

The Montgomery Sentinel

Travel Tales

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

Part 2: Jim Finds the Sacred Cave

by

Llewellyn Toulmin

Last month I told you how Jim Thompson, the “Silk King of Thailand,” headed up-country in Thailand, looking for a lost city. According to his unpublished letters, on April 12, 1958, Jim drove a jeep with his friend Joe Huffman, north to “Petchaboon” province, and at “kilometer 113” they turned east “into the jungle.”

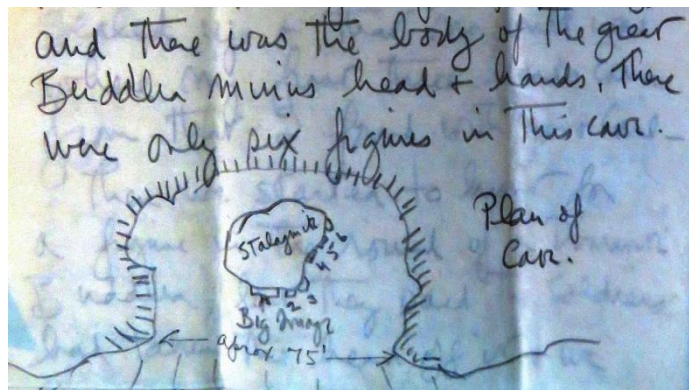
After crossing a small river, paddy fields and plowing through virgin jungle, they thought they had been “hoaxed” by their local guides. But “finally the remains of laterite city walls appeared.” They found an artificial lake, a huge brick tower, a large Vishnu figure, and a large Khmer “Golden Mount” – all in the ruined city of Si Thep. An old man there said that Thompson’s jeep “was the first vehicle ever to come in” to the area since another foreigner came decades before “in an ox cart.” This was evidently Quaritch Wales, the original discoverer of the lost city in 1937.

Local villagers also told Jim about “wonderful caves... full of beautiful sculpture” on top of the nearby Khao Amon Rat mountain. Thompson wanted to visit the cave, but was prevented by dense jungle and heavy rains.

Two years passed. In 1960 and ‘61, Jim acquired five beautiful Buddha heads from an art dealer in Bangkok. He paid \$2500 for the five heads, but later told a reporter that they were really

worth \$25,000, a fabulous sum. Jim made discreet inquiries about the origin of the heads, and learned that they likely came from a cave near Si Thep. Jim re-read Quaritch Wales accounts of the city, and realized that the legendary “mountain cave of the two hermits, Fire-Eye and Ox-Eye” was the same cave he had heard about in 1958. He also realized that no other explorer had ever found this important cave. He knew what to do next.

In February 1962 Jim and two friends went looking for the sacred, 1000-year-old cave. They used local guides, including a child and some hunters. For a time Jim and his companions got lost on the mountain -- perhaps a foreshadowing of Thompson’s disappearing five years later in the mountains of Malaysia. But then his letters say that, “onward and upward we went” and the guides “shouted ‘There it is!’ – A great opening in the cliff – and there was the body of the great Buddha – but minus its head & hands.”



Jim found “six figures in this cave.” He sketched the cave and documented the stalagmite in the middle, from which the largest Buddha figure was carved.

Jim learned from local villagers that members of the Thai police and army had recently come to the cave and, incredibly, had dynamited the opening to make it easier to loot. The police and army then

brutally cut off the heads and hands of the Buddhas, to sell in Bangkok. Jim now knew where most of his Buddha heads came from.

But in examining the desecrated, decapitated bodies and recalling his Buddha heads, Jim felt that at least three were different. His heads were in “almost full relief,” not flat, and “must have come from another cave.”

Jim then asked their 12-year-old boy guide “if there was another cave on the mountain, and he answered ‘yes,’ but a giant naga [cobra] lived in it and it had been sealed up. At first he and the hunters said they would take us to it...” but then the guides led the foreigners down the mountain instead. Jim did not find the second cave.

During 1962, Jim was awarded the prestigious Order of the White Elephant by the King of Thailand, in recognition of his tremendous work in creating the Thai silk industry, which was employing thousands of workers. Jim was a national hero. It was the high point of his life. But within a few months things started going wrong.

In October 1962 the Director-General of the Thai Fine Arts Department, a division of the Royal Thai Government, suddenly accused Jim Thompson of “looting the patrimony of the country.” Thompson responded that he was buying the best of the best of the art and antiques that was available, holding it, and was leaving it to the Siam Society and thus the people of Thailand in his will. This was different from many corrupt dealers who were illegally smuggling ancient Thai art out of the country.



But the Director-General insisted on seizing the Buddha limestone heads that Thompson owned. Perhaps the D-G was peeved by Jim’s Royal award, or was prodded by a shadowy, crooked art dealer named Thada who was in cahoots with corrupt police officers. The DG even created a public spectacle, in which “crowds of police invaded” Thompson’s house/museum to seize the heads, along with a “pack of local news reporters and photographers.”

This incident so angered Jim that he sold off most of his remaining Thai Buddha art collection, focused on collecting other items, and never returned to the Si Thep area. Jim was also angered that the Siam Society was not helping him, so he changed his will and left all his holdings to his nephew in America, instead of to the Society.

Fortunately, after Jim’s mysterious disappearance in 1967, his nephew and others created the Jim Thompson Foundation, which now administers the Bangkok house-museum and retains its many art objects and antiques. It is one of the top tourist attractions in Bangkok.

Next month I will describe my expedition to re-discover Tha Morat and to geo-locate it for the first time, and to try to find the mysterious second cave.

Lew Toulmin lives in Silver Spring, and grew up in Thailand from 1959 to 1965.

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Photos, captions and credits:

- A. The head of the Bodhisattva Maitreya Buddha from cave Tha Morat, in north central Thailand. Now in the National Museum of Thailand. (Courtesy photo)
- B. The large figure of a Buddha, decapitated, in the center of the Tha Morat cave.
- C. Jim Thompson, the “Silk King of Thailand,” later in life. He built the Jim Thompson Thai Silk company and the entire silk industry of Thailand. (Courtesy photo)
- D. Part of a 1962 unpublished letter from Jim Thompson gives a sketch plan of the sacred, 1000-year-old Buddha temple cave. (Credit: Lew Toulmin and the University of PA)
- E. Part of an unpublished letter from Jim Thompson describes his belief that there must be a second, nearby unfound cave. (Credit: Lew Toulmin and the University of PA)
- F. Order of the White Elephant, awarded to Jim Thompson (Courtesy photo)
- G. Star of the Order of the White Elephant, awarded to Jim Thompson (Courtesy photo)
- H. Then entrance to the Tha Morat cave, dynamited by Thai police and army personnel, to more easily gain access, according to letters of Jim Thompson (Credit: Lew Toulmin)

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