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New Perspectives on Early Cambodia from the Lower Mekong Archaeological Project

One cannot know a country without understanding its history, and the heritage of Cambodia is deeply rooted in its past. Archaeological research provides one approach to studying a nation's past, since archaeology is a form of long-term history. After decades of political instability, archaeological research has resumed recently in Cambodia. Since 1995, archaeological research throughout several areas of the country has begun to probe different periods in Cambodia's ancient history, and to explore why certain developments occurred when they did and assumed the forms they took.

One period of time that remains poorly known is the early historic period (ca. 500 B.C. - A.D. 500), a period that ended only a few centuries before Jayavarman II established the Khmer Empire near the shores of the Tonle Sap lake. It is during this time that we see the earliest states emerge in Cambodia and elsewhere in mainland Southeast Asia. Documentary sources and, now, archaeological research suggests that southern Cambodia, which includes Cambodia's Mekong delta, played a vital role in Khmer history during the first millennium A.D.

Work described in this article introduces the Lower Mekong Archaeological Project, an international collaborative archaeological project that blends research with training, and seeks to place the project in its historical context. Some findings of the Lower Mekong Archaeological Project are then described. Interested readers are encouraged to delve more deeply into this project and the early historic period by consulting references cited throughout this article. The final section of this article discusses the significance of some findings from the project to date, and explores some of the other contributions that the Lower Mekong Archaeological Project has made, and can make, to understanding Cambodia's past and helping Cambodia in the present.

Introduction to the Lower Mekong Archaeological Project

The Lower Mekong Archaeological Project is a direct outgrowth of the University of Hawaii/East-West Center/Royal University of Fine Arts Cambodia Project that was initiated in 1994 by Dr. Judy Ledgerwood (then of the East-West Center and Dr. P. Bion Griffin (Department of Anthropology, University of Hawaii). Funding for the project was initially provided by the East-West Center, and a history of the project is provided in an article by Griffin, Ledgerwood, and Chuch (1999). The Cambodia project, as it is also called, was developed as a foundation for long-term research programs by faculty from the University of Hawaii that involve training graduates of the Royal University of Fine Arts (Phnom Penh) in archaeology, art history, cultural anthropology, and historic preservation (Griffin et al., 1996; Griffin et al., 1999).

The primary goal of the Cambodia project, since its inception, has been capacity-building,

which in this case involves providing technical and academic training for graduates from the Archaeology faculty at the Royal University of Fine Arts. Training archaeology students has been a primary goal of the Royal University of Fine Arts for more than a decade, since the temples of Angkor are the leading tourist attraction in Cambodia and the country lacks trained specialists to manage them. One of the many tragedies of the Khmer Rouge era was the disappearance of most of Cambodia's archaeologists; it is said that only four trained archaeologists survived that era. They recognized the urgent need to train the next generation in archaeology to provide preservation specialists for the country's archaeological heritage, and have actively sought international cooperating institutions to support this goal since the early 1990s.

Although prehistorians and historical archaeologists are now actively engaged in field investigations throughout the country, most current energies focus on understanding archaeology in the northwestern portion of Cambodia, and particularly in Siem Reap province near the Angkorian temple complex. A small handful of research projects work in areas outside of northwestern Cambodia, notably teams working in Kompong Cham province on the circular earthworks and in Takeo province through the Lower Mekong Archaeological Project. These and other teams have devoted long-term systematic efforts to studying the archaeology of ancient Cambodia. New projects run by Khmer students have been initiated at the prehistoric site of Samrong Sen and also in a kiln site near Phnom Penh. As more Khmer students receive training to do archaeological research, the amount of archaeological research in Cambodia continues to grow.

The Lower Mekong Archaeological project, hereafter called LOMAP, was established to study the early historic period of southern Cambodia, from ca. 500 B.C. to ca. A.D. 500 (Stark et al., 1999). His Excellency Chuch Phoeurn (Under-Secretary of State, Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts) and Dr. Miriam Stark (University of Hawaii) co-direct the Lower Mekong Archaeological Project. At the invitation of Cambodia's Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, LOMAP has concentrated most of its archaeological research on the archaeological site of Angkor Borei in Takeo province. Our fieldwork combines archaeological research and training and uses a variety of field techniques, from excavation and survey to geoarchaeological prospecting and coring. Several American students from the University of Hawaii, and more than 20 graduates from the Archaeology Faculty of the Royal University of Fine Arts have participated in LOMAP fieldwork since 1996.

The Mekong Delta and the Transition to History

Southern Cambodia contains a rich yet poorly understood record of early historic period occupation, from approximately 500 B.C. to approximately A.D. 500. Archaeological research in the last two decades suggests that the Mekong delta experienced extensive settlement and human land-use that predated the Angkorian period, or before ca. A.D. 802. Historians and art historians have identified the endpoint of the early historic period ca. A.D. 500, when we see the emergence of statuary, writing, and a more complex political organization that may have been integrated through religious ideology (Coedès 1968; Vickery 1998).

The Mekong River is one of world's longest rivers (ca. 2,600 mi or 4,180 km) and flows through China, Burma, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Today the Mekong delta is one of world's great rice-growing regions. It is flat, low-lying, and prone to flooding. It is also a rice granary of mainland Southeast Asia, and traditionally produced large surpluses that were exported. Today, rice production yields in portions of Cambodia's Mekong delta far surpass the yields in most other provinces in Cambodia, and geographers believe that the ancient Mekong delta was easily farmed through recession rice agriculture (Fox and Ledgerwood 1999; van

Liere 1980).

We know the earliest polities of the Mekong delta through documentary evidence, and particularly through Chinese accounts and oral traditions. Chinese envoys, Kang Dai and Zhu Ying, visited the delta in the mid-3rd century AD to explore the nature of sea passage via SE Asia to India. These Chinese dignitaries described customs of the peoples who lived in the "Kingdom of Funan." This polity reputedly contained multiple urban centers and many trappings that archaeologists associate with ancient states: nucleated population centers, political hierarchy, institutionalized religion, writing and perhaps even economic specialization. According to the Chinese, the political structure of Funan was a succession of rulers or kings, each of whom lived in a wooden royal residence. Oral traditions recounted to the Chinese suggested that the first king gave each of his seven sons a region to rule, and that one of the last kings was named Jayavarman - the great name appropriated by kings during the Angkorian empire of the 9th-14th centuries.

Archaeology and History as Sources of Information

Several scholars have examined the Chinese documentary sources to understand political developments associated with "Funan" (e.g., Coedès 1968; Ishizawa 1996; Jacques 1979; Pelliot 1903; Wheatley 1983). Historical accounts say that Funan had a tribute-based economy, and that this Funan polity produced a surplus that was available to foreign traders who visited coastal ports. At some point in or shortly after the 2nd century B.C., the Indian emperor Asoka encouraged efforts at missionization and Buddhist missionaries moved to the east into Southeast Asia. Kenneth Hall has summarized these developments in his history of trade and maritime development in early Southeast Asia (Hall 1982, 1985).

Although our strongest archaeological evidence for contact begins some centuries after this time (e.g., Bellina 1998; Glover 1990), the earliest archaeological evidence for South Asian materials dates to the 4th and 3rd centuries B.C. Farther west, the Roman emperor Vespasian banned the exportation of metals from the Roman empire in A.D. 70, leading Indian merchants to seek their raw materials from the East (and from Suvannabhumi, the Land of Gold) to provision international traders (Ray 1994). How do these different pieces of information fit together to explain developments in the Mekong delta? Documentary and archaeological sources provide complementary strategies for understanding the transition to history.

Until recently, the only archaeological information available for the archaeology of the Mekong delta derived from Louis Malleret's 1940s excavations at the site of Oc Eo in Vietnam (Malleret 1959, 1960, 1962). Malleret's work at Oc Eo suggested that this settlement served as a coastal trading port for the kingdom of Funan during the second through sixth centuries A.D. In the half-century since Malleret's fieldwork, Vietnamese archaeologists have uncovered dozens of "Oc Eo Culture" (sites occupied in the first half of the first millennium A.D.) throughout southern Vietnam.

No systematic archaeological field research has been undertaken previously in Cambodia's Mekong delta, and civil strife between the 1950s and 1970s restricted Vietnamese research on the early historic period in the Mekong delta. Much of what we know about early historic period archaeology in the region to date thus derives from the Vietnamese side of the Mekong delta. Louis Malleret's research in the Transbassac area and at the site of Oc Eo produced a wealth of evidence for international maritime trade in semiprecious stone beads, high-tin bronze artifacts, Rouletted Ware, Roman coins, intaglios, and glass beads (Malleret 1959, 1960, 1962). A decade earlier, Pierre Paris (1931, 1941) identified possible canals (using aerial photographs) between Oc Eo and Angkor Borei. Since the 1970s, Vietnamese

archaeologists have worked steadily in the delta on sites from the “Oc Eo” culture. This growing body of research suggests that large settlements were found throughout much of the Mekong delta by the first millennium A.D. The sequence of development and the nature of intraregional interaction between these settlements remains largely unknown.

Archaeological Research at Angkor Borei (Takeo province)

Since 1996, the Lower Mekong Archaeological Project (LOMAP) has undertaken research in and around the ancient site of Angkor Borei (Takeo Province) in southern Cambodia. The contemporary community (and archaeological site) of Angkor Borei is found at the western edge of the Mekong delta, at 10° 59' N latitude and 104° 25' E longitude. Although a town of approximately 6,000 inhabitants sits directly atop the archaeological site today, archaeological features are still visible as collapsed rubble mounds and water control features. As one example, portions of the ancient moat are now used for farming. French geographer Etienne Aymonier described architectural features of the site (in particular a wall), while others collected statuary from the site and vicinity for museum collections.

Historians and archaeologists have recognized Angkor Borei as an important historical site for several reasons. As early as 1911, the French were drawn to a small hill immediately south of Angkor Borei that contains two pre-Angkorian temples, Phnom Da and Asram Maharosei. These temples once contained abundant statuary that suggested early Indic influence and the importance of the Mekong delta area for pre-Angkorian Khmer civilization. The archaeological site of Angkor Borei has also produced the earliest Khmer inscription (dated to A.D. 611 [Jenner 1980]), as well as brick architecture, statuary, and assorted valuables including precious metals and gems. The French believed that Angkor Borei was one of the first capitals of the Funan that the Chinese described (Pelliot 1903), and that powerful elites ruled the region until some point during the 7th century A.D. when the center of power shifted to the north (for recent review, see Vickery 1998).

The settlement of Angkor Borei has long been important to the Cambodian people as well. Many Khmers consider Angkor Borei the cradle of Khmer civilization, in part because Angkor Borei is associated with the place called Kok Thlok and the origin story of Preah Thaong or Nagi Soma (Ledgerwood 1996; also see Gaudes 1993). In the origin story that Funan residents recounted to visiting Chinese emissaries in the 3rd-6th centuries A.D., an Indian Brahmin priest named Preah Thaong (or Kaundinya) left India for Southeast Asia, and arrived at the shores of the Mekong delta. There he saw a beautiful local princess, named Soma, on the shore. She was the daughter of the king of the nagas, serpents that lived beneath the ocean. Preah Thaong and Nagi Soma battled each other for control of the region. He defeated her, they fell in love, and married. As a gift to his daughter and new son-in-law, the king of the nagas ‘drank the waters’ that covered the land (this might have involved draining parts of the delta for farming). It is said that King Preah Thaong introduced Hindu customs, legal traditions and the Sanskrit language to the population and built them a kingdom that he called Kambuja.

The descendants of this kingdom’s residents, Kambuja-desa, are the modern-day Khmers. No indigenous inscriptions link Angkor Borei directly with the founding of Cambodia, because the 7th-8th century inscriptions described donations to temples and the acts of generous people rather than discussing founding stories. Yet place names around Angkor Borei suggest a strong connection between the Preah Thaong/Nagi Soma story and this ancient settlement. The district of Khok Thlok is located just southeast of Angkor Borei, and a reservoir in the settlement’s center is named Preah Thaong. Oral traditions, coupled with historical and archaeological evidence, indicate that Angkor Borei and its environs are significant for understanding Cambodia’s past.

Research Through the Lower Mekong Archaeological Project

Research by the Lower Mekong Archaeological Project at Angkor Borei has been designed to answer the following questions:

1. When was Angkor Borei first settled as an ancient community?
2. How did the organization and role of ancient settlement of Angkor Borei change through time?
3. How did the settlement and growth of Angkor Borei, as a regional center, affect the natural and cultural landscape of the Mekong delta?
4. What evidence exists that Angkor Borei served as an ancient capital of the complex polity that Chinese emissaries described as “Funan” in the 3rd-6th centuries A.D.?

Answering these questions requires both basic research and detailed technical studies. Basic research through our project since 1996 has primarily involved two types of field research. The first uses reconnaissance and mapping to identify the range of ancient features distributed across the site, like collapsed brick structures, ancient water features like reservoirs and moats, and areas of dense ancient trash deposits. We now know that Angkor Borei was a walled settlement that, at its peak, enclosed an area of at least 300 hectares and contained more than a dozen brick monuments. It was first founded in the 5th or 4th century B.C., and apparently grew as a community through time. Precisely how large the population became and where all the people lived is not yet clear, although future work will concentrate on these topics.

The second type of basic research undertaken by the Lower Mekong Archaeological Project involved testing the subsurface deposits in various parts of the site through excavations. Most of these activities have been summarized elsewhere (Stark et al., 1999; Stark and Bong, in press). Work in 1999 and 2000 uncovered portions of an ancient cemetery in the center of the walled site that probably dates between ca. 200 B.C. and A.D. 200 (Stark, in press). Several detailed technical studies are now underway that examine human modification of the ancient landscape through time, changes in the technology of ceramic production and the organization of ceramic distribution, and the health and status of ancient people who lived in and constructed the settlement of Angkor Borei. Most of this work is complicated, and will take several years to complete. Our work has already produced several key findings, however, that may encourage scholars to revise their view of Cambodia’s Mekong delta during the early historic period.

First, it now seems clear that the settlement of Angkor Borei was first occupied by the late 5th or early 4th century B.C.; three consistent sets of radiocarbon dates, from discrete areas of the site, support this finding. This founding date precedes Chinese descriptions of “Funan” by approximately 500 years. It may be the case that the “Funan” polity the Chinese described had a much deeper history than scholars have previously imagined, with roots in the late Iron Age of Southeast Asia. If this is so, then social complexity emerged gradually, over a 500-year period in the Mekong delta. Documentation and testing of archaeological sites like Angkor Borei permits researchers to study the historical trajectory of this development.

Secondly, the 1999-2000 excavations at the ancient cemetery of Vat Komnou (in the center of the site) have produced an ancient cemetery that was used from ca. 200 B.C. - A.D. 200. LOMAP excavations recovered portions of at least 45 inhumations in the 1999 and 2000 field seasons that are now undergoing analysis by Dr. Michael Pietruszewsky at the University of Hawaii. The closely packed nature of the human burials and the fact that these are inhumations rather than cremated remains means that we can study the health and dietary status of these ancient Cambodians through skeletal analyses. The fact that most human skeletons

were interred with associated burial goods (earthenware vessels, animal remains that were likely grave offerings, and some beads) provides data for studying the nature of social organization during the time the cemetery was used.

From Archaeological Findings to Issues of Relevance

Fieldwork is the most dramatic aspect of the archaeological enterprise, and attracts tremendous attention from the communities in which archaeologists work. Yet archaeological fieldwork alone produces only broad outlines of the pictures that archaeologists seek to draw; post-fieldwork analysis is necessary to make sense of the material we excavate. As should be clear from the previous sections, the results of detailed studies from archaeological research at Angkor Borei will take some time to complete. The next decade holds great promise for learning about more about this site, and work by members of the Lower Mekong Archaeological Project will illuminate the role of Angkor Borei with respect to regional developments during the first millennium A.D.

Work through the Lower Mekong Archaeological Project also makes a significant contribution by providing advanced technical training opportunities for archaeologists who wish to dedicate their careers to historic preservation and heritage management in Cambodia. At the forefront of this group are Khmers who have graduated from the Archaeology Faculty of the Royal University of Fine Arts, and whose participation in the Lower Mekong Archaeological Project helps them gain access to long-term employment as archaeologists. The project offers high-level technical field training to graduates of the Royal University of Fine Arts to help them gain the expertise necessary to move into professional archaeology positions in Cambodia's heritage organizations like the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts and APSARA. At least seven project participants are now engaged in post-graduate study in or beyond Cambodia (in the United States and Japan).

The Lower Mekong Archaeological Project emphasizes training for Khmer archaeologists, but the project also accommodates a small number of trained archaeology students from western universities (not only American universities) who wish to study Cambodia's past at the graduate level. Opportunities for a variety of research topics - both in the field and in the lab - are available through the Lower Mekong Archaeological Project for students who join the graduate program in the University of Hawaii's Department of Anthropology. The University of Hawaii has one of the most dynamic Centers for Southeast Asian Studies in the country today, and an active commitment to research in Cambodia. Graduate students who pursue Cambodian research at the University find colleagues in a variety of different programs, from Geography and Sociology to Political Science and Historic Preservation. We encourage motivated graduates with strong undergraduate records to apply to the program, and welcome inquiries.

Conclusions

Because this article is written by an archaeologist who was trained in western methods of data and interpretation, much of the foregoing discussion focused on archaeological and historical goals of the research, and how the project's findings thus far articulate with these goals. The Lower Mekong Archaeological Project has now dedicated more than five years of research to the site of Angkor Borei, and with good reason: It is at Angkor Borei that the earliest written Khmer was found, and this ancient settlement may well have dominated the Mekong delta region politically and economically during part of the first millennium A.D. Angkor Borei is thus an extremely significant archaeological site for the information it contains about the first

millennium settlement of the Mekong delta, and because we can study the rise of civilization by studying the development of ancient settlements like Angkor Borei. The fact that Khmers lived in the Mekong delta, at settlements like Angkor Borei, as much as 1500 years ago is also significant given current geopolitical boundaries.

The archaeological site of Angkor Borei deserves status as a national heritage site, since understanding this settlement's history holds potential for understanding the origins of the Khmer. For these reasons, the European Union has funded a local museum at the site, in consultation with members of the Lower Mekong Archaeological Project. This modest museum (now undergoing renovations) contains sculptures, inscriptions, and artifacts that are described in Khmer, English and French. Hundreds of people visit the museum each year, including many Khmers from within and beyond Cambodia's borders. Angkor Borei, in part because of its proximity to Phnom Da, is becoming a tourist destination for Khmers and foreigners who want to learn about Cambodia's important and ancient history. It has been an honor and a privilege to undertake archaeological research at this most important place in Cambodia's history for all of the project members, and we look forward to even greater collaboration in the future.

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