All on board! Uses of boats in Angkor

**Boat Construction in Angkor**

A representation of reality? The first question that arises when using boat images is the degree of reality that is being represented. The bas-reliefs of the Bayon temple have been determined to be representing the everyday life of the Khmer empire during the 12th century. However, it is difficult to determine if the shapes of the hulls represent an idealization of the image of a boat, or if it is trying to represent a real boat. Ethnoarchaeological research has been used to help solve the problem.

**Nautical Angkor: The Social Life of Boats in the Khmer Empire**

By Veronica Walker Vadillo
University of Oxford
veronica.walker@arch.ox.ac.uk

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**Fishing vessels:** in the Bayon and Banteay Chhmar temples, there are a few small fishing vessels. In Banteay Chhmar the fishing vessels are occupied by Khmer fishermen and bigger leisure vessel can be seen in the same register. However, in the Bayon temple the two small fishing vessels depicted, there are Chinese and Khmer men fishing. In the upper register there is a plank boat whose origin is being debated, and in the lower vessel we can see a medium-size vessel loaded with Chinese. Both bigger boats represent a leisure scene. From the surrounding scene, it could be discussed that the Chinese were fishing for leisure. The fishing apparel is most likely made of rattan or other vegetable material. They use baskets to keep the fish, nets and hard nets that are very similar to leisure scenes. From the surrounding scene, it could be discussed that the Chinese were fishing for leisure. The fishing apparel is most likely made of rattan or other vegetable material. They use baskets to keep the fish, nets and hard nets that are very similar to leisure scenes.

**Leisure or Ceremonial vessels:** some images from Khmer bas-relieves represent a very interesting aspect of Khmer life: boating. According to the Chinese emissary Zhou Daguan, boating was a pastime among the Khmer court. There are a few representations of such activity. Foreigners are often depicted dancing, smoking, drinking and playing, while Khmer are always shown in a very dignified pose. This difference between the Khmer and the foreigners make it difficult to determine in some images if the Khmer are simply boating or if they are celebrating a religious ceremony.

**War Vessels:** the two most astonishing scenes of boats are the naval battles represented in the Bayon and Banteay Chhmar temples. Both are several meters long and depict a savage battle between two armies. The location of the battle is in dispute; traditionally it was assumed that the scene showed a Cham invasion by sea and that the battle was set in the Tonle Sap, the closest water course to Angkor. But new approaches based on nautical technology and spatial analysis seem to indicate that the battle was fought in the Mekong river. The scene in the Bayon is particularly interesting because it shows at least two separate war scenes: one represents the deployment of a Cham army transported by Khmer rowers, while the second scene shows a full naval battle with ships engaging in war. The boats used by Cham and Khmer are very similar in shape and decoration. A straightforward interpretation of the naval battles cannot be presented at this point since the discussion is still open.

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