

# Chapter 5

## Rock Art and the Sacred Landscapes of Mainland Southeast Asia

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### Introduction

The area known as Mainland Southeast Asia consists of the modern nation-states of Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Malaysia, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. It is a geographically, linguistically, and climatically diverse region. Several mountain ranges are present, including the lower Himalayas in northern Myanmar and the Dangrek chain bordering Thailand and Cambodia. A total of some 270 million people who speak a mixture of Austro-Asiatic, Tai, and Austronesian languages currently live in the region. Evidence for prehistoric human activity is mainly found in caves and rock shelters in the form of stone tools of varying traditions. In fact, caves and rock shelters continue to be used for various purposes, including habitation, burial, and worship as was the situation throughout prehistory. Like many other places in the world, one marker for the human use of these caves is the presence of rock art.

Rock art research in Southeast Asia is a nascent field in archaeology characterized by uneven levels of research across the different countries in the region (see recent surveys of Southeast Asian rock art by Taçon and Tan 2012). Thailand, for example, has documented hundreds of rock art sites over the last 30 years, while in contrast neighboring Laos and Myanmar have less than ten known sites between them, many of them mentioned in local archaeological reports but generally unknown in the larger academic context. Our dearth in knowledge is exacerbated by

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the fact that much of the archaeological literature produced in the region today is written in local languages, and that rock art research often takes a back seat to monument restoration works, which indirectly supports the revenue-generating tourism industry.

Owing to the fragmented nature of the literature, and the general lack of research on the topic, it is difficult to make but the broadest remarks about the characteristics of Southeast Asian rock art. Generally speaking, three main forms of rock art are present in the region—pictograms, petroglyphs, and megaliths. Pictogram sites are by far the most numerous and widespread type of rock art found in Southeast Asia, and megaliths, while numerous, tend to be limited to specific regions. Petroglyph sites are uncommon, but still found throughout the region.

Rock paintings, which are discussed in this chapter, span time frames from the prehistoric past to the very recent present. They are predominantly red in color; other colors also appear. Black pigment presumed to be charcoal is thought to be younger as black paintings appear superimposed over red paintings or depict modern subjects and have ethnographic accounts related to them, such as those at Gua Badak in Malaysia (Faulstich 1988; Mokhtar and Taçon 2011). Polychromatic paintings are also associated with more recent painting activity (Sukkhom et al. 2011).

There have been few attempts to date the rock art of Southeast Asia, but where we have dates, the rock art is surprisingly old. Dating of rock art in East Timor by uranium-series dating puts the age of the rock art at 7,000 years old, and possibly as old as 26,000 years (Aubert et al. 2007). Radiocarbon dating of sediments in Myanmar's Padahlin Cave (discussed in this chapter) produced dates of 7,000 and 13,000 BP in association with red-stained stone tools (Moore 2007). Like most rock art elsewhere in the world, dating remains a problem. From these few lines of available evidence from the region, it appears that rock art sites containing red rock paintings without any diagnostic iconography (which is often) tend to be attributed to the prehistoric period.

This chapter stemmed primarily from a study of newly discovered rock art sites in Cambodia located near the world-famous Angkor Archaeological Park. The area in which these rock art sites are located has been considered sacred for over a 1,000 years, or from the Angkor period (between the ninth and fifteenth centuries CE). The discovery of rock art pushes the evidence of human occupation back to pre-Angkor times and possibly extends the anthropogenic use of the landscape to prehistory. Interestingly, this pattern of usage—rock art sites to religious sites—can be found in many countries in Mainland Southeast Asia. Starting with this example from Cambodia, we articulate this phenomenon as it is found in other sites, particularly in Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand. In some cases, we find a long history of human presence at these localities, while in others we find the shift from “prehistoric” rock art to current religious sites to be quite abrupt. Are these similarities superficial, or is there a larger confluence at work?

## Cambodia

Little is known about the rock art of Cambodia; indeed, the first discovery of rock art in the country was only in the last decade. Despite a wealth of archaeological work conducted in the country, first by the French at the *École Française d'Extrême Orient* at the start of the twentieth century, and continuing today with teams from all over the world, the focus of research has been centered on the temples of Angkor and their corresponding periods, between the ninth and fifteenth centuries. Much less is known about the preceding period of "Indianization," when cultural influences from India began to appear in Cambodia's material culture through trade and religion from the first century BCE, and even lesser still to the period before, which is considered the prehistory of Cambodia. More recent work has started to pay attention to this period of the past, such as research on the rock shelter of Laang Spean in Battambang Province which dates to 7000 BCE, and various circular moated earthwork sites which date to the iron age of Southeast Asia, between 200 BCE and 500 CE (Stark 2004).

Rock art was first reported in the Cardamom Mountains, bordering Thailand in the western part of Cambodia in 2005; this site is not in the scope of this chapter. The focus of this chapter is on the rock art discovered in Siem Reap Province, in the vicinity of Phnom Kulen (the Mountain of Lychees), a sandstone plateau situated some 40 km northeast of Siem Reap town and the Angkor Archaeological Park. To date 13 sites have been discovered, 12 on the foothills of Phnom Kulen, and 1 on top of the mountain itself; research in this area is ongoing with additional sites likely to be discovered (Heng 2011; Taçon 2011).

The sites in the mountain's foothills were discovered by a team from the Apsara Authority, the local government agency in charge of the management of the Angkor Archaeological Park, while conducting survey work for another project in 2010 and 2011. The discovery of the single site found on top of Phnom Kulen resulted from 2012 work undertaken by the Archaeology and Development Foundation, which has been working on mapping the unexplored sections of Phnom Kulen since 2008.

The rock art of Phnom Kulen occurs in sandstone rock shelters. The paintings are red in color, and in many cases considerably faded, which may be an indicator of advanced age. Depictions include naturalistic animals such as bovinds and fish. There also are various types of anthropomorphs. None of them have any diagnostic features that can be associated with any date. Some shelters also have black drawings in them, which are presumably made from charcoal. These drawings look fresher and are from recent times.

Rock shelters have a long period of use in Phnom Kulen. Rock shelter sites found in this area often have drip lines carved into the inner edge of the roof to run off water (Sakada Sakhoun personal communication 2012) although when these drip lines were carved is uncertain. Anecdotally, local villagers report using the numerous rock shelters found in the foothills as refuges during the recent tragic civil war of the 1970s.



**Fig. 5.1** Poeng Komnou, on the foothills of Phnom Kulen in Siem Reap Province, Cambodia. Red paintings occur on the north wall of this boulder past the right side of the bas-relief (photograph by Noel H. Tan)

For the purposes of this chapter, we limit the discussion to just the one site of Poueng Komnou, located in the foothills just east of Phnom Kulen and 20 min from the Angkor temple of Beng Melea. Poueng Komnou (the Decorated Boulder) consists of two large sandstone outcrops, the larger of which forms a natural rock shelter. On the eastern face of the larger sandstone outcrop is a group of prominent carvings which give the site its name: the bas-relief carvings of the Hindu god Vishnu, flanked by his wife and two other deities, colored green. On the left and right of this set of four deities are smaller carvings of a reclining Vishnu and hermits, as well as an inscription which states that the carving was made by a hermit who lived in the site in the twelfth century (Fig. 5.1).

On the other side of the boulder, at the western end of the shelter, are two other sets of carvings, one depicting Ganesha, the elephant-headed god of prosperity, and the second another depiction of a reclining Vishnu. The site was first mentioned in Boulbet's (1979) survey of Phnom Kulen; and the carvings were later described in detail by Jessup (2008). The rock art was not acknowledged until 2011, when it was recorded by a team from the Apsara Authority with one of the present authors (Taçon 2011). The paintings are located in the north wall between the two groups of carvings.

There are two phases of rock art present at the site: old red paintings and recent black drawings. The black-colored art consisting of charcoal drawings appears to be quite fresh and could easily have been discounted as vandalism. The most

prominent drawing is a portrait of a bearded man, possibly a hermit or *esai* in local tongue, which is cognate to the Sanskrit *rishi*, or ascetic. The connection to the ascetic traditions of Buddhism and Hinduism can be made with the wooden hut just adjacent to Poueng Komnou, and the rattan bed frame on the north side of the shelter where the rock art is, which is said to be used by forest monks when they come to meditate.

The red rock art is fairly hard to see. The most prominent of the paintings includes a large “catfish” figure about a meter long in width and 2 m above the floor. There are numerous smaller red paintings, consisting of linear abstract designs which are hard to see without digital enhancement. The site does appear to have potential for archaeological excavations, but none have been undertaken so far. Pottery sherds from the thirteenth century have been noted from the surface finds.

While Cambodia is predominantly a Buddhist country, and despite the Hindu character of the site, locals still leave offerings and consider Poueng Komnou a shrine. Small wooden altars are found in front of all three groups of carvings, on which are left offerings of joss sticks, sweets, and fruit particularly during the Khmer New Year which occurs every April. In recent years an earthenwork dais has been built in the area in front of the main Vishnu carvings and comparisons of the site today with Boulbet’s pictures from 30 years ago show that the site is still very much in use t.

There are no currently secure dates for dating the rock art found in Phnom Kulen. However, their characteristics—the use of red pigment, depictions of naturalistic animals (especially bovids and fish), and their general worn-down appearance—are typical for prehistoric rock art found in Southeast Asia. Assuming this to be true, it is interesting to observe that the human interaction with Phnom Kulen has been longer than previously thought.

Phnom Kulen is more famously known in Cambodian consciousness as the birthplace of the Angkor Empire, when in 802 CE the King Jayavarman II instituted the royal divine cult which established his empire as an independent state. In Angkoran texts, Phnom Kulen is identified as Mahendraparvata, which was thought to be the home of the gods (Miksic 2007). The common narrative that Jayavarman II conducted a ritual to become god-king, or king of the gods, certainly draws from the idea of Phnom Kulen as Mahendraparvata.

All over Phnom Kulen there are numerous remains of temples and landscape carvings that emphasize the sacred nature of this mountain. One particularly potent example is found at Kbal Spean, where hundreds of lingas are carved on the riverbeds. The symbolism of linga, as the representation of the divine energy of Shiva, carved into the beds of rivers on the mountain, is meant to infuse the water with procreative power to fertilize the agrarian fields in the plain below.

Even today, the mountain is considered to be the most holy place in all of Cambodia, a pilgrimage site for many locals, and a place for ascetics to meditate and learn the arcane and magical arts. Monks are deemed to have superior authority and ability if they had spent some prior time meditating in Phnom Kulen (Heng Piphah, personal communication 2012).

Thus, humans must have been interacting with and marking the Phnom Kulen landscape over a long period of time. Starting with the rock art that is to be found in numerous sites at the foothills as well as on the top of the mountain, followed by the Angkor period continuing to popular local devotion today, these activities occur in a backdrop of a sacred landscape. With this as our starting point, we look at other sites in the region that contain a similar history of use: prehistoric rock art sites that later become religious sites.

## Thailand

Thailand has more rock art than any other Southeast Asian country and has seen much rock art research including the identification of sites numbering in the low hundreds. It also has a long tradition of religious interaction with landscapes. Here we explore the conjunction of rock art with sacred spaces in three places: Khao Chan Nam, Wat Phuttabat Bua Ban, and Phu Phra Bat—two individual rock art sites and a complex of sites in the northeast of Thailand, respectively.

Khao Chan Ngam (The Mountain of the Beautiful Moon) is located some 300 km northwest of Phnom Kulen near the provincial capital of Nakhon Ratchasima, colloquially known as Korat, the gateway to the northeast plateau. The site is a cluster of large sandstone boulders that form a natural rock shelter—by far the largest shelter amongst the sandstone boulders strewn throughout the landscape. The rock art is clustered at two sides of the shelter, mostly at high elevations or 3 m from the ground.

The most prominent rock art features a group of anthropomorphs, drawn in full profile, presumably hunter-gatherers. They are depicted with little clothing except for “skirts,” which are consistent with clothing worn by indigenous populations in the region, and carry bows and arrows. Men, women, and children are depicted, as well as a “dog.” The identification of the “dog,” it has been suggested, places the rock art no later than 3,000 years old, as dogs do not appear in the archaeological record of this area before then (Higham and Thosarat 2012). However, the domesticated dog could have been introduced earlier without leaving an archaeological signature.

Archaeological excavations at the site are no longer possible, because the rock art of Khao Chan Ngam coexists with a Buddhist shrine and an associated wat (temple) (Fig. 5.2).

A small living space behind the main Buddha image is used as a retreat location by forest monks for meditation. The shrine also receives frequent devotees who come to pay homage to the Buddha image there, as well as a shrine to an aborted baby. The contemporary Buddhist activity at Khao Chan Ngam is relatively recent; the temple was founded by monks only in the 1960s, who said that prior to their arrival the area was deserted. Their motivation for moving to the area was the impression and belief that it would be an advantageous area to perform meditation. The presence of rock art did not appear to influence their decision to set up a temple there.





**Fig. 5.2** Khao Chan Ngam, Nakhon Ratchasima Province in Thailand. The rock shelter currently houses a Buddhist shrine. The rock art is located in the wall, 2 m off the ground (photograph by Noel H. Tan)

On face value, it appears that the presence of rock art and Buddhist religious activity is coincidental—the rock art appears to be very old, and the origins of the temple can still be recalled in recent memory. However, the choice of location by the prehistoric painters and the modern monks, located hundreds if not thousands of years apart, are striking. While forest monks have set up other living spaces and meditation spots in additional rock shelters in the area, the spot chosen to seat the Buddha image is one with rock art.

Wat Phuttabat Bat Bua Ban is situated in Udon Thani, a northeastern province of Thailand. The site is a small forest temple, in which a Buddha footprint is enshrined in a stupa, or a reliquary tower. The area of archaeological interest is not within the immediate temple grounds but at a forest clearing some 80 m away. Additionally, the site is not a rock painting site but an arrangement of standing stones known as “sema.” These sema stones are associated with the Dvaravati and Lopburi period dating to between the ninth and twelfth centuries CE. It should be noted that the Dvaravati period of Thailand is not well known; it is thought to be a Mon-speaking culture or collection of polities that existed from the sixth to thirteenth centuries. Lopburi culture is the Thai expression for Khmer culture, and can be regarded as synonymous with Angkor.

Eight groups of three stones are arranged in a circle along the cardinal points (Fig. 5.3). This arrangement of stones is also associated with the boundaries of a



**Fig. 5.3** The sema stones of Wat Phuttabat Bua Ban in Udon Thani Province, Thailand. Groups of three stones are arranged at the right cardinal points of the compass around a central sacred space (photograph by Noel H. Tan)

sacred space, usually the ordination hall of a Thai Buddhist temple with a central stone marking the location of the main Buddha image. Nothing remains of the central sema stone Buddha image or the temple structure which might suggest that the latter was made from wood. These remains indicate that this site was a sacred place in the first millennium.

Further east from the clearing is a small trail that leads past another group of sema to a large boulder where a Buddha shrine is now housed. The shrine appears to be relatively modern: the floor of the shelter has been tiled, the Buddha statue appears to be of recent make, and the shrine is well kept, although several broken sema fragments have also been moved into the sanctuary of the shrine. All along the boulder devotees place sticks between the boulder and the ground to help prop the boulder up, a practice linked to merit-making.

The boulder is also a boundary between the forest clearing and the edge of a cliff. Behind the boulder, the sandstone landscape slopes gently downwards, providing a panoramic view to the vast tree line below. It is on this east-facing side of the boulder that we find rock art. The red markings are fairly unexceptional, made up of faint red linear markings consistent with the numerous rock art sites found in the area (Fig. 5.4).

There is no apparent way to date the paintings as yet, nor do they contain any datable iconographic material. Most of the paintings are faded, and some encroached upon by creeping vegetation. When asked about them, the local abbot said that he



**Fig. 5.4** The rock art of Wat Phuttabat Bua Ban is made up of extremely faded abstract linear paintings, which indicate a great age, but are stylistically simple (photograph by Noel H. Tan)



was not aware of the presence of rock art in the site. With the rest of the rock art in the immediate area taken into account, the paintings are estimated to be of the prehistoric period.

Here in Wat Phuttabat Bua Ban we find another pattern of long site use: the presence of rock art (albeit small and unspectacular), sema stones from around the first millennium, and the evidence for contemporary Buddhist practice. Combined with the physical landscape, that is the threshold between a forest clearing and a cliffside vista, these qualities suggests that this area was a significant, if not a sacred, landscape. The presence of rock art, which was hitherto unknown to the abbot until we pointed it out to him, again indicates that there was something special about this location even in prehistoric times.

Unlike Khao Chang Ngam and Wat Phuttaba Bua Ban, which are single rock art sites, Phu Phra Bat represents a cluster of mountainside sites that closely resembles the landscape setting and usage profile of Phnom Kulen in Cambodia. Phu Phra Bat is located some 18 km away from Wat Phuttabat Bua Ban in Udon Thani Province, approximately 400 km north of Phnom Kulen and some 25 kilometers away from Laos to the north. Like Phnom Kulen, the landscape abounds with sandstone rock shelters, many of which contain prehistoric rock art. Many of these shelters also

become adapted for religious use around the tenth century, and still remain religious sites today.

The name of the mountain refers to depressions in the landscape that later become identified as the footprints of the Buddha and his disciples. Probably formed through natural processes, these footprint-shaped depressions are believed to be where Lord Buddha stepped when he was walking through the landscape. They become venerated as part of a popular local religious expression, and they form focal points of pilgrimage for locals. Some footprints later become enshrined in stupas, such as the one found in the main temple of the mountain. This reliquary tower is approximately 100 years old and dates to the Lan Xang Kingdom, a polity that was centered on what is now Laos.

Part of the mountain has been demarcated as the Phu Phra Bat Historical Park, a site for local tourism that showcases the local sandstone formations, many of which have been named for places set in the local legend of Bor-nam and U-sa. The story has its roots in the tragic romance between the prince and princess of two regional kingdoms. Notably, the current abbot has given many of these rock shelters within the park names that correspond to the Bor-nam and U-sa legend. While the shelters do not necessarily have any connection to the folktale, they do indeed show signs of human use, either as shelters for inhabitation or as shrines.

Here in Phu Phra Bat we find a number of sema stones, usually focused around a sandstone boulder that may have once housed a Buddha image. The artistic style of the semas again dates them to the tenth-century Dvaravati period while some of the sculpture carved into the rock shelters is identified as from the Lopburi period also similarly dated around the tenth century. Some rock shelters additionally feature rock art; the two most prominent rock art sites are Tham Khon (the cave of humans) and Tham Wua (the cave of bullocks), both located on the same large sandstone formation and also named for their primary depictions.

The rock art of Tham Khon and Tham Wua consists of naturalistic depictions of anthropomorphs and bullocks, although the humanlike figures are larger and drawn to appear to be emerging from the ground below. The cattle of Tham Wua are generally smaller, averaging 20 cm in length. The interpretation provided by Thai archaeologists for the rock art of Tham Khon and Tham Wua is the presence of prehistoric man having lived in the sandstone shelters of this area. The mountain of Phu Phra Bat may have been part of some sort of prehistoric highway along which people would have travelled. The rock art is thought to date between 2000 and 500 BCE primarily because of the allusion to agriculture from the depiction of bovids (Munier 1998).

Tham Khon and Tham Wua are the most spectacular rock art sites of the area, but are atypical regarding design motifs. The rock art of the region is characterized by linear geometric designs, typically small markings in sandstone shelters. Sometimes, small animals are portrayed in solid silhouette. They are located in a number of rock shelters throughout the mountain, not just in the historical park but their locations have been kept undisclosed and remain only known to the locals.

Thus, at Phu Phra Bat we also have evidence for a long period of human activity, starting with rock art as an indicator of prehistoric activity: Dvaravati and Khmer religious structures and carvings in the tenth century, and contemporary religious

activity that can be seen through the veneration of at least two sets of Buddha footprints, a functional wat (temple), and a number of small shrines located throughout the park. Like Phnom Kulen, Phu Phra Bat appears to have functioned as some sort of focal point for religious activity for a long period of time—a sacred landscape. It is also a landscape where rock art abounds.

In one area of the historical park, called the Wat Porta cluster, we see the confluence of rock art, Dvaravati and Khmer religious activity and modern religious activity. Wat Porta (the Father-in-Law Temple) is one of a few sandstone formations found in a clearing at the historical park. The focal point of this cluster of sandstone boulders is an arrangement of sema stones in the middle; some, including the central stone, are missing but their former positions are demarcated by the notches carved into the sandstone bedrock.

Wat Porta itself is a sandstone boulder consisting of a long natural pillar running north to south, topped with a large sandstone boulder, giving the shelter a mushroom shape. The north end of the pillar contains a single red-colored rock painting of an anthropomorph, which appears to be wearing some sort of headdress, but otherwise does not appear related to the Buddha images found at the site. The base of the pillar once contained bas-relief Buddha carvings but they were chiseled away at some point and only the outlines of the reliefs remain. All around the base of the pillar at the south end are fragmentary remains of Buddha statues, mostly of the bases; they are possibly from the Lopburi period. The modern occupation of this site is in an auxiliary rock shelter just south of the sandstone formation, consisting of a shrine venerating three Buddha statues. Modern visitors today come to pray at the shrine and leave offerings of flowers, candles, and joss sticks.

Just northwest of the Wat Porta formation is a long collapsed sandstone shelter which once housed a Lopburi-style temple called Tham Phra, or the Buddha Cave (Fig. 5.5).

The roof of this shelter has collapsed splitting into half at the center sometime in the last 1,000 years, as the event must have post-dated conversion of the shelter to a cave temple. The remaining carvings that depict the Buddha are distinctly Khmer in character, while linear rock art can be detected underneath the collapsed roof in the east section of the shelter.

Other rock shelters encircling the sema stones include Tham Chang and Tham Mue Dang, both containing rock art of varying styles and condition. Tham Chang (Elephant Cave, although the site is not a true cave but rather a rock shelter) is named after a linear naturalistic drawing of an elephant, but also contains linear abstract rock paintings. Differing levels of deterioration suggest that the elephant painting, which is white in color and finely executed, is much more recent than the abstract red-colored linear paintings, which are more consistent with the undated, presumably older paintings. This in turn suggests at least two periods of artistry at the site, a situation consistent with other rock art sites in Phu Phra Bat.

The second rock shelter, Tham Mue Dang or the Cave of Red Hands, contains two forms of evidence for occupation. The first is the rock art, which is very faint, and includes that of a handprint. The faintness of the rock art despite the good protection provided by the shelter is a possible indication to the age of these paintings.



**Fig. 5.5** The Wat Porta sema stones (foreground) in front of Tham Phra, a collapsed sandstone shelter. The break in the middle of the shelter contains Lopburi (Khmer)-style carvings of Buddha, while rock art is found underneath the collapsed section to the left. Udon Thani Province, Thailand (photograph by Noel H. Tan)

The second form of evidence is found in a small section of the sandstone formation, where the natural shelter has been accentuated by chiseling activity such that the walls have become straight and the floor smoothed. These modifications to the shelter imply that it may have been used for habitation at some point. Similar chisel marks on the walls can be seen at other rock shelters in Phu Phra Bat, such as Wat Porta, and are associated with sites used by forest monks for meditation.

Phu Phra Bat is thus functionally comparable to Phnom Kulen: both are sandstone plateaus, both contain a number of rock shelters with rock art, and both were used for religious activity during Angkoran times, as well as today.

## Laos

Moving further north along the Mekong River, we come to the Pak Ou Caves, approximately 20 km north of the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Luang Prabang. There is a sort of cultural continuity and connection between the Pak Ou Cave sites and those in Cambodia and Thailand discussed above. For instance, Phnom Kulen is considered the birthplace of the Khmer Empire; the sites in Phu Phra Bat display

stylistic affinities with the Khmer empire in the tenth century; and the founding of Laos through the precursor kingdom of Lan Xang has its origins rooted in Cambodia.

The kingdom of Lan Xang is said to have begun with Fa Ngum (1316–1393 CE), a prince from Luang Prabang province who went to Angkor and married a daughter of the Khmer king. Winning the favor of the Khmers, Fa Ngum raised an army and from 1352 to 1354 CE moved his way north to present-day Laos to establish his kingdom of Lan Xang, named for the million elephants in his army.

The Pak Ou Caves, a pair of limestone caves at the confluence of the Mekong and Ou Rivers, is where Fa Ngum was to have instituted Buddhism as the state religion, over animism that is still practiced in the more remote regions of Laos. The Pak Ou Caves were first introduced to the west through the writings of Garnier, who visited it in the nineteenth century (Garnier 1873). The site is only accessible by boat and serviced by people who live in the village at the opposite bank of the river. Today, Tham Ting is a tourist attraction visited from Luang Prabang, its draw being “the cave of a thousand Buddhas.” Since the sixteenth century, with the establishment of Luang Prabang as the royal capital of Lan Xang, thousands of Buddha statues are kept in the lower of the two caves—at its height over 4,000 images were said to be housed there. The site receives many local devotees during the new year who come to bathe the Buddha images and keep the water used thereafter for cleansing and blessing rituals.

The upper cave is a 5-min climb from the lower cave and is the deeper of the two cave systems with six or seven chambers. Despite the lack of natural light sources, Buddha images, sema stones, and altars have been built into various chambers of the cave, which also has its main access way blocked by a wooden gate. It is in this upper cave that we find rock art: first at the entrance beside the gate, and then inside the first chamber of the cave. Some of the rock art most certainly dates to the historic period—there is a green painting of a steamship or a paddle-wheel boat in the first chamber, as well as fragments of gold leaf, set in rows, that are the remains of Buddha images.

Two other groups of rock paintings, one black and the other red, are less easy to date because of the lack of iconographic details. The red paintings, located on the outside of the cave close to the gate, appear to be stylized anthropomorphs, possibly depicting some sort of headgear, posed with outstretched arms and bent legs (Fig. 5.6).

The black paintings, located in the first chamber close to the entrance, depict a series of black anthropomorphic figures with bent legs and bent elbows facing upwards. The black and red anthropomorphs within the site do not appear to be similar to each other and may not have been part of the same painting episode. However, the black paintings are reminiscent of rock paintings in Huashan Mountain in Guangxi Province, China, and Gua Batu Cincin in Kelantan, Malaysia.

The age of these paintings is uncertain. When asked, locals did not know the origin or the antiquity of these paintings. A tour guide felt confident that they were images created as part of offerings left behind by devotees; yet these paintings do not appear to fit with any artistic convention used by Buddhists for worship, even as





**Fig. 5.6** The rock art at Tham Theung, at the Pak Ou Caves in Luang Prabang Province, Laos (photograph by Noel H. Tan)

other rock art in the site fits the convention for Buddha imagery. It is likely that the black and red rock art preceded the Buddhist usage of the site.

## Myanmar

The last area to be discussed is the Padalin Caves in western Shan state, Myanmar. The Padalin Caves consist of two caves: Cave 1, a rock shelter that contains 2 chambers, and Cave 2, a deep cave system containing 11 chambers, some lit by natural holes in the ceiling. The caves were first reported in the 1969 during a geological survey, with rock art being noted for Cave 1 (Aung Thaw 1971). Cave 1 was systematically excavated twice, once during 1969 by Aung Thaw, the director of the Archaeological Department, and then again in 2004 by the archaeology department of the Ministry of Culture. Despite its deep, picturesque chambers, no archaeological material was found in Cave 2.

To date, Padalin Cave 1 is the only prehistoric site in Myanmar to have been systematically excavated; Aung Thaw's excavation in 1969 unearthed over 4,000 artifacts, mainly stone tools which he attributed to the Neolithic period. Moore (2007) has reassigned the date of the site to the late Palaeolithic or epipaleolithic. The excavations revealed a long sequence of stone tool working.



**Fig. 5.7** Cave 1 of the Padalin Caves in Shan State, Myanmar. Note the stupa built in the 1950s on the left; the rock art—paintings and cupules—is found behind the fenced area (photograph by Noel H. Tan)

Carbon-14 results provide an early date range of 7,000–13,500 years BP. Some stone tools are reportedly stained red with ochre and, if so, would demonstrate a direct link to the rock art. The rock art itself occurs in the upper sections of a dividing wall that bisects the rock shelter into two chambers. There are a variety of red paintings, including stylized handprints, various animals, and a “sun” motif. In the past decade, the rock art has been consolidated by the archaeology department; a plastic varnish has been applied over the paintings to protect them, and drip lines installed over the panels to prevent water from running down the walls. Also discovered in the last decade are cupules, numbering over a hundred, at the base of the paintings, some of which appear to continue under the ground and suggest great antiquity (Taçon et al. 2004).

The site is currently closed to public. The lack of visitors is further mitigated by its fairly remote location with access to the site requiring a boat ride across a lake followed by a 2-h trek. The authorities have taken steps to protect Cave 1 by building a wall across the front of the shelter and access to the shelter is locked at all times. Prior to the construction of this wall, modern religious activity is manifested by the erection of a stupa in Cave 1. The stupa dates to 1957 and was built by a couple from a nearby village for the purposes of making merit (Fig. 5.7).

The multi-chambered Cave 2, which lies 300 m away, is reminiscent of the Pak Ou Caves in Laos and contains plentiful evidence for modern religious activity. The entrance contains several shrines to the Buddha, as well as a stupa built by locals seeking to make merit. Most of the chambers inside Cave 2 contain at least one stupa or a Buddha image, even in chambers that do not have any lighting and are engulfed in permanent darkness. As with the stupa in Cave 1, it appears that the construction of religious monuments only occurred in the latter half of the last century.

According to the locals that we spoke to, the caves themselves were discovered during the Second World War, and thus there appears to be no middle layer of occupation at the site—just a prehistoric use, and then a modern one. In this regard, the Padalin Caves are similar to Khao Chan Ngam in Thailand.

## Confluences and Coincidences

In describing these six site complexes we do not mean to suggest any kind of direct connection between them; they are varied in terms of rock art style, archaeological material, and current cultural and political landscapes. We do not have secure dates for most of these sites, neither are there any similarities between the motifs in the rock art to suggest a common cultural link between them. However, it is striking that the anthropogenic usage of these places is similar: places where ancient peoples once painted rock art on walls are currently places where people (particularly Buddhists) worship or perform some sort of contemporary religious activity.

Munier (1998: 12) suggests that rocks in Thailand may have had sacred attributes since prehistoric times, and rock art may have converted them into “animist chapels.” This is not to say that the rock art by itself is spiritual in meaning, but perhaps their presence signaled to subsequent users that the site was “special” and the images “sacred.” Animist beliefs are not unique to Thailand and apply to the whole of mainland Southeast Asia prior to the arrival of Indic religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism. Today, Theravada Buddhism is the main religion of Cambodia, Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar and the beliefs in local spirits are integrated into these religions. However, understanding the interplay of Buddhism with the landscape is essential and there are nuanced differences between how Buddhism and the belief in spirits are expressed in different countries in this regard.

Barnes (1999) notes that caves (and presumably rock shelters) are important in Buddhism because Buddha himself went to caves for meditation. Consistently, we find that monks make frequent visits to these caves for meditation, particularly during Vassa, the Buddhist Lent observed by Theravada Buddhists. However, in talking to local residents and monks about the history of these places, there did not seem to be any connection between the rock art and the current religious practice. For example, the monks we spoke to in Thailand often talked about how good an area was for meditation, but never mentioned the presence of rock art as a deciding factor, if at all. In one case, at Wat Phuttabat Bua Ban, the abbot was unaware of the rock art present in the shelter until we informed him about it, despite his earlier assertion that his temple had been operating in the area for approximately 1,000 years.

Another Buddhist conception of sacred rocks is that they are islands emerging from the landscape after the previous world’s destruction by water, wind, and fire, and that Buddha used these rocks to walk, sit, rest, and sleep (Munier 1998). This idea is readily seen in Phu Phra Bat, whose name as the “Mountain of Buddha’s Footprints” already evokes the imagery of Buddha walking through the landscape.

In the case of Khao Chan Ngam in Thailand and Padalin Caves in Myanmar, there appears to be a long gap in the sites' history between the prehistoric rock painting period and the erection of the modern shrines and stupas, which only appear very recently—in the last 50 or 60 years. Prior to this modern activity, locals questioned reported that the area was deserted and devoid of previous habitation, which suggests that the paintings are very old, at least older than any generational memory.

Beyond the more-than-coincidental appearance of religious activity at rock art sites in mainland Southeast Asia, the cases of Phnom Kulen in Cambodia and Phu Phra Bat in Thailand fill the gap between the unknown past and the known present with evidence for religious activities in an intermediate period. In Phnom Kulen, a wealth of archaeological evidence—in the form of architecture, epigraphy, and rock carvings that can be dated through art historical methods—shows that this area was inhabited and actively used for religious use from the ninth to the twelfth centuries. Phnom Kulen's role in the Cambodian nationalist narrative as the birthplace of the Khmer empire as well as modern attitudes to the mountain as a place of power further add to the idea that Phnom Kulen was regarded a sacred landscape for a very long time. At Phu Phra Bat and nearby Wat Phuttabat Bua Ban, rock art, ancient monuments, and contemporary religious practice coexist side by side, but never interacting with each other.

Besides the presence of rock art and continuing Buddhist practices today, these sites share a number of similar landscape attributes. They are located far from urban centers and the settlement density in their immediate surroundings is very low. These sites are all associated with some sort of mountain, either located on the foothills or at the top. Often, these sites are also associated with a dramatic vantage point or threshold within the landscape. For example, the concentration of rock art found at the Wat Porta cluster in Phu Phra Bat is situated at a crossroad of many trails found in the mountain; the rock art at Wat Phuttabat Bua Ban overlooks a vast cliff face at the edge of a forest, while the Pak Ou Caves overlook the confluence of two rivers. Despite the lack of archaeological material in some of these sites, they are all good natural habitation sites, providing space for rest and ample shelter from the elements.

We suggest or propose that these six site complexes in Mainland Southeast Asia demonstrate that humans have been interacting with these places for a very long time. While these sites are places of historic or present-day religious ritual and practice, it is also likely that these rock art-marked landscape locations had the same or similar use in the more remote past. Whether recognized or not, each successive group has left visual or material remains that denote “sacred” or at the very least “special” place connections—places where one could interact with spirits and/or supernatural power.

**Acknowledgements** The bulk of the data gathered for this research was funded by the Australian National University as part of Tan's Ph.D. research. Griffith University partly funded Taçon's research in Cambodia and Thailand. Several government agencies have been instrumental in facilitating the research, namely, the Apsara Authority (Cambodia); the National Research Council of

Thailand and the Fine Arts Department (Thailand); the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism (Laos); and the Department of Archaeology, National Museum and Library of the Ministry of Culture (Myanmar). Thanks also to Jutinach Bowonsachoti, Gem Boyle, David Brotherson, Ea Darith, Nicholas Gani, Heng Piphah, Heng Than U Hla Shwe, Im Sokrithy, Khieu Chan, Lagh Udarn Ransei, U Man Thit Nien, Amphone Monephachan, Muong Chan Raksmei, Sakada Sakhoun Duangpond Kanya Singhasen, Atthasit Sukkham, Watinee Tanompolkrang, Sulatt Win, Charmaine Wong, the Robert Christie Centre of the University of Sydney, and the Archaeology Unit of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

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