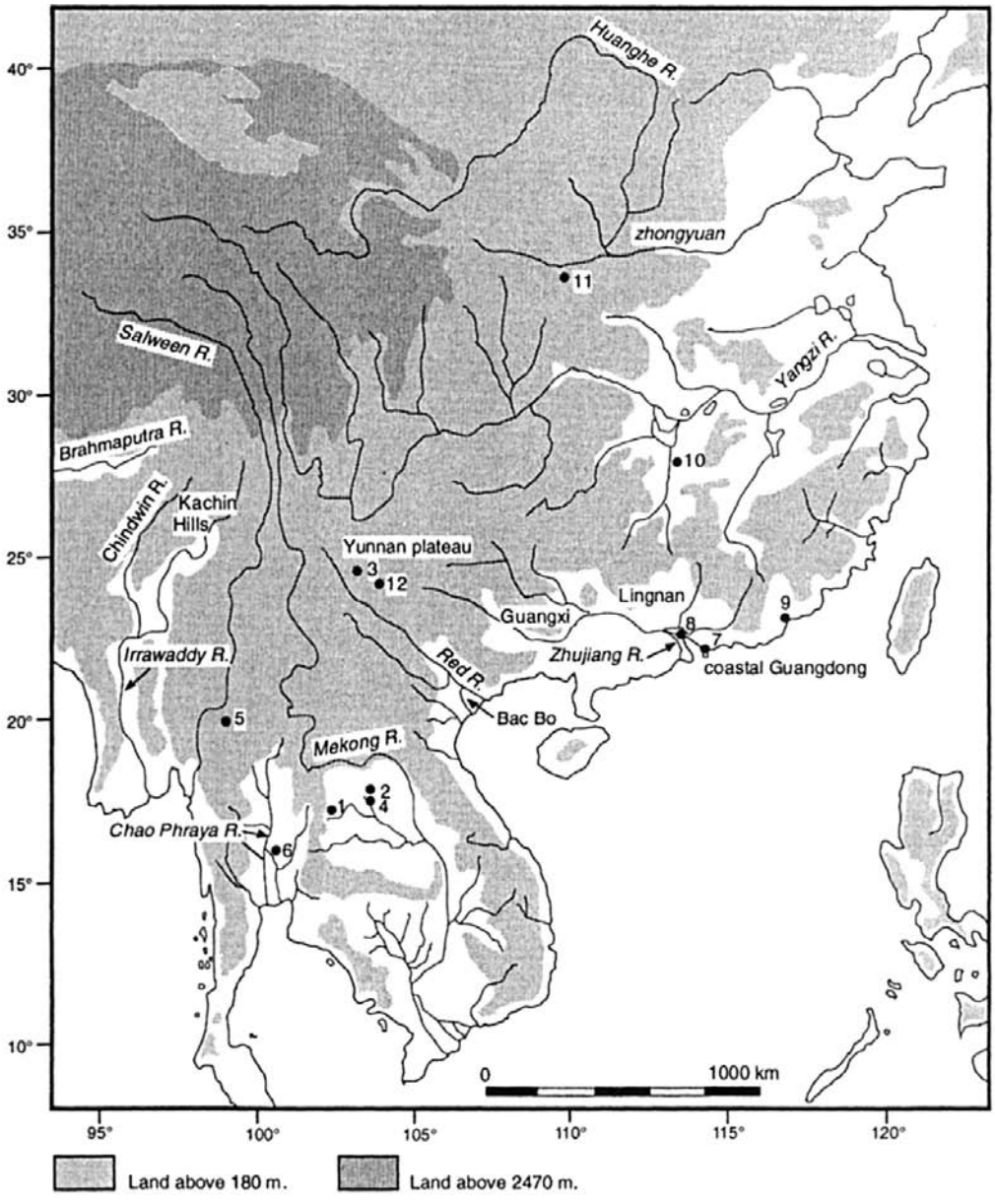
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

From their hub in the eastern Himalayas, a series of the world's great rivers radiate like the spokes of a wheel. Fed by the melting snows and augmented in the northern spring by the May monsoon, they have cut through mountain ranges and formed extensive flood plains and deltas in an area which today sustains a sixth of humanity. Enclosed between the Brahmaputra in the west to the Yangzi (Changjiang), we encounter the Chindwin, Irrawaddy, Salween, Chao Phraya, Mekong, Red (Hong) and the many rivers which drain Lingnan and join to form the Zhujiang. In an area where the copious monsoon rains encourage dense forest cover, including triple-canopied rainforest in favoured areas, these rivers have historically provided passage for the movement of people, goods and ideas (Fig. 1.1).

In a previous study, I confined mainland Southeast Asia to the valleys of the lower Red, Mekong and Chao Phraya rivers together with the intervening uplands (Higham 1989). This area could easily be expanded. If, for example, we defined Southeast Asia as those areas affected by the monsoon but excluding India, then we should incorporate Lingnan, that part of southern China comprising Guangdong and Guangxi provinces. There is, indeed, a logical case for doing so: the Chinese only seized this territory under the Qin and Western Han dynasties, and to this day local customs and languages, as well as the habitat, show far greater affinities with the land to the south than with the *zhongyuan*, the Chinese central plains. The southern boundary of China has for too long intruded into archaeology. Chang (1986) scarcely once looked beyond this line in his synthesis of Chinese prehistory and I have been taken to task for the same blind spot but in reverse (Bronson 1989). I will, therefore, cross this particular Rubicon, and include the Yunnan Plateau and Lingnan in Southeast Asia. Burma would be included were there any evidence to cite, and there are also strong grounds for including the areas of eastern India settled by those speaking Mundaric, Austroasiatic languages. This last area will be considered in seeking parallels to the Southeast Asian metallurgical tradition. There is also island Southeast Asia, the extensive arc of islands to the south and east of the mainland, which, hardly experienced a bronze age, and will be considered as a relevant but not integral part of this study.

There are also environmental and cultural reasons for this definition of mainland Southeast Asia. The area defined was subject to the monsoon, although its impact varied with local topography. This involves a sharp distinction between



1.1 Southeast and East Asia, showing the principal rivers and locations of places mentioned in this chapter, together with climate stations considered below. **1.** Non Nok Tha. **2.** Ban Chiang. **3.** Wanjiaba. **4.** Ban Na Di. **5.** Spirit Cave. **6.** Chansen. **7.** Hong Kong. **8.** Guangzhou. **9.** Shantou. **10.** Changsha. **11.** Xian. **12.** Kunming.

a wet and a dry season, although the temperature, other than in upland areas, rarely falls below 10°C. The subsistence base in the extensive lowlands, where most bronze age sites are found, was rice cultivation, fishing and stock raising. Only towards the end of the first millennium BC did the Chinese have a major impact in Southeast Asia, and then only in Yunnan, Lingnan and Bac Bo. Most prehistoric people would have spoken a language within the Austroasiatic family, but as we proceed to the northern margins of Southeast Asia, it is possible that Austro-Tai languages were also present.

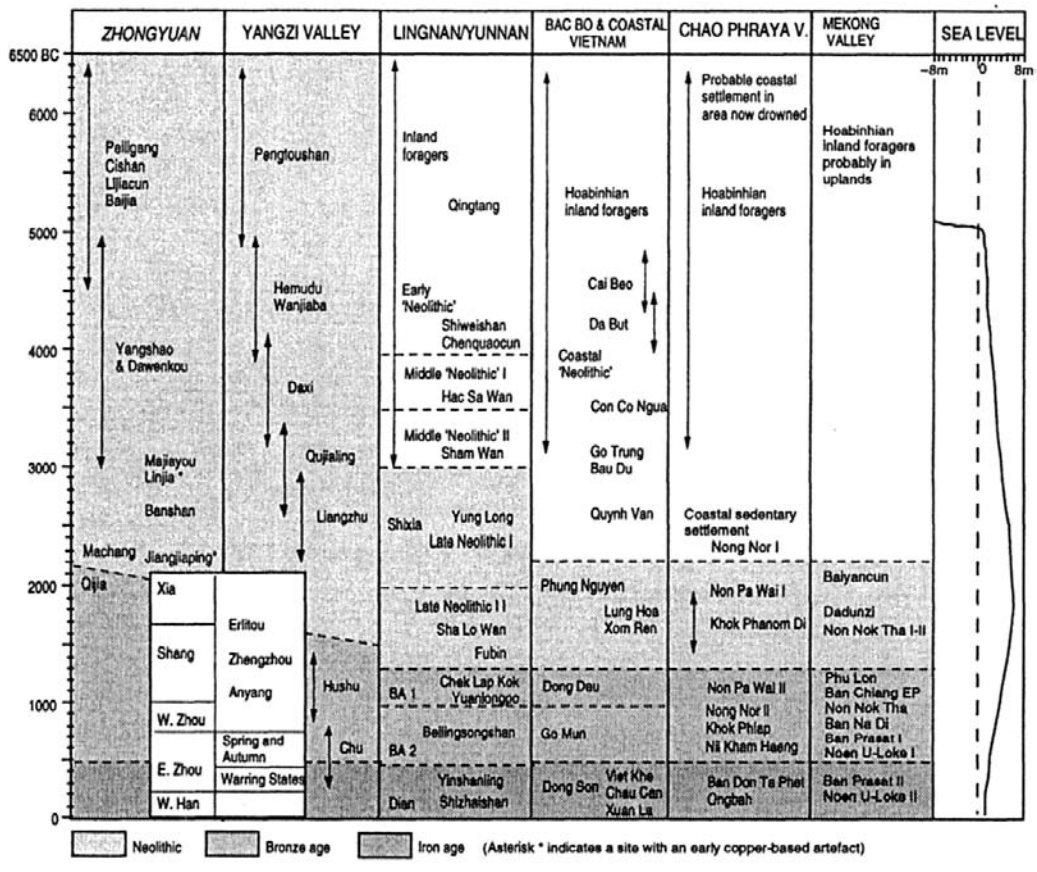
Essentially, then, Southeast Asia involved Austroasiatic speakers living in a hot, monsoonal habitat with an economy based on rice cultivation. The naturally dense forest cover would have stressed the importance of riverine and coastal movement, and it is along these lines of communication that I have divided Southeast Asia when considering regional cultural developments. There are four principal regions: the Chao Phraya and Mekong valleys, Lingnan and Bac Bo, and the Yunnan Plateau (Fig. 1.1).

The study of prehistory in most of this extensive area has been a recent development. This has resulted in much confusion and controversy: on the one hand, claims based on few or shaky data have been made for the world's earliest agriculture and metallurgy. On the other, the very term 'Indo-China' conveys the manner in which Southeast Asia has been seen as provincial and reliant on the influence of adjacent higher civilisations. This situation, however, has now been redressed, and we can begin to discern a pattern which places Southeast Asia in a prominent position for anyone approaching such issues as the origins and spread of agriculture, or the adoption of metal working, on a broad, comparative front.

The prehistoric sequence

The shallow seas and mangrove shores indented with estuaries which characterise the coast of tropical Southeast Asia provide the world's richest habitat in terms of biological activity. Although many archaeological sites have been drowned by the rapid Holocene rise in the sea level, the marine adaptation has been documented at settlements on raised beaches. We encounter a pattern which falls into place alongside sites stretching from northern Australia to Japan: rich, coastal foragers, whose settlements were often sedentary and socially complex. In mainland Southeast Asia, the interior seems to have been sparsely occupied by smaller and more transient groups (Fig. 1.2).

There is not yet a consensus on later prehistoric developments and it is necessary to consider alternative explanations of virtually all aspects of the sequence. The origins and spread of rice-growing communities, for example, may have involved an expansionary movement down the river systems from the Yangzi. There may, however, also have been local transitions to agriculture. In the Yangzi Valley, the cultivation of rice was probably under way by about 6500 BC



1.2 Chronological chart showing the cultural sequences in the different parts of Southeast and East Asia considered below.

and assuredly by 5000 BC. Neolithic communities proliferated, and spread beyond the confines of the Yangzi catchment to the north, south and quite probably by boat to Taiwan and ultimately, to Melanesia and the Pacific (Bellwood 1985, 1991). This expansion is thought to have involved languages in the Austric phylum (Schmidt 1906), which in due course gave rise to Austroasiatic (AA) and Austronesian (AN) languages. The former are distributed from eastern India to southern China (Fig. 1.3). The latter are found from Taiwan south into island Southeast Asia, then to Malagasy in one direction, and Polynesia in the other. In this overview the expansion of AA speakers followed the lines of least resistance: the major rivers. According to Blust (1993a), the present distribution of Vietnamese, Mon, Khmer and Munda languages resulted from the movement of agriculturalists down the Red, Chao Phraya, Mekong and Brahmaputra rivers, a process which saw neolithic communities established in our area during the third and second millennia BC.

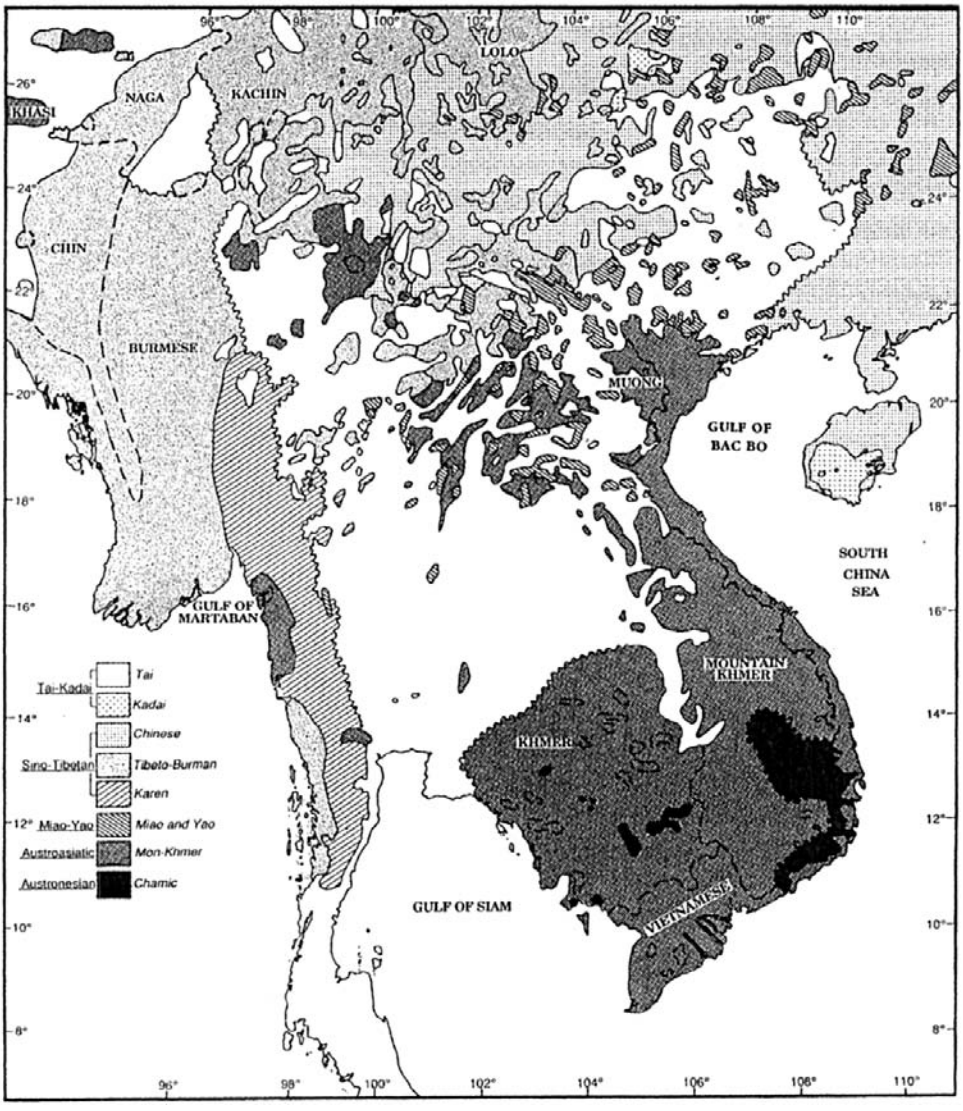
While this interpretation is logical and plausible, it is also necessary to consider local and independent developments. We know of many coastal, sedentary communities in tropical Southeast Asia, and it is highly likely that in due course some adopted agriculture. At present, there is no convincing evidence for an independent transition in these groups, but the possibility cannot be ruled out.

In both the Yangzi Valley and Southeast Asia, village communities proliferated and increasing social complexity is encountered (Pearson 1981, Chang 1986, Higham 1989). The almost universal presence of inhumation cemeteries in association with the settlements also reveals that exotic goods were exchanged and employed in mortuary ritual to denote achieved status. In the valley of the Huanghe (Yellow) River, the first consistent evidence for smelting and alloying of copper and tin is found towards the end of the third millennium BC. It will be argued that in Southeast Asia, copper-based artefacts were first locally cast within the period 1500–1000 BC. Some colleagues prefer a date towards the end of the third millennium, others between 2000–1500 BC. This chronological issue will be considered below.

In Lingnan and Bac Bo, the earliest evidence for local casting is found between *c.* 1500–1000 BC, when jades of Shang inspiration were available. The repertoire, which included axes, fishhooks, projectile points and bracelets, copied late neolithic stone and shell prototypes. In this same area, we also encounter a scatter of imported exotic Shang-style bronze vessels, bells and weapons and throughout the bronze age, there was continuing exchange with the *zhongyuan*. The further removed from this contact in Southeast Asia, the less evidence there is for the presence of exotic Chinese bronzes. Yet the same tradition of casting a limited range of artefacts in bivalve moulds recurs in the Mekong and Chao Phraya valleys, and must have been related intimately to that established in Lingnan within the context of exchange with the Shang state.

From about 500 BC, we encounter a widespread cultural change in Southeast Asia which involved the adoption of iron working, a trend towards the concentration of authority in the hands of social elites, a widening exchange network which incorporated greater distances and new products, a marked increase in the range, size and quantity of bronzes and a commensurate growth in the skill of the bronze workers. The range of new items made from bronze, as well as technical changes and innovations, will be considered within these communities. It will be seen that bronzes were used to project the achievements and status of the elite.

Two related issues are central to this study. The first concerns the relationship between the bronze ages of Southeast Asia and of China. Were there two independent and unrelated transitions to metal working, or was one later, developing in the context of the transmission of information? The second, and more interesting issue, is the nature of the communities which adopted metal working in Southeast Asia, how they employed this new medium, and developed it over time.



1.3 The distribution of language families and major languages in Southeast Asia (from Bellwood 1992).

The relationship between the bronze ages of China and Southeast Asia has not hitherto been considered in a detailed and objective manner, and this is hardly surprising given the immense area and the difficulties involved in coping with different languages, interpretations, and the confused and controversial issue of chronology. Any such review must grapple with the continuing disagreement over dating the first evidence for bronze in the middle reaches of the Mekong Valley. If it was significantly earlier than that of the *zhongyuan*, or even contemporary, then there is a strong case for an independent origin. If it was later,

then the situation changes without ruling out independence. Under these circumstances, it would be necessary to consider the evidence for the exchange of goods, and with them knowledge, between the bronze-using communities to the north and those in Southeast Asia still showing no evidence for the use of metal. This issue turns on the establishment of an accepted chronological framework which, in some areas, remains in the future. It further involves consideration of the mechanisms for the transfer and acceptance of technological innovations.

The second issue also requires a resolution of chronology. Thus, an appreciation of the structure of bronze age communities will vary in line with its duration. As will be seen, there was little evident social change between the neolithic groups and their successors, and bronze was found only sparingly in bronze age cemeteries. At two extremes, we have the option of either a very long bronze age in Southeast Asia, of independent origin, or a briefer period where knowledge of metallurgy was introduced.

Nomenclature

There is no agreed system of nomenclature for the prehistory of mainland Southeast Asia. In the following pages, agricultural communities antedating metal use will be called neolithic and the period from the first use of copper-based artefacts will be called the Bronze Age. We have a wide choice when turning to the complex, increasingly centralised groups evident from about 500 BC. Options include General Period C (Bayard 1984, Higham 1989), Mode 2 (Higham 1983), *Muang* Period (Bayard 1992), the High Bronze Age (Hutterer 1991), the Late Bronze Age (von Dewall 1979), the Iron Age (Penny 1984, Charoenwongsa 1988), the High Metal Age (Ho 1992), the Late Metal Age (Bronson 1992), the Late Prehistoric (Glover 1991) and the Formative (Welch 1985). I have chosen the Iron Age. It is, however, stressed that the Three Age System is used only as a convenient shorthand and with no implications for similarities with other regions where it has been employed. It is also the case that in Yunnan and northern Vietnam, iron was much rarer than in Central Thailand and the Mekong Valley during the period described as the Iron Age. To avoid confusion, however, the term will be used even if iron was later and less abundant in some areas than in others. Since the Iron Age saw a sharp increase in the quantity and range of bronzes produced, this study will cover both the Bronze and Iron Ages.

The Bronze Age: issues and problems

This period is seminal in any consideration of prehistoric Southeast Asia. It opens with the establishment of neolithic communities in a new world of dense forests, broad wetlands during the rains and the long and difficult dry season. By the final act, we can perceive the foundations of the distinct regional states described by

early Chinese and Indian visitors, some of which can be traced in an unbroken lineage to the present.

It is also a part of our prehistory which is covered in overlays of confusion and contradiction. It is the intention of this book to strip these away and present a judicious interpretation of the period within a broad, comparative framework. The birth of our understanding of prehistoric Southeast Asia has been difficult and its formative years have seen stunted growth. This has been incisively summarised by Hutterer:

> [For many decades,] the scholarly world took it for granted that the indolent spirit of Southeast Asian peoples had been brought to florescence only relatively late by grafting onto it shoots of the more vigorous – and already mature – civilisations of India and China. (Hutterer 1982:559)

He proceeded to urge specialists in Southeast Asia to adopt a comparative approach which would

> move Southeast Asia into a meaningful and important place within the history and development of mankind. (Hutterer 1982:567)

This approach contrasts with that recommended by Bayard (1992:17), who has shown concern that the use of terms for ideal social types, such as tribe or chiefdom, might imply too high a degree of similarity with the same term employed in other areas. He advocated the use of the term *ban* to describe autonomous village communities, and *muang* for later, centralised societies. The use of such Thai words is, in my view, inward looking. Should we substitute the equivalent words in Vietnamese or Khmer, or Mon, when considering other parts of Southeast Asia? It is argued that the use of terms known only to native Thai speakers and a tiny group of foreign specialists is likely to marginalise a region which this book is designed to advertise.

Several studies on the nature and development of social inequality in prehistory have recently appeared (Renfrew 1986, Brumfiel, Earle 1987 and Earle 1991). All have in common the absence of any reference to Southeast Asia. This is sensible, and may be ascribed to the overlays of confusion which involve chronology, the nature of the societies which deployed bronze and the myriad approaches to the data within an area of contrasting political ideologies. Any attempt to present an overview of the Southeast Asian Bronze Age soon encounters problems. Publications of relevant material come in many languages: Chinese, Vietnamese, Thai, French, English, Dutch and German. More significantly, interpretations involve distinct, even mutually conflicting, approaches. Chinese scholars, for example, operate within an intellectual straightjacket described by Tong Enzheng:

> For the past forty years, Chinese scholars doing research on ancient societies have been forced to tailor their interpretations to a single approved model. This model is the unilineal evolutionary model proposed by the American Henry Morgan in the 19th century in his

book *Ancient Society*. As a result of Engels adopting and systematically developing this model ... it was branded with the mark of Marxism and thus above reproach. It was later further simplified and taken to a greater extreme by Lenin and Stalin. After 1949, it became, in China, a sacred formula and rigid doctrine. (Tong Enzheng 1991)

This doctrine required that all societies evolved in a unilineal manner from a primitive band to the final goal of a socialist society. The stage most commonly equated with the southern Chinese bronze age was described as the slave society. So, we find Wang Dadao (1985) interpreting the Wanjiaba cemetery as representing an elite of slave owners, their weapons being required to constrain slaves. The possibility that the wealthy aristocrats used weapons to protect their community from alien aggression and were sustained by consensus was not considered. In Vietnam, the post-colonial period has seen a vigorously nationalistic interpretation of the archaeological record in which innovations, particularly those concerning the Dong Son culture, are necessarily of local inspiration by the ancestors of the present inhabitants.

The Bronze Age in Thailand: a controversy over dates

Archaeology came late to Thailand, and the interpretation of bronze age material became highly controversial when Solheim (1968) announced the presence of a cemetery containing bronze artefacts and their stone moulds at Non Nok Tha, Northeast Thailand. On the basis of two radiocarbon dates, he assigned the bronze to the third millennium BC, concluding that these finds

would mean that bronze was being worked in North-eastern Thailand nearly one thousand years before it is now considered to have begun in Shang China and one hundred or more years earlier than it started in the Harappa Culture of the Indus Valley. (Solheim 1968:62)

A few years later, this chronological issue had been considerably extended. Solheim wrote that a socketed tool dated

from about 3500 BC – the oldest known metal tool coming from Southeast Asia, and the oldest socketed tool yet found anywhere. (Solheim 1972:36)

This claim received support from Bayard (1971), who directed the excavations at Non Nok Tha. When reviewing the situation in 1980, he noted:

Are claims for early metallurgy in Southeast Asia valid? On this question, I can for once give an unequivocal answer: yes. Based on the earlier evidence and problematical chronology of Non Nok Tha there was still room for doubt – not much in my view – although even sceptics were forced to accept the presence of bronze in the area before 1500 BC. But I believe that the recent Ban Chiang evidence makes it highly likely that bronze metallurgy was well developed before 3000 BC. (Bayard 1980:105)

In 1974–5, Gorman co-directed the excavation of Ban Chiang (Gorman and Charoenwongsa 1976). This is an occupation and cemetery site near the headwaters of the Songkhram River in Northeast Thailand. He added further to

the controversy by his proposal that bronze at Ban Chiang dated back to 3600 BC, with iron appearing by about 1500 BC.

The results of these claims were predictable: some accepted them with enthusiasm, while they were rejected by others. I was introduced to the area and its prehistory in 1968, when Gorman and Bayard asked me to analyse some faunal material from Spirit Cave and Non Nok Tha. I knew little of the area and found myself part of a team, as for example at the excavation of Ban Chiang in 1974–5, working in an atmosphere of infectious enthusiasm and conviction that indeed we had found remarkably early evidence for bronze and iron. My review of the chronological evidence for the beginning of the bronze age written in 1970 concluded that a date in the fourth millennium BC was the most plausible (Higham 1972).

The blinkers were removed from my eyes in 1981, when I received the radiocarbon dates for our excavations at Ban Na Di, a site located a few kilometres south of Ban Chiang and spanning part of its sequence. These were far later than the claims for equivalent cultural contexts at Ban Chiang, and I knew that our charcoal samples came from *in situ* contexts (Higham and Kijngam 1984). I therefore have considerable sympathy for Muhly (1988), Stech and Maddin (1988) and many others who have found it hard, if not impossible, to penetrate the vapours surrounding Non Nok Tha and Ban Chiang and the attendant claims, a veil which will not properly be lifted until final excavation reports are available.

The hares, however, had been started and the issue generated its own momentum. An article for general consumption published by the Smithsonian Institution declared: 'sophisticated bronze ornaments and pottery have been found dating back at least as far as 3600 BC. The bronzes turning up at Ban Chiang are 15 centuries older than comparable objects found in China' (Mosaic 1977). White's initial re-analysis of the radiocarbon dates from this site provided for a range between 2100 and 1700 BC for the initial presence of bronze (White 1982). In the same publication, Goodenough (1982) attempted to place the site in world ethnological perspective by placing Ban Chiang at the beginnings of the expansion of Austronesian speakers across island Southeast Asia and the Pacific. Goodenough makes no mention of the fact that Ban Chiang lies in the Austroasiatic heartland, an area which has never, to my knowledge, been cited as one which was ever settled by speakers of any Austronesian language.

One direct result of the claims for an early and enduring bronze age tradition has been its projection as being fundamentally different from all other examples of prehistoric societies engaged in metal production. This speculation by White (1982) further bolstered Solheim's proposal that Southeast Asian bronze working is early:

> The discovery of a distinctive metallurgical tradition in Southeast Asia at least comparable to that of northern China, if not earlier, has added new pieces to a puzzle of metallurgical origins. (White 1982:48)