

NEWS RELEASE

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Penn Museum Researchers Advocate a Paradigm Shift in Southeast Asian Archaeology



For her significant research contributions to the field of Southeast Asian archaeology and archaeometallurgy, Dr. Joyce C. White (second from the right), a Consulting Scholar at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and an Adjunct Professor of Anthropology at Penn, received the Friend of Thai Science Award from Thailand's Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research, and Innovation on July 9, 2021. From left to right: Dr. Sethapan Krajangwongs from the Royal Thai Embassy's Office of Science and Technology, who presented the award; Dr. Elizabeth Hamilton; and Dr. Christopher Woods, Williams Director of the Penn Museum. (Photo: Julianna Whalen, Penn Museum)

PHILADELPHIA—Summarizing decades of research led by the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Dr. Joyce C. White's July 2021 article, "The Metal Age of Thailand and Ricardo's Law of Comparative Advantage," offers new ways to understand the socio-economic dynamics during Thailand's prehistoric period. Co-authored with her Museum colleague, Consulting Scholar Dr. Elizabeth G. Hamilton, the open-access article appeared in the journal *Archaeological Research in Asia*.

The work highlights key findings from a four-volume monograph suite, published by Penn Press, which looked at ancient metals from four sites Penn Museum excavated in Thailand during the mid-1970s, including Ban Chiang, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

By applying a comprehensive and systematic methodology to the archaeometallurgical evidence, Dr. White and Dr. Hamilton challenged previous research claims that assumed elite-controlled production and trade of ancient metals in prehistoric Thailand.

Overturning conventional paradigms, they contend it is time for new economic models to replace outdated beliefs that linked “craft specialization” to political economies and alleged that technological change forced social change.

Although the use of metals conventionally has been related to state-formation, social hierarchies, and warfare, the authors argue there is no evidence of those connections in prehistoric Thailand. For example, developing metal technology did not necessarily lead to weapons production and warfare. Instead, through a new Archaeology Paradigm rooted in the anthropology of technology, Dr. White and Dr. Hamilton show how metallurgy in prehistoric Thailand benefitted from an abundance of natural resources and responded to the cultural norms of a peaceful society.

Archaeology has changed in the last 50 years, shifting away from top-down narratives to granular assessments that consider the importance of community and individual agency. Top-down perspectives once dominated telling the story of Metal Age societies—until now.

Reframing Thailand’s Metal Age with contemporary narratives, this new, innovative approach interrogates historical assertions that ignored the role of culture, community, and consumer demand, all of which have the power to tell stories with an entirely different perspective.

“It is imperative going forward that population and sampling issues be emphasized; advancing our understanding will require systematic assessments of the full range of excavated assemblages, including intact, broken, and unidentifiable artifacts, and possible production remains,” Dr. White concludes.

“Updated frameworks implemented in the interpretation of a rich new data set will then cement Southeast Asia’s distinctive place as a key case study in global archaeometallurgy.”

Decades ago, archaeologists working across the region were challenged to develop models for the region’s distinctive development of metal technologies that highlight its rich, widespread metal resources. Today, Dr. White and Dr. Hamilton have accomplished just that—by creating a new framework for future generations studying archaeological evidence excavated from prehistoric sites in Southeast Asia.

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