

# **Elephants in Southeast Asian Rock Art: An Overview**

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## **Introduction**

Elephants evoke powerful imagery. In Southeast Asia, elephant depictions encode the arrival of Indic religions into Southeast Asia as a symbol of the Buddha, or through Hindu symbols like Airavata and Ganesha. Elephants have been depicted in Angkor as beasts of war and construction; their sheer size and destructive power would have been a source of inspiration and fear that would have been translated in art. At the same time, the question of when elephants were domesticated in Southeast Asia remains an open question. The domestication of elephants represents a major change in the way humans interacted with the environment. Wild elephants continue to be a source of danger for rural communities in Southeast Asia today, and so the ability to tame elephants can be traced through iconographic evidence from rock art.

Given their immense size, it is unsurprising therefore that they appear in rock art around the region in a variety of contexts. In this paper, I will review elephant depictions in Southeast Asian rock art. The variety of depictions indicates that humans were in awe of these creatures since prehistoric times, and even as they were domesticated they remained powerful symbols of strength and spirituality.

## **The Archaeology of Elephants in Southeast Asia**

Corlett (2007) notes that Asian elephants are generally understudied, a condition that is also reflected in the current archaeology of the region. Elephants are endemic in Southeast Asia, but their populations have become smaller as the range of human expansion has grown (Hedges et al. 2005). Elephant remains show up occasionally in prehistoric Southeast Asian archaeological assemblages (Conrad 2015), such as in Tham Lod in Mae Hong Son province (Amphansri 2011) and Lang Rongrien in Krabi Province (Mudar and Anderson 2007). Elephant remains have also appeared sporadically in other sites in Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam (Cyler Conrad 2016, pers. comm; Philip Piper, pers. comm). The context of these faunal remains is fragmentary and this suggests that the exploitation of elephants were non-systematic and possibly opportunistic or obtained via scavenging.

In more recent historical contexts, elephants have traditionally been used for military and ceremonial purposes (Sukumar 2003). Wood et al. (2015) have hypothesized that some circular

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earthworks in a Northern Thailand and adjacent regions in Laos dating from 800-1200 years BP may in fact be elephant enclosures. This usage as elephant enclosures is a marked and morphological difference from other earthworks in central and northeast Thailand, which have been thought of as defensive structures for use by humans. Elephants are also depicted as war machines and construction aids in the walls of Angkor, notably in Angkor Wat, the Bayon and the Terrace of Elephants dating to the 11-12th centuries (Figure 1). Despite the wealth of historical iconography, we curiously have no indication of elephantine faunal remains from periods where we know that elephant domestication must have occurred.



fig.1 Bas Relief of War elephant at Angkor Wat.  
(Photo: Noel Hidalgo Tan)

## **Elephants in Rock Art**

There has been much research on Southeast Asian rock art in recent years, which span both the mainland and island areas of the region, and have an antiquity of comparable to dated sites in Europe (see Taçon and Tan 2012, Tan 2014a, Aubert et al. 2014, Scott and Tan 2016). Rock art is commonly red, although black and other colours exist; and some of the oldest depictions are that of large, naturalistic animals (Taçon et al. 2014). Typical zoomorphic depictions on Southeast Asian rock art include fish and quadruped mammals such as deer, pig and cattle. Quadrupeds are not easily distinguishable (see Tan 2010, Tan and Chia 2012) due to their similar characteristics; elephants are exceptional in that they are uniquely identifiable in rock art. They are often depicted in side profile, and their relatively large size and trunks set them apart from other common quadruped zoomorphs.

### **Thailand**

There are over 200 rock art sites in Thailand, clustering in the north, northeast and southern regions of the country. Elephants appear in several sites. The Phu Phra Bat landscape in northeast Thailand's Udon Thani province is a sacred mountain that contains evidence of use for at least a millennia, including rock art sites that later become religious shrines (Khemnak 1990, Fine Arts Department 1992, Wichanka 1994, Munier 1998, Tan 2014b). Two rock shelters contain elephant depictions. Tham Chang ('Elephant Cave') is linked to the Lan Xang artistic style, and has a maximum age of 400 years (Figure 2). The site is Buddhist in context and it is likely that the depiction of elephant is in a religious context. In Non Sao Ei, another rock shelter in the Phu Phra Bat area, is identified

according to local lore as a clothes changing area used by people making their way to the local temple. Here there is a pair elephants painted in white outline, and one of the rare instances of white rock art in Southeast Asia (Figure 3). A painting in similar colouring and style depicts a peacock, and thus it is likely that the paintings are linked to either Hinduism or Buddhism; moreover their superimpositioning indicates they are among the most recent paintings at the site. It is therefore likely that the paintings are no more than a few hundred years old.



fig.2 Tham Chang, Phu Phra Bat Historical Park, Udon Thani Province, Thailand. (Photo: Noel Hidalgo Tan)



fig.3 Non Sao Ei, Phu Phra Bat Historical Park, Udon Thani Province, Thailand. (Photo: Noel Hidalgo Tan)

A possibly older site can be found elsewhere in Northeast Thailand, in Ubon Ratchathani province bordering Laos. Pha Taem is a painted cliff face overlooking the Mekong River, and is one of the longest painted sites in Southeast Asia stretching over 80 meters (Sisuchat and Mukmikha 1989, Figure 4). The scene depicts a long line of animals, including turtles and fish, but also elephants and anthropomorphs. Three elephants can be identified, the leftmost southern painting is almost life sized, while the right most (northern end) follows the natural contour of the rock and “walks” uphill. The painting is associated with prehistoric people living in the area, and do not have any connection to living memory. While the depictions are located side by side with other anthropomorphs, they do not seem to indicate domestication due to the presence of other wild animals.

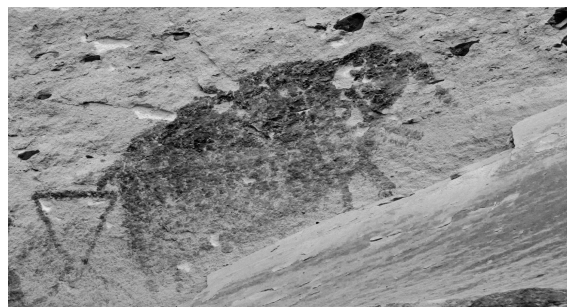


fig.4 Pha Taem, Ubon Ratchathani province, Thailand. (Photo: Noel Hidalgo Tan)

An even older site, Ban Tha Si, is known from northern Thailand. The site is a limestone cliff face that has a painted red elephant, among other paintings. The elephant appears to be in a non-domesticated context; additionally, the date associated to Ban Tha Si is 11,000 years BP.

## **Cambodia**

Cambodian rock art is a newly discovered field of research, as painted rock art has only been discovered in the last 10 years; however, some other Angkorian era sites are also technically rock art. In the 10th century capital of Koh Ker, some of the natural rock surfaces are carved with various Hindu images, including that of an elephant (Figure 5). On Phnom Kulen in Siem Reap, an unfinished carving of an elephant can be found in Poeng Tbal, while on Srah Damrei a large boulder has been carved into the shape of an elephant (Figures 6 and 7, Boulbet 1979). Nearby, several other boulders have been carved into lions. The Angkorian carvings of Phnom Kulen date to around the occupation dates of 8-11th centuries. An additional site, Kanam in western Cambodia has a depiction of domesticated elephants, accompanied by elephant riders and human figures holding cattle prods. Latinis et al. (2016) have associated this rock art site with the trade in deer skins and forest products between the highland and lowlands, from around the 15<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries (Figure 8).



fig.5 Koh Ker, Preah Vihear province, Cambodia. (Photo: Noel Hidalgo Tan)

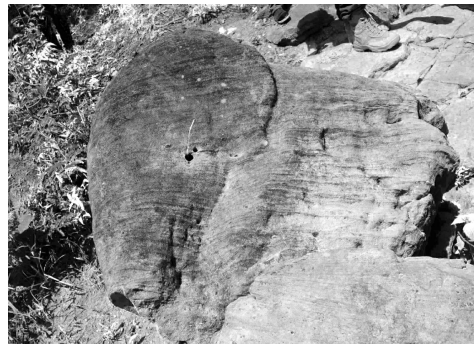


fig. 6 Poeng Tbal, Phnom Kulen, Siem Reap province, Cambodia. (Photo: Noel Hidalgo Tan)

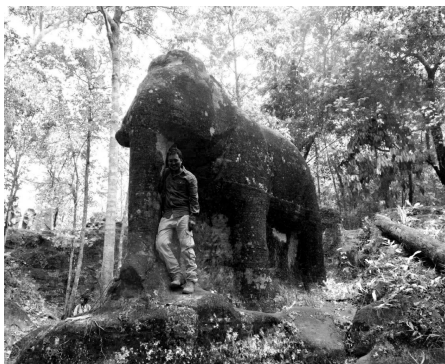


fig. 7 Srah Damrei, Phnom Kulen, Siem Reap province, Cambodia. (Photo: Noel Hidalgo Tan)



fig. 8 Kanam, Pursat Province, Cambodia. (Photo: Kyle Latinis)

## Indonesia

Indonesia has over 500 rock art sites, mostly painting sites clustered on the eastern Indonesian islands. The most notable depiction of an elephant comes from a site in Southern Sumatra, the megalithic rock field of Pasemah. Batu Gajah (‘elephant stone’) depicts a rider on an elephant carrying a Dong Son style drum (Van Der Hoop 1932). On this basis, the carving is dated to no later than 2000 years, and the rider also denotes an elephant in a domesticated context (Figure 9).



fig.9 Batu Gajah, South Sumatra, Indonesia  
(Photo: Wikicommons media)

## Laos

Rock art has not been extensively studied in Laos but there are two sites known to this author. In Wat Phu at Champassak, there is a boulder carved into the shape of an elephant near the summit of the associated mountain. The temple ruins date from the 11-13th centuries, but an earlier period from the 5th century existed. The date for the elephant boulder is thus unclear, but it is unlikely that the carving predates the 5th century. Elsewhere in Thakhek province, Watanabe et al. (1985) noted the presence of cave drawings in Tham Khao. The cave drawings of Tham Khao are in black and white, although white drawings are more recent (there is a white drawing of a plane). Five elephants are depicted, three black and two black-and-white. There is a lack of stone tools found in the site, although it should be added that the site has been excavated for resources previously and so the archaeology of the cave is unclear. Generally speaking, black rock art is relatively late in Southeast Asia, and most. The white pigment on some elephants may be associated with the white pigment used for the airplane, which would put the paintings to less than 100 years old.

## Myanmar

There are not many known rock art sites in Myanmar, so it is notable that two of them contain depictions of elephants. In Arakan, western Myanmar, elephant petroglyphs are found in Pyaingdet-Taung, on a steep hillside. Several groups of carvings containing elephants are found, not to scale against depictions of humans and birds. Gutman et al. (2007) conclude on the basis of stylistic similarities of the headdress of the human figures with similar depictions in regional Mrauk-U art that the carvings date to the late 17th to 18th centuries. It is unclear if the elephants depicted in Pyaingdet-Taung are domesticated; in contrast the second Myanmar site in discussion definitely depicts a domestication context. The Gabarni site in western Shan State was only discovered in 2015, in an

isolated area not far from the more well-known Padalin Caves. The main rock art from Gabarni is a worn rock shelter with a vertical wall, containing on first glance the faint outline of the back of an elephant, which is almost life sized (Figure 10). Digital enhancement of the rock art panel reveals that the elephant is surrounded by two, possible five people, and that the elephant wears a leash. This may be one of the oldest depictions of domestication of elephants. The date of the site is as yet unknown, but stone tools found at the site and in the region give the region a prehistoric flavour (Tan 2015).



fig.10 Gabarni, Shan State, Myanmar  
(Photo: Noel Hidalgo Tan)

## **Discussion**

Despite their relatively rare depictions, elephants in Southeast Asian rock art can be classified into three types: religious, domesticated and wild. Religious rock art is associated with Hinduism and Buddhism, appear in Thai and Cambodian context. Domesticated rock art depict humans exerting control over elephants, whether riding or controlling. The earliest dates for domestication so far is 2000 BP from the rock art depiction at Pasemah, however this is a latest date. Moated sites interpreted as elephant pens in Thailand date to 800 CE, although the depiction of elephant domestication in Myanmar might push the dates older. Wild elephants, depicted as unaccompanied by humans, appear in prehistoric sites as early as 11,000 years ago.

The shift between wild elephants and domestication is still unknown, but from the rock art and other archaeological evidence, domestication must have taken place after the Neolithic, and possibly with the emergence of metalworking technology. At the very least, the rock art evidence shows that humans were in awe of these large beasts for a very long time. The shift from awe to mastery represents a major shift in human society that represents the marshalling of resources and control of the environment.

*The data used in the paper was developed from a variety of sources and projects, including the Department of Archaeology and Natural History of the College of Asia and the Pacific at the Australian National University for fieldwork funding in Thailand; the Myanmar Ministry of Culture for access to Gabarni, Kyle Latinis for images of the Kanam paintings, and Cyler Conrad and Philip Piper for the zooarchaeological insights.*

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