

Rock Painting at Cardamom Mountains, Cambodia

The following is a preliminary report made by archaeologists **Heng Sophady, Tep Sokha, Em Dany, and Son Chantoeurn** on the rock art site in the Cardamom Mountains which has attracted the attention of archaeologists.

Introduction

Rock art, or rock painting, is not well known in Cambodia; however, there has been significant interest in the recent “official” discovery of a few rock shelters containing rock paintings in the mountain of Kulen in Siem Reap, and another site in the Cardamom mountain range of Kravanh District, Pursat.

History of the site

The site in the Cardamom Mountains is not a new discovery. For a long time, local residents of the area have been aware of the rock art. However, information relating to the site is new to authorities and researchers. In 2007, officers of the Culture and Fine Arts Department of Pursat province reported the red paintings on the small rock shelter at the Cardamom Mountain to the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts.

The authorities decided to protect the site, and arranged for officials and staff of the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts to collaborate with local authorities. They visited the site in October 2007 to determine the location, and assess the situation by studying the styles of the rock paintings. At that time, only H.E. Chuch Phoeurn, Secretary of State, Ministry of Culture, and a few officers could access the site; the road conditions were also difficult. Subsequently, officers of Pursat Culture and Fine Arts Department visited the site, and confirmed its location and features.

On 21 - 23 February 2011, officers of the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, led by Mr. Heng Sophady, accompanied by Mr. Tep Sokha, Miss Em Dany, and Mr. Son Chantoeurn (in collaboration with a French team led by Dr. Fabrice Demeter from Musée National d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris, as well as local participants) conducted a survey of the site.

Site location

The rock painting is located southeast of Kanam village, Rokat commune, Kravanh district, Pursat province (UTM: N 37 05 35, E 133 85 62). The site is situated around 2 km south of the village. Kanam is a new and remote village located on the Cardamom Mountain range, about 70 km from Pursat provincial town, and about 40 km from Kravanh District. Accessible only in the dry season by foot, motorcycle or oxen cart, it takes a whole day to reach by motorcycle; and a few days by oxen cart or walking. The road to the village cuts through the Cardamom Mountains, and passes through some small villages, such as Veal Vong, Sach Pouk, Peam, Khsang, Prei Khmam and Kanam.

A river originating from Ta Sai village runs through the area. The survey team crossed that river three times before reaching the site. Few families live in the area, and most of them are migrants from Pursat. The inhabitants earn their living from agriculture, cutting trees, foraging, and fishing. They ride buffalo carts, and walk down the mountain once every month or two to purchase supplies from the market.

Description

The locals call the rock paintings "*laang komnou*" in Cambodian ("*Laang*" refers to "cave", and "*komnou*" means "painting"). The term is misleading because the site is not a cave, but a small rock shelter of grey sandstone approximately 3.46 m high, 6.60 m long, and 4 m deep. The roof is about 7.40 m long and 4.80 m wide; and the edge of the roof is about 65 cm thick (Fig. 1). Under the roof are several big blocks of sandstone, suggesting that the shelter would not be suitable for prolonged

settlement by a migrating people. Under the rock shelter's ceiling is a big block of sandstone with traces of red, perhaps powdered, ochre pigments similar to the colour of the paint on the ceiling. This spot was possibly used for colour preparation before the painting is done (Fig. 2).



Fig. 1: "Laang Kamnou" from Northeast direction



Fig. 2: Remnants of red colour on rock under shelter

The pictographs and paintings might have been drawn using pigments of red ochre, the remains of which are found on the rock under the ceiling. This type of colour is easy to find in the natural environment, and is very popular as a painting or drawing material among prehistoric humans.

Most of the paintings are on the ceiling, and a few paintings were found on the edge of the roof and on the vertical wall. The paintings depict human figures, terrestrial animals, and agricultural tools, mainly ploughs (Fig. 3, 4). There are both single and group images of humans riding on an elephant, and holding something in their hands (Fig. 5, 6 and 7). Some



Fig. 3: Terrestrial animals



Fig. 4: Plough



Fig. 5: Human riding on elephant



Fig. 6: Group of humans riding on elephant



Fig. 7: Group of people riding on elephant



Fig. 8: Probably a water buffalo



Fig. 9: Unidentified animal

parts show a group of animals or a single animal, such as that of a water buffalo (Fig. 8). Birds are rarely depicted, and fish are not represented.

Some animal images in the paintings are difficult to identify because of damage caused by the effect of rock erosion and water. In addition, some images of the original paintings were modified by village children using white chalk (Fig. 9).

During the visit, samples of the red powder were removed from a rock panel under the shelter's ceiling, and sent to a laboratory in Paris for chemical compositional analysis.

Conclusion

The paintings at *Laang Kamnou* site depicted human activities, terrestrial animals, and agricultural tools. Those of humans riding on elephants possibly reflected human travels or migration. Animals represent domesticated and undomesticated species, such as water buffaloes, cows, multiple species of deer, elephants, and various animals, which we could not identify either because of the impact of natural damage or acts of modern humans. Depictions of ploughs probably indicated the agricultural activities of the communities in that period, which for now are not precisely ascertained yet.

In the current research on rock paintings, analysis on samples of red pigments left on the rock is being carried out to identify the raw materials used for painting.

Damage to the paintings, most of which are still in good condition while some are in a poor state, was likely caused by water dripping from the ceiling during the rainy season while human activities were also a contributing factor.

Rock painting is very rare in Cambodia. *Laang Kamnou* is, therefore, tremendously important as the country's cultural heritage. It should be further studied in detailed investigations and research so as to understand the life of people in the past, and the significance of rock paintings in Cambodia.

Photographs Courtesy of Heng Sophady