

Book Review

Johannes Moser. 2001. *Hoabinhian: Geographie und Chronologie eines steinzeitlichen Technokomplexes in Südostasien*. 194 pages with 52 figures and 25 tables, 60 plates (13 in color) and 1 geographic map. AVA Forschungen Band 6, Köln (Cologne).

—*Alfred F. Pawlik*

Hoabinhian is Johannes Moser's published and slightly revised doctoral thesis, which he submitted in 1998 at the University of Tübingen in Germany. The book is written in German, which, unfortunately, makes it difficult to digest for most of *Hukay's* readers. However, what makes the book worth reading are the English (as well as the French and the Vietnamese) summaries, the bilingual captions of all figures, illustrations and plates, and most of all the importance of this topic for Southeast Asia's prehistoric archaeology. Although only softbound, the book's printing quality and layout are above average, and its format, handy. Rarely observed in publications on Southeast Asian Prehistory, the quality of the illustrations, especially the drawings, is outstanding. Aside from being a compendium of the Hoabinhian "technocomplex," this book also provides archaeology students with examples of perfect technical illustrations of stone tools.

Johannes Moser studied Prehistoric and Protohistoric Archaeology, Classical Archaeology and Art History at the Universities of Cologne and Tübingen. He was a student of Gerhard Bosinski, Wolfgang Taute, Hansjürgen Müller-Beck and Joachim Hahn. His main activities include field projects in Africa, the Middle East, South Asia and Southeast Asia. The present book is the result of two years of research (funded by the DAAD) during which the author was based in Thailand and associated with the Silpakorn University in Bangkok. From there, he undertook various travels throughout the Southeast Asian region (including the Philippines), visited sites, museums and institutes and studied their artifact materials.

The term "Hoabinhian" was established in 1927 through the works of French researcher Madeleine Colani, who was (in the best tradition of many early foreign scientists on Asia's archaeology) not a trained archaeologist, but a botanist. As a

member of the *École Française d'Extrême Orient* established in 1898, she conducted extensive fieldwork in Vietnam's Hoa-Binh province. Although still controversial, the term Hoabinhian remains until now and stands for a more than 10,000-year-long lithic tradition which supposedly begins in the Late Pleistocene and ends somewhere in the middle Holocene. The Hoabinhian and related industries cover the whole of Southeast Asia which is at present an area of more than 15 million square kilometers.

It seems very difficult or even impossible to put all archaeological materials of such a long time period and an immense area under just one major term. In his tour de force, Moser undertook a critical evaluation of this conglomerate of regions, sites, chronologies and artifact materials forming the Hoabinhian Complex.

The present book is divided into three major parts: first, a geographic, ethnographic and archaeological overview of the Hoabinhian region; second, a catalogue structured by countries; and third, an analytical part of Hoabinhian artefacts and their typology and morphology. The geography and ethnography of Southeast Asia is brief but quite well summarized. The author puts more emphasis on the archaeological records and the history of Hoabinhian archaeology. There, he tries to re-define the term Hoabinhian based on lithic artefacts, pottery, bone tools, burial rites and site characteristics, including the palaeo-economy, subsistence patterns and the (still rather confusing) chronology.

The largest part of the book is dedicated to the catalogue. The lithic sites and industries in Vietnam, Thailand and Malaysia as core areas for the Hoabinhian are most extensively discussed, followed by the chapters about the Philippines and Indonesia. Laos, Myanmar (with an excursion to the problematics of geofacts), Cambodia and the peripheral hoabinhoid technocomplexes of Nepal, China, Taiwan and Australia complete the catalogue section.

The chapter analysis deals with the lithic assemblages of two classic Hoabinhian sites: Moh Khiew Cave in Southern Thailand's Krabi Province and Xom Trai Cave in Northern Vietnam. Moser was a team member of the ethno-archaeological Hoabinhian Research Project in South Thailand, a joint venture of the Silpakorn University in Bangkok and the University of Tübingen, and participated in the excavations at Moh Khiew cave (and later in Sakai Cave, Trang Province as well). His analysis uses technological and morphological-metrical classification systems and descriptive statistics on the blank production. Tool forms and core technology are only verbally discussed;

descriptive statistics are lacking. Moser could certainly have elaborated more on the morphology of the modified materials.

Hoabinhian technology appears relatively basic and only few formal types are characteristic. This seems not surprising, considering the limited quality of the lithic raw material, which consists almost exclusively of brittle siliceous slate in Xom Trai and siliceous pebbles in Moh Khiew. Both assemblages are rather similar—being flake industries produced in direct and hard percussion. Important, however, is Moser's observation that the flakes in these assemblages are mostly wider than long. This coincides with the few analysed Southeast Asian lithic inventories. All of them show flakes with a width greater than the length.

The tool types in Hoabinhian assemblages depend in their form and shape on the available raw material, which are mostly pebbles. Common Hoabinhian tool types are core tools and used cores, unifacially modified ovoid pebbles (Sumatraliths) and flakes, bifacially retouched pebbles, short-axes, edge-ground tools, Bacsonian adzes, scraper-like edge retouched flakes and unmodified flakes with visible use traces like "sickle gloss."

The lithic spectrum of the Hoabinhian is restricted and rather lucid. The most obvious reason for this is the generally poor quality of the lithic raw materials in Southeast Asia. As a consequence, Moser considers a high level of multifunctionality of the tools, also based on ethnographic observations. Following Moser, Hoabinhian industries reflect a maximum in its bearers' adaption to the prehistoric environment and the living conditions.

The chronology of the Hoabinhian is still problematic. The limited tool type spectrum is a hindrance to a clearer structured chronology as is the rather poor state of research. The very limited number of well excavated sites, ambiguous radiocarbon dates for the early Hoabinhian (especially from sites in Thailand) and seemingly parallel existence of other "cultures" like the later Son Vi and the Bacsonian make a clear definition of the Hoabinhian culture or technocomplex at present impossible.

Moser's writing style is pleasant to read, informative and entertaining. He provides the reader with a unique compendium for Southeast Asia's Prehistoric Archaeology. Especially in the catalogue section and his update on the state of research in Southeast Asia, Moser displays a critical objectivity, uncovering flawed analyses and unproven but generally accepted manifestations and concepts in the Hoabinhian's research history, and not hesitating to slaughter sacred cows. In the

German tradition of science, Moser seeks proof and evidence, and shows little respect for palliations, half-truths and speculations. It is certainly a piece of standard literature for the Archaeology of Southeast Asia and perhaps even a good reason to pick up a few lessons in German.

P.S. If you want to know what the quote of H. Hahne (1928) in the preface says, here is an attempt at a translation: "Eoliths (geofacts) are a nuisance, which are not getting any more tolerable by eagerly using drivel to place them in the Palaeolithic."