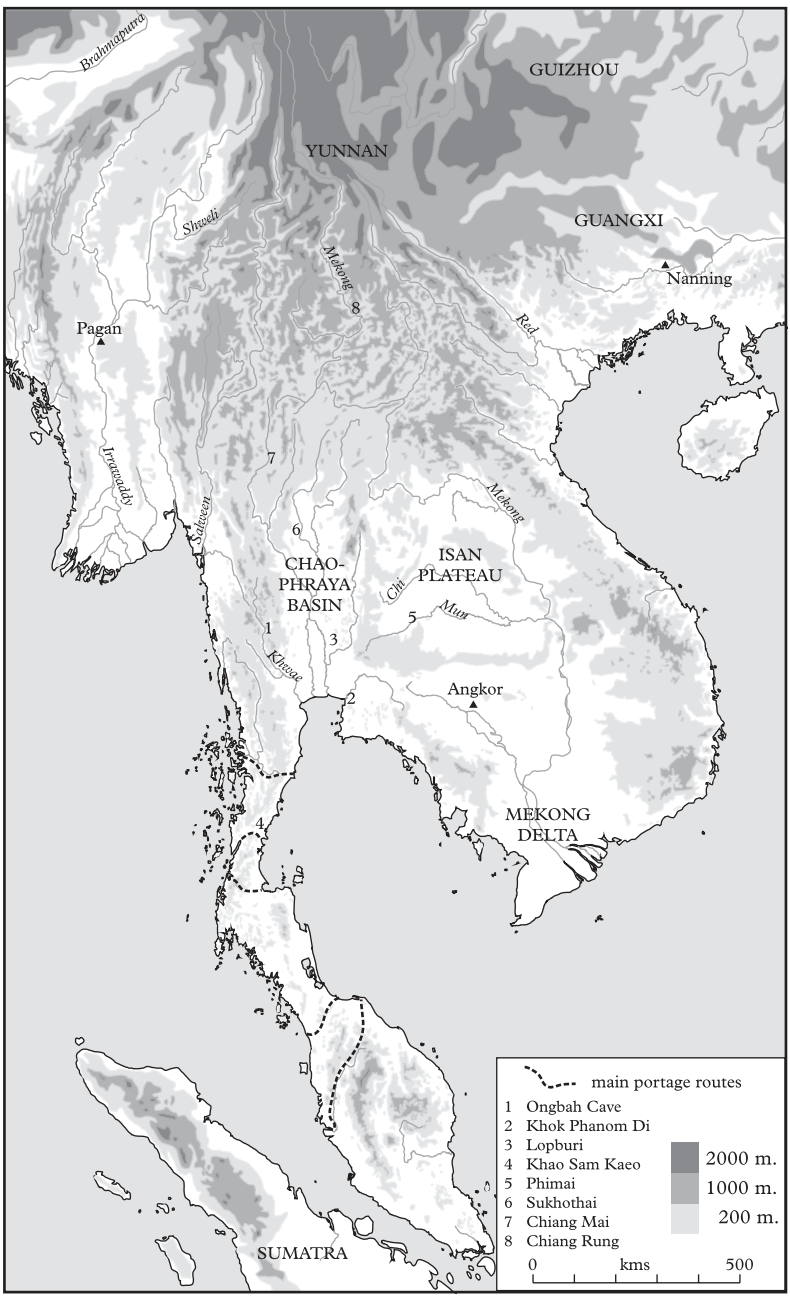
1 Before Ayutthaya

Ayutthaya looms into history from the late thirteenth century CE. Over the following two centuries it becomes the principal city of a territory known as Siam, occupying the deltaic plain of the Chaophraya River, the Central Plain of Thailand today. To west, north, and east, this plain is bounded by hill ranges straggling southwards from the Himalayas (see Map 1.1). Though the hills are not high, forest made them more forbidding. Within these boundaries, the territory is knitted together by water routes along rivers and coastal seas, the most convenient medium of transport prior to the modern era. As the Chaophraya Plain drops only 80 meters across 500 kilometers from the hills to the sea, rivers are sluggish and craft could be poled or paddled northward for most of the year. The hill boundaries and water communications resulted in Siam developing as a distinctive cultural zone.

Today around 1300 millimeters of rain fall on the 162,000 square kilometers of the Chaophraya River's catchment area from May to October, and most of the runoff is channeled down the Chaophraya. The flow is now controlled by dams and water gates, but earlier it would break the banks and flood the lower delta almost every year. Today the plain is a tessellated landscape of paddy fields. In the past, the ecology was very different. High heat and plentiful water generated a rich and varied biomass ranging from deciduous forest near the hills to tropical rainforest further south and mangroves along the coasts. For humans, this ecology supported both a rich economy of hunting and gathering and a productive agriculture, but also hosted many predators including carnivorous animals, poisonous reptiles, disease-carrying insects, and many germs, viruses, and parasites. Forests were seen as dangerous, especially for their fevers and other deadly diseases. Because of high mortality, the population of Mainland Southeast Asia remained small and sparse, with density between a fifth to tenth of the neighboring zones in China and India.[1]

[1] Population is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.



Map 1.1. Mainland Southeast Asia

This chapter traces the history of the Chaophraya Plain to the eve of Ayutthaya's foundation, using mainly secondary works. The historiography of this era has been transformed over recent years. The earlier version was a story of competing empires (Pagan, Srivijaya, Angkor, Dvaravati) and broad geopolitical conflict, reminiscent of the world in the twentieth century. With more digging, more inscriptions, more artifacts, new techniques, and more sensitive readings of sources, the story has become more fragmented, less violent, and more subtle.

Early Peoples

Man arrived rather late in Mainland Southeast Asia. Traces of human settlement in the region stretch back around 40,000 years, but these traces are faint. From about 11,000 BCE, when the climate became warmer and wetter, hunter-gatherers using tools made by flaking river pebbles became more common throughout the region. Along the hills that now divide Thailand and Burma are several caves and rock shelters where these Hoabinhian hunter-gatherers spent the rainy seasons.

Around 17,000 years ago, the sea was over 100 meters below the present level. The mainland and the islands of the western archipelago were connected in a single land mass. The sea rose gradually, reaching a maximum of around 4 meters above its present-level at around 6550 BCE, submerging the lower Chaophraya Plain. Thereafter, the sea dropped and the coastline moved south, reaching Bangkok between 3000 and 1000 BCE, and settling near its current site by 500 CE. Recent research shows the sea receded earlier than once thought, revising the long-held view that the lower gulf was underwater in the first millennium CE and that many Dvaravati sites were on the coast of the time.[2]

Few hunter-gatherer sites have been found in the lowland, probably because such sites are easily obliterated, but two are known on the estuary of the Bang Pakong River. These sites belie the image of hunter-gatherers as small and mobile groups. Khok Phanom Di was occupied for 500 years from around 2000 BCE by a community of several hundred people. At first, they visited temporarily and harvested a huge range of fish and shellfish, supplemented by game and vegetable products from the nearby forests. After settling, they fashioned bone into fish-hooks and other tools, made sea shells into jewelry, manufactured a large quantity and variety of pottery, and ate some rice, perhaps acquired through exchange. After perhaps ten generations of regular settlement, when the sea receded, they fashioned granite into hoes to till the ground, and shells

[2] Trongjai, "Reconsidering the palaeo-shoreline."

into knives to harvest plants. Several generations later, they began to make larger pots with a different technique and new decoration, hinting at an influx of new people. One woman, probably a master potter, was buried with 120,000 shell disc beads, her tools, and examples of her pottery skill. Around 1600 BCE, the site was abandoned.[3] This extraordinary excavation displays the strength and flexibility of the hunter-gatherer economy in this rich environment.

The earliest evidence for rice growing is around 2000 BCE. Some believe it developed locally since wild rice grows naturally in the area, but more likely it came from the mid-Yangzi valley, where domestic rice cultivation was well developed by the fourth millennium BCE, and spread along the coasts to Mainland Southeast Asia in a package with the keeping of cattle and dogs, a style of pottery with curved incisions, and a tradition of inhumation burial.[4] The researched sites in the Chaophraya Plain are all on the fringe of the western hills, or on the uplands in Lopburi, and may have developed from earlier forager settlements through an influx of new people. The early farmers still gained much of their food from hunting birds, deer, monkeys, crocodiles, rhinos, turtles, and other fauna, and from collecting frogs, fish, and shellfish from the waterways. As Bronson summarized, "No farmers in any region outside southern and eastern Asia could produce as much food with as little labor from the same amount of land."[5] In civilization models based on temperate zones, the coming of agriculture is a major disjuncture because agriculture supports larger and denser populations which in turn develop more complex hierarchies. Southeast Asia diverged from this model for the simple reason that the hunter-gatherer economy was so productive. Agriculture did not replace hunter-gathering, but supplemented it.

Bronze appeared around 1250 to 1000 BCE.[6] Again, the technology most likely arrived from southern China where a well-developed bronze industry using the same techniques flourished by 1500 BCE. A copper mining center has been discovered in the Khao Wong Prachan valley in Lopburi. Bronze was used to make some tools such as axe-heads and needles, but mostly for jewelry and ornaments. The settlements of this era were small, with a maximum of around 250 people, and scattered rather than clustered, possibly to preserve territories for hunting and gathering. After 1000 BCE, people were often buried with fine pots,

[3] Higham and Rachanie, *Early Thailand*, 46–75.
[4] Higham and Rachanie, *Early Thailand*, 77–105.
[5] Bronson, "Extraction of natural resources," 295.
[6] Some scholars argue for an earlier date around 2000–1800 BCE; see the discussion in Rispoli, Ciaria, and Pigott, "Establishing the prehistoric cultural sequence," 119–34, and Higham, Douka, and Higham, "New chronology for the Bronze Age."

tools, jewelry, animal parts, or clay figurines of domesticated animals. One site shows evidence of a dominant chiefly lineage, but at present it stands as an exception. What is truly striking is the variety – both within a single community, and between locations – on burial practices, pottery styles, taste in jewelry, and cultic objects. Two villages only 20 kilometers apart maintained completely different pottery traditions over several hundred years.[7]

Overall the archeological record to this point at present suggest a range of small local communities where the environment provided a good living, where neither economic monopoly nor armed political domination was creating any significant social division, where there was a high degree of local experimentation in cultural and ritual practices, and where inter-community exchanges were common but socially neutral.

Around 500 BCE, communities began to make things from iron. While copper and tin for making bronze were found in only a few locations, the raw material for iron was widely available in laterite rocks. The technology may have evolved locally but again the date is late enough that diffusion from elsewhere is more likely, possibly from India as humped (zebu) cattle also appeared in the same era.[8] The first iron articles were decorative goods, mimicking bronze examples, but before long the main usage was to make implements for agriculture and hunting – knives, sickles, hoes, billhooks, digging sticks, and spades.[9] The impact of iron was much greater than bronze.

Population expanded. On the Isan Plateau, where the archeological work has been more intense, over 1,500 Iron Age sites have been counted. Some could have accommodated over 2,000 people.[10] In the Chaophraya Plain, many sites have been found around the old copper-working area in Lopburi, in the Lower Pasak valley, along the Maeklong and Bang Pakong rivers, and farther north along the Ping and Yom rivers. An increase in burials at the Lopburi sites suggests population growth.[11]

A distinctive form of settlement appeared – the moated mound. The original pattern for these may have been a natural landform, but it was improved by adding moats in concentric rings. The water may have been used for irrigation, but more likely they provided a secure domestic water

[7] Higham and Rachanie, *Early Thailand*, 130–55; Glover, Pornchai, and Villiers, *Early metallurgy*; Solheim and Ayres, "Late prehistoric and early historic pottery."
[8] Rispoli, Ciaria, and Pigott, "Establishing the prehistoric cultural sequence," 134–5.
[9] Higham and Rachanie, *Early Thailand*, 167–80; Glover, Pornchai, and Villiers, *Early metallurgy*.
[10] Srisakara, *Isan*, 37–60.
[11] Srisakara, "Early urban centres in the Chao Phraya valley"; Rispoli, Ciaria, and Pigott, "Establishing the prehistoric cultural sequence," 135–6

supply through the long dry season and periods of drought.[12] Graves suggest craft skills became more developed, more specialized, and more valued: metal-workers, potters, and textile makers were all buried with the tools of their trade. Burials show more clustering into what may be clans, with more variation by gender and age. A few sites show stronger evidence of chiefs or chiefly lineages. At Ongbah Cave on the Khwae Yai River, some men were buried in hardwood coffins carved with the images of bird's heads and filled with beads, bronze ornaments, iron tools, and weapons – lances, spears, and halberds.[13] Other sites have yielded arrowheads, projectiles for pellet bows, and spears which have been "killed," possibly in honor of a warrior.[14] But much of this could still come from a hunting culture. No arsenals have been found, and no definite proof of fortifications.

In the sites along the lower reaches of the rivers, exotic goods appear in the graves, including beads and figurines from India, and several high-tin bronze bowls decorated with vegetation, dwellings, the first pictorial representation of humans, along with images of sheep and horses, which are not native to Southeast Asia.[15] While sites on the west of the plain show linkage westward to India either by sea or over the portage routes, especially via the Three Pagodas Pass, sites on this western side have yielded glass beads also found down the Malay Peninsula, and green stone ear rings, bone combs, and ornaments found also in Vietnam, the Philippines, and southern China. Graves from this era contain more exotic status-defining goods, suggesting the emergence of "a farmer-warrior elite."[16] Fragments of pottery carry Indian religious symbols and excerpts of written scripts.[17]

Who were these early peoples? To date, the discussion of the early peopling of the region has been dominated by linguists using a model of languages developing by division and diffusion from a common core. Benedict traced all the major Southeast Asian language families back to a single root in southern China; the Austronesian family branched off first by ocean travel and developed into Malay and the related languages of the archipelago; the Austroasiatic or Mon-Khmer family passed by land or sea into Mainland Southeast Asia.[18] Bellwood and Blust proposed that Mon-Khmer moved with the spread of the new rice agriculture from the

[12] O'Reilly, "Increasing complexity."
[13] Sorensen, "Ongbah cave and its fifth drum."
[14] Higham and Rachanie, *Early Thailand*, 179–80.
[15] Higham and Rachanie, *Early Thailand*, 172–5; Glover and Bellina, "Ban Don Ta Phet and Khao Sam Kaeo."
[16] Rispoli, Ciaria, and Pigott, "Establishing the prehistoric cultural sequence," 136.
[17] Borell, Bellina, and Boonyarit, "Contacts between the upper Thai–Malay peninsula and the Mediterranean world"; Bellina, "Development of coastal polities."
[18] Benedict, *Austro-Thai language and culture*.

third millennium BCE. From eastern India through to Vietnam, the different Mon-Khmer languages share the same words for rice and bronze, and have similar words for millet, winnowing, transplanting, dogs, goats, bronze, and getting drunk on liquor – implying that these peoples knew about these things before they became scattered over a wide area.[19] Bellwood argues that rice agriculture was spread by waves of migration that superseded the hunter-gatherers, whose remnants are small negrito groups like the Senoi and Hlabri, still found in the depths of the forests.[20]

In this view, packages of peoples, languages, and technologies are layered onto the landscape like the layers in an archeological dig. But gene pools and various forms of knowledge (technology, ritual) may not have traveled together. Genes can be transmitted in small samples. Ideas, languages, and technologies may move with people or with artifacts. In the past, when rather little research was available, the archeological record suggested great discontinuities, occasioned by outside forces such as migration, but as the record has thickened, the continuities are more striking. The long-range studies of the hunter-gatherer settlements in the Bang Pakong estuary and the metal-working communities in Lopburi show people adjusting to successive changes in the environment, with some innovations brought by people from outside. Some elements of language may have arrived from southern China along with rice and bronze, but others may have come from India with the craftsmen and traders of exotic goods. The earliest representations of human faces in the Chaophraya Plain in stucco found at Nakhon Pathom and other sites are striking for the variety in shape and features.[21]

A DNA analysis of skeletons from sites in the Upper Mun Basin from 1500 BCE to 500 BCE showed that the people today who are most closely related to these ancient people are the Chao Bon or Nyah-Kur, a Mon-Khmer speaking group that still lives on the nearby hills.[22] Such small Mon-Khmer speaking communities are found from the Annamite cordillera to western India. In such a fragmented area, local languages would originally have been very diverse. The Mon-Khmer languages probably developed as lingua franca as trade and exchange increased, especially along the coasts.[23]

[19] Zide and Zide, "Cultural vocabulary"; Blust, "Beyond the Austronesian homeland"; Higham, "Archaeology, linguistics and the expansion of the East and Southeast Asian neolithic."
[20] Bellwood, "Southeast Asia before history," 91; Bellwood, "Cultural and biological differentiation."
[21] Best seen in the collection in the Phra Pathom Chedi National Museum, Nakhon Pathom.
[22] Patcharee et al., "Genetic history of Southeast Asian populations," 436–9.
[23] Bayard's comments on Shorto, "The linguistic protohistory," in Smith and Watson, *Early Southeast Asia*, 279–80.

In sum, nature provided very rich livelihoods for early peoples in the Chaophraya Plain, but also presented them with many threats from predators and disease. Life expectancy was low. The population increased slowly. Settlements were small and stayed mostly on the uplands on the edges of the plain. Perhaps the climate was wetter than today, the forest in the Chaophraya Plain denser, and the predators more prolific. Because the hunter-gatherer economy was so productive, the arrival of agriculture was much less of a revolution than in temperate zones. Bronze also had a limited impact, and was used mainly for personal ornamentation. Only with the arrival of iron was there more significant change – slightly larger settlements, some sign of social division, and more exchange, but no stark social division, no political integration, and very limited evidence of violence. From the early centuries CE, the pace of change picked up, in part because of influences arriving from outside, mainly from India.

Towns

In the early centuries CE, the region slips from prehistory to history, with the appearance of monumental buildings and inscriptions, and with records in the Chinese gazetteers. From the sixth or seventh century CE, larger settlements appear throughout the Chaophraya Plain. They are influenced by cultural imports from India, where urban societies had developed a thousand years earlier.

Contacts

In the last few centuries BCE, Mediterranean traders reached India, and Arab and Indian sailors mastered the technique of crossing the Indian Ocean using the rhythm of the monsoons.[24] Indian writings of this era mention Suvarnadvipa or Suvarnabhumi, a land of gold, which translated into the Golden Chryse or Golden Chersonese for Greek and Roman geographers, and Kimlin or Chinlin in Chinese. This term arose because of gold found in Sumatra and on the peninsula that served as both a bridge and a barrier between east and west, but also because of other economic opportunities. By the fourth or fifth centuries BCE, there were settlements on the middle peninsula using portage routes to connect the trade systems of the Indian Ocean and South China Seas. Between the fourth and second centuries BCE at Khao Sam Kaeo on the east coast of the peninsula, a large Indian-style settlement appeared making products

[24] Glover, "Early trade between India and South-East Asia"; Ray, "Early maritime contacts."

of stone, glass, ceramics, and metals – a relocation of Indian production to better access markets in the South China Seas. The settlement grew Japanese-style rice along with pulses, cotton, and sesame from India.[25] Short-range trading systems were now chained together from China to Europe. By the first century CE, European objects, especially Roman intaglios, coins, and medallions, had reached several sites on the middle and upper peninsula.[26] The first Chinese account of the portage routes dates to the first or second century BCE.

Early Arab and Chinese accounts record that Southeast Asians were great seafarers. A Chinese text from the third century CE described Southeast Asian ships with a sense of wonder: "The large ones are more than fifty meters in length … they carry from six to seven hundred persons, with 10,000 bushels [c. 600 tons] of cargo." Archeologists have found remnants dated to the fourth century CE, and some images are known from carvings and murals. These ships were built with fiber-lashed planks, up to four masts, and heavy cladding. The Chinese had nothing to rival them until the ninth century CE, and European visitors were stunned by the size and sophistication of their later form.[27]

From the first century CE, the Han Chinese also became interested in the peninsula.[28] The growing power and profligacy of the Chinese imperial court created a demand for many exotic items from tropical and subtropical areas including kingfisher feathers, pearls, ivory, rhino horn, and precious stones, but especially perfumes of all kinds including aromatic woods. The peninsula became famed in the Chinese courts as the source of the best aloes wood: "It is like something belonging to the immortals … Light one stick and the whole house is filled with a fragrant mist which is still there after three days."[29] From 240 CE the Chinese court developed the tribute system, under which local rulers gained access to trade with China, along with political recognition, by offering tribute. Between 600 and 850, the Chinese court received 110 tribute missions from thirty-four named places in Southeast Asia, of which half sent only one mission.[30] Many were probably on the peninsula, including five states that may have controlled portage routes across the peninsula (see Map 1.1).[31]

[25] Bellina et al., "Development of coastal polities"; Castillo, Bellina, and Fuller, "Rice, beans and trade crops."
[26] Borell, Bellina, and Boonyarit, "Contacts between the upper Thai–Malay peninsula and the Mediterranean world."
[27] Manguin, "Trading ships of the South China Sea," quote on 262.
[28] Wade, "Beyond the southern borders," 25.
[29] Wolters, "Tambralinga," 600.
[30] Smith, "Mainland Southeast Asia in the seventh and eighth centuries," 444.
[31] See also the speculative map in Wade, "Beyond the southern borders," 27.

Around 400 CE, a master mariner from the eastern coast of India left a carving of a Buddhist stupa near Kedah.[32] In the eighth century on the Takua Pa portage route there was a South Indian settlement, managed by a merchant guild and protected by a garrison of soldiers.[33] On the east coast around Nakhon Si Thammarat, around ninety sites have been found with Brahmanical artifacts including elaborate hilltop temple complexes, dating from the fifth century CE onwards.[34] The Chinese records describe local communities adopting Indian religious practice, including at Panpan in the seventh century:

> In the country are numerous Brahmans come from India in search of wealth. They are in high favour with the King … There are ten monasteries where Buddhist monks and nuns study their canon … the King of P'an-p'an sent accredited envoys to present, among other things, a tooth of the Buddha, painted stupas and ten varieties of perfume.[35]

The Gods Came

According to legend, in the mid-third century BCE during the time of the emperor Asoka, monks were sent to carry Buddhist teachings to Suvarnabhumi. The Ceylonese *Mahavamsa* chronicle describes the travels of two Buddhist monks to Suvarnabhumi in what may be the same era.[36] In the first century CE, Chinese monks came in the other direction, crossing Mainland Southeast Asia to find teachings, texts, and relics in India and Sri Lanka. Religious objects from India, probably carried by merchants, reached Southeast Asia by the early centuries CE. A sixth-century CE Chinese record of Dunxun states,

> there are five hundred families of *hu* [maybe merchants] from India, two *fo-t'u* [maybe Buddhists] and more than a thousand Indian Brahmans. The people of Tun-sun practise their doctrine and give them away their daughters in marriage; consequently many of the Brahmans do not go away.[37]

According to Piriya Krairiksh, Vishnu images and Shiva-*linga* appeared on the peninsula from the fourth century CE, and in the Chaophraya Plain from the sixth, while the first Buddha image from the peninsula dates to the fifth century, and the earliest representation of the Buddha

[32] Ray, "Early maritime contacts," 53.
[33] Christie, "Medieval Tamil-language inscriptions."
[34] Wannasarn, *Tambralinga and Nakhon Si Thammarat*, ch. 3.
[35] Wheatley, *Golden Khersonese*, 48–9.
[36] Wheatley, *Golden Khersonese*, 181.
[37] Wheatley, *Golden Khersonese*, 17; Wade, "Beyond the southern borders," 28; Prapod, *Ascendancy of Theravāda Buddhism*, 67.