

The Montgomery Sentinel

Travel Tales

The Search for the 1000-year-old Buddha Temple Caves of the “Silk King of Thailand”

Part 1: How the Monk Fire-Eye Destroyed a City

by

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Three years ago I told you the story of my search for the remains of Jim Thompson, the “Silk King of Thailand,” in the high jungle of northern Malaysia, where he disappeared in 1967. Now I will tell you about searching for Jim’s 1000-year-old Buddha temple caves on a mountain in north central Thailand. Since the story is complicated, I will start it and tell it chronologically, like any good tale:

Once upon a time, about one thousand five hundred years ago, a city arose in north central Thailand. It was a Buddhist city, part of the Mon kingdom of Dvaravati (the oldest known kingdom in the region). The city was named Si Thep – the “City of the Gods” -- and it was a mile across, with a tall wall and deep moat to protect it. (You can still visit its ruins.) During the rainy season, Buddhist monks from the city would escape its floods by traveling ten miles northwest to a small, steep mountain, where they had found a sheltering cave almost at the top. It was not a large cave, only about seventy-five by sixty feet, but it was more than enough for the simple monks. In the cave they meditated and studied the words of Buddha.

After five hundred years of meditation and prayer, the monks began carving large, beautiful statues of their Lord Buddha out of the walls of their cave. They wanted to create a temple for their religion. The most beautiful statue was of the Bodhisattva Maitreya Buddha -- an image of a future, reincarnated Buddha who was prophesied to come to Earth in about three thousand years. This Buddha, whose name means “Loving-Kindness,” would teach enlightenment and

restore pure Buddhism to the whole world. Then everyone would live a holy life, happily ever after.

Rumors spread that the monks also had a secondary refuge cave, much harder to find, with Buddha images, somewhere else in the area. The main cave was called Tham Tha Morat, which means “Cave of Forgiveness.” The name and location of the second cave was a secret.

Two hundred years later, cave Tha Morat was inhabited by two legendary Buddhist hermits, named Fire-Eye and Ox-Eye. Fire-Eye had a pupil, a prince, the son of the king of Si Thep. Fire-Eye told the prince that nearby were two wells, one with deadly water and one with life-giving water. The prince did not believe this tale.

So Fire-Eye said he would prove the story by bathing in the well of death. But the prince had to promise to pour water from the well of life over the hermit, to bring him back from the dead. The prince promised to do this, but then when the hermit was dead, the faithless pupil ran back to the city without reviving Fire-Eye.

Luckily Ox-Eye was passing the well of death, saw bubbles in the well, and realized what had happened. Ox-Eye pulled his friend out, poured the water of life over him, and Fire-Eye was saved.

The monk Fire-Eye swore revenge on the prince, the king and the city. Using his magic powers, he created a giant black bull which roared around the city for seven days, then rushed in. The bull’s body burst and poison flowed out, killing all the people. And so Si Thep was wiped out, never to rise again.



The city slumbered for almost a thousand years. A few people settled in the ruins. The heavy rains and floods reduced its laterite walls and buildings, until only a few tall ruined temples and some walls remained.

In 1937, the first outsider arrived. It took him five days in an ox-cart, over rough trails, to go the last 54 miles. He had the strange name of Quaritch Wales, but he was a great archaeologist, author and scientist. He was so excited by what he found that he spent years documenting the ruins of Si Thep for future generations.

From the local villagers Quaritch Wales heard the legend of Fire-Eye and Ox-Eye, and he wrote it down in one of his

books. He thought the story might be a metaphor for a terrible cholera epidemic. He mentioned the cave where the monks lived, but he did not discover Tha Morat cave.

In the late 1950s the famous Jim Thompson heard the stories of a ruined city in Petchabun province in north central Thailand. Jim had been a Lt. Colonel in World War II in the US military spy agency, the OSS, and later he was an asset for the CIA. He had created, virtually from scratch, the burgeoning Thai silk industry. His very successful firm made some of the most beautiful silks in the world, so he was called the “Silk King of Thailand.” He was also an art expert and amateur archaeologist. He was collecting art to fill his fabulous Thai house/museum, built from six antique houses he brought in from around the country. Hearing of the ruined city, on Saturday, April 12, 1958 Jim and a friend took a jeep and headed north, in search of Si Thep and adventure.

Next month I will tell you what Jim found up-country, and the fate of the Tha Morat cave and its beautiful Buddhas.

Lew Toulmin grew up in Thailand and Haiti. His substantial report on the disappearance of Jim Thompson is available on his website, www.themosttraveled.com.

Photos, captions and credits:

1. The head of the Bodhisattva Maitreya Buddha from cave Tha Morat, in north central Thailand. Now in the National Museum of Thailand, once the property of Jim Thompson, recently loaned to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. (Courtesy photo)
2. Jim Thompson, the “Silk King of Thailand,” in his uniform as a Lt. Colonel and intelligence officer in the US Office of Strategic Services in World War II. He was later a CIA asset in Thailand. (Courtesy photo)
3. The small but steep mountain Khao Amon Rat, seen from the south. The cave Tha Morat is on the north side, just below the top.
4. A ruined tower in the mile-wide city of Si Thep, which was destroyed in about 1200 C.E.
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