evidence of the sect's philosophy is engraved in large Sema Hin Stones slates that are very similar to the Sema Hin stones from the *Soonyawat* sect where the slates still retain their spear shape form but the difference is that the *Yokajarn* sect stones do not have engravings on the slate. There is only a simple line protruding from the base to the apex at the top of the slate or at the tip of the spear slate. This line which narrows at the top to represent the spirit that exists in the middle of emptiness
- Buddhist philosophy of the *Jitramatawat* Sect from the Mahayana school of thought. The *Jitramatawat* sect originated during the Gupta empire near the end of the 10th century BE. During this period there was a revival of Sanskrit writings and Hindu philosophy. No evidence can be found as to who was the founder of the *Jitramatawat* sect, but the sect's belief and philosophies are represented in many Sutras written in Sanskrit during the reign of King Kuranakrachun of the Gupta dynasty. It was the golden age of Sanskrit literature and Brahmanism was in revival. Brahmanism philosophy influenced much of the Buddhist literature of the *Yokajarn* sect and eventually evolved into the *Jitramatawat* sect. Evidence of their philosophy is engraved on Sema Hin Slates which is still shaped in the form of a spear. The difference is that there is a pagoda shape engraving at the base of the slate with a line protruding from the middle of the dome up to the top of the slate. The *Jitramatawat* sect philosophy spread into Suvarnabhumi during the Champa and Funan Empire

- Buddhist philosophy of the *Tantrayan* or *Montrayan* sect from the Mahayana school of thought. The reign of the Gupta dynasty between 836-1190 AD was the golden age of Indian philosophy. Buddhism and many other beliefs were at their highest point. Buddhist novice and worshippers in Asia would travel to study at the Buddhist University of Nalanda located in Northern India. Through Nalanda University, the Mahayana school of thought's philosophy spread rapidly throughout Asia. Advancements in philosophy and the fusing of Hinduism, Tantric philosophy and Buddhism of the *Yokajarn* sect fused into the *Trigai Sukawadee Montrayan* sect. The *Trigai Sukawadee Montrayan* sect's doctrine was a fusion of Buddhism and Brahmanism. The influence of the *Trigai Sukkawadee Montrayan* sects are engravings on Sema Hin stones of Buddha's Jataka stories and Biography which is a continuation the customs of Murals and Pictures which were popular during that period. It is believed that there are at least 10 types of Jataka stories engraved on Sema Hin stones which coincides with the 10 lives of the Buddha. Most engravings are from Buddha's last incarnation as *Prahwaetsandon Chadohk* (Keerati, 2007)

Currently many temples in Northeast Thailand have intruded ancient burial sites and mounds and removed the stone markers. Many of the ancient stones end up in private collections and in some cases used as the city's sacred pillar. Many have been collected and stored away as sacred relics of villages and temples. Stone slates and columns that were once used to mark burial mounds and graves have now been replaced by urns, Chedi, Stupa and Pagoda's to store ashes and bones which are now placed along temple walls and monastery grounds. Currently Sema Hin stones are classified as an important archaeological artifact, but very little research has been supported to examine them in detail. More research is needed to study the details to the origins of each stones and how they influenced the societies that created them.

CONCLUSION

Sema Hin Stones have their origin dating back to the Stone Age from megalith cultures of prehistoric Southeast Asia. The original purpose for the stones is still being debated but it is highly believed that they were used to mark burial mounds and cemeteries in Southeast Asia. The arrival of Buddhism after 300 BE created a cultural fusion of indigenous culture and Indian influence from beliefs and practices in Buddhism and Brahmanism with traditional Animistic belief of Southeast Asian

communities. The outcome of the cultural fusion gave birth to the first adaptation and reuse of ancient burial stones in the form of stone columns, pillars and slates which represent beliefs of Buddhist philosophies of various sects. A total of 6 philosophies have been identified far. Sema Hin stones that are located around temples and monasteries are the 2nd adaptation of these stones. The change from belief in Mahayana Buddhism to Theravada Buddhism changed the form of Sema Hin Stones and their main purpose during this period to mark Buddhist temple areas and chapel grounds. Currently the third adaptation is going on right now where these stones are becoming collectable items and souvenirs in private collections. Sema Hin stones are in danger of being lost due to modernization and popular trends. Ancient stones that once marked sacred burial grounds and temple grounds with respects from our ancestors are now being bought and sold as art collectables and used as decorations.

SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Research studies should be supported in the field of the exact locations of ancient Stone Age rock formations and Sema Hin stones by use of GIS technology so that they can be used to identify and study the density of ancient communities in the past. The transformation of Stone Age rock culture to Sema Hin stones can be used to identify the developments of communities in ancient Northeast Thailand and help provide a better understanding of the ancient land of Suvarnabuhmi.

The Fine Arts Department and National Cultural Organizations should engage and support the study and catalog of Sema Hin stones that are kept in local village museums and Monasteries so that the exact numbers of artifacts are known and their histories and location of where they were originally located are documented. Training should also be provided to rural communities on the origin and importance of Sema Hin stones and the adaptations from Stone Age rock culture towards the development of Northeast Thailand. Conservation training and correct maintenance procedures should be provided to communities and villages so that Northeast Thailand's Stone Age culture and Sema Hin stones are preserved for future generations to study and admire in the cultural development of ancestors.

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