

# Ancient Khmer Elephant-Jar Reflects Potters' Brilliance

Dawn Rooney reports on the background of the discovery of a unique Khmer elephant-jar, its technical characteristics, iconography, and possible meaning and function in Khmer society.

## Introduction

In 1985, an extraordinary green- and brown-glazed Khmer elephant-jar was discovered in Tak province, Thailand, where it had been buried for at least 800 years (Figure 1). The jar is unprecedented in the Khmer ceramic repertoire because of its exceptionally large size, elaborate decoration, and pristine condition. These aspects evoked reactions amongst the public that the piece was not genuine. Further discoveries, additional research, and scientific testing, however, confirm its authenticity. Today, it is recognized as a superb example of the genius of the Khmer potters' creativity and skilful workmanship.



*Fig 1: Green- and brown-glazed Khmer elephant jar, c. 12<sup>th</sup> century (h: 38 cm; d: 13 cm).*

## Background

This article is based on a paper presented at an international conference on 'Ancient Khmer and Southeast Asian Ceramics: New Archaeological Findings, Production and Revival of Techniques,' held in Siem Reap, Cambodia (10-12 December 2008), and jointly hosted by the Center for Khmer Studies (CKS), the National Center for Khmer Ceramics Revival (NCKCR), and Heritage Watch. A unique feature of this conference was the convergence of international scholars

specializing in Khmer ceramics that are made by studio and production potters working in both the revived ancient techniques and innovative contemporary designs. Speakers presented papers within guidelines of the panel themes which explored the economics of ceramics in the ancient Khmer Empire and their conservation; and the revitalization of ceramic production in modern Cambodia. Field trips to Tani, an ancient kiln site, and to the NCKCR reinforced the dual aim of the conference. The objective was to focus on ceramics of archaeological importance and the development of ceramic technology in the region. Supporting this objective, the NCKCR made a replica of the ancient Khmer ceramic elephant-jar which enabled a study of the potting technique, glazing, and firing process (Figure 2). It is hoped that the conference and the International Khmer Ceramic Festival that follows in Siem Reap will afford new opportunities for Cambodian potters and economic development in the region.



*Fig 2: Replica of the ancient Khmer elephant-jar made at the National Center for Khmer Ceramics Revival (before glazing), 2008.*

## Discovery

The jar was discovered in 1985 in the mountains of Tak province, north-western Thailand, on the border with Burma; an area that is flanked by Mae Hong Son and Chiangmai provinces. The construction of a main road in the region during the 1970s unearthed large numbers of ancient ceramics and artefacts, including jewellery, glass beads, tools, utensils, bullet coins, and ceramics mainly from the Sukhothai and Sawankhalok (Si Satchanalai) kilns in central Thailand and from the Northern Thai kilns of Sankampaeng, Payao, Kalong, Wang Nua, and Phan. Very few Khmer ceramics were found at Tak. An exception is the green- and brown-glazed elephant-jar which was most likely made at kilns in either Lahan Sai or Ban Kruat, Buri Ram province, northeastern Thailand, two areas that were part of the Khmer Empire between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries.

Shortly after its discovery, the jar was purchased by a Thai collector, Khun Surat Osathanagruh, and it is now in the collection of the Southeast Asian Ceramics Museum, Bangkok University, Rangsit.



## Websites

Center for Khmer Studies (CKS)

Website: [www.khmerstudies.org](http://www.khmerstudies.org)

National Center for Khmer Ceramics  
Revival (NCKCR)

Website: [www.khmerceraics.com](http://www.khmerceraics.com)

Southeast Asian Ceramics Museum

Website: <http://museum.bu.ac.th>

The Southeast Asian Ceramics Museum opened to the public on 11 May 2005 with exhibits that highlight ancient pottery production in Thailand and the history of Thai and other Asian trade ceramics. About 200 ceramics from a permanent collection of about 2,000 pieces are on view. The core collection was donated by Surat Osathanugrah, founder of Bangkok University.

While many of the ceramics were made elsewhere, most of them were discovered in Thailand. There are pieces made in China, Vietnam, and Burma as well as ceramics from Thai production sites. The museum collection also includes Thai prehistoric pottery of 2,000-4,500 years old, with the largest accessible collection of ceramics from the Tak-Omkoi sites of western Thailand (Khmer ceramics are mostly from old kiln sites in Buriram province). A Shard Archive and extensive library are also available for researchers.

This extraordinary vessel has no known prototype, and when it was discovered people did not believe it was genuine because of its exceptionally large size (h: 38 cm; d: 13 cm); the ornate decoration on the vessel contrasts those on most other Khmer pieces, which was minimal and consisted mainly of geometric motifs. Furthermore, its good condition, considering that it had been buried in the ground for at least 800 years, prompted questions about the dating.

The idea of a round-bodied jar with applied appendages in the form of a standing elephant is not uncommon in Khmer ceramics, and there are other



*Fig 3: Brown-glazed Khmer elephant-jar, 12<sup>th</sup> century (l: 45 cm; h: 37 cm; d: 31.5 cm).*



*Fig 4: Legs being applied on the Khmer elephant-jar (replica).*



*Fig 5: Geometric marks incised on the base of small green-glazed Khmer wares.*



*Fig 6: Rectangular rolls of clay being applied to (replica) form the sides of the howdah.*

similar examples. Most are brown-glazed (Figure 3); others have riders; still others have a flat base; a few green-glazed; and fewer still are predominately green-glazed with brown highlights. None of the elephant-jars, however, is like this one.

### **Description, Potting and Firing Methods**

The 12<sup>th</sup> century vessel is a strong, dense, weighty, and high-fired stoneware jar. Four short legs support the round elephant body which has a short neck and a wide mouth. An elaborately decorated *howdah* (a carriage on the back of an elephant) is held in place by rope straps.

The body is fine-grained and beige to reddish in colour, the latter of which resulted from burial in iron-rich earth that stained the exposed body. The form was made with rectangular coils which were used to build up the walls of the jar to the desired size; then the coils were smoothed out on the exterior but left untouched on the interior. The roughness of the coils can be felt on the inside of the vessel. Next, the jar was shaped and trimmed on a turning device. The appendages, such as the legs, were formed from lumps of wet clay applied to the body of the jar and adhered by a slip, a liquid mixture of clay and water (Figure 4).

A unique feature of the vessel is an incised 'X' cut, with a pointed instrument, into the upper right foot. Similar geometric marks are often found on the base of small green-glazed pieces (Figure 5). Although the purpose of the marks is unknown, the most frequently proposed idea is that they identified a particular potter's work in firing in a communal kiln.

The short neck and mouth with a turned out and flattened rim were potted separately, and joined to the body as evidenced by the sharp ridge between the two parts. Upon further examination, the sides of the *howdah* on the back of the elephant were formed from a lump of clay that was rolled into a rectangular shape of the desired length, and applied to the body of the jar (Figure 6). The resulting form looks like a lug-type of handle which is very rare in Khmer ceramics but widely used in other Asian ceramic traditions.



Next, a thin and ash glaze was applied. This was translucent in places and transparent in others after firing. The light green colour was obtained from a small percentage of iron oxide in a glaze mixture of ash, clay, and water. Starting at the mouth, the glaze was poured on to the body, which resulted in streaks where the glaze thickened (visible on the body, globules on the lower body and legs, and the uneven glaze line). The jar was wood-fired in a clay-built and cross-draft kiln in an oxidizing atmosphere to a temperature of approximately 1,200 degrees centigrade. The surface of the glaze is marked by crazing (an unintentional network of fine-line cracks spread throughout the surface of the glaze in a spider-web pattern) which occurred during the cooling phase of the firing cycle (Figure 7).

One or two holes were deliberately made on the inside of the legs of the elephant but their function is unknown (Figure 8). Some holes go through the piece; while others are dead-ended. As there does not seem to be a technical reason for their presence, perhaps they were made to affix the elephant to something such as an altar.

## Function and Meaning

No records that describe the use of Khmer ceramics survive. Carvings on the walls of Angkorean-period temples provide a source of form, particularly those on the Bayon temple, but there are no depictions of an elephant-shaped jar.

Additionally, it is not possible to determine the material of the pots carved in stone, which was most likely a precious metal such as copper, bronze, silver, or gold but could have also been lacquer or fired clay.

In view of its uniqueness, an assumption can be made that this jar was intended for ritual or ceremonial use by royalty and the elite. While small and medium-sized pots and jars in animal shapes (many of elephant form) were used as lime containers for the universal custom of betel chewing, it is not a likely function for this jar as there are no traces of calcified lime on the interior. One possibility is that it may have been a container for gold jewellery, such as rings, bracelets, and ear ornaments which were worn by Khmer royalty.



*Fig 7: Crazing on the glaze of the jar (original).*



*Fig 8: Deliberately-made holes in the leg of the jar (original).*



Inscriptions give detailed lists of jewels belonging to the Khmer state. Although no jewellery inside glazed Khmer jars has been found in a controlled excavation, dealers often comment that such was the case. In Indonesia, jewellery found in ancient fired clay jars is well documented.

## Authenticity and Dating



Fig 9: Terrace of the Elephants, Angkor Thom, late 12<sup>th</sup> - early 13<sup>th</sup> century.



Fig 10: King Suryavarman II, Angkor Wat, Gallery of Bas-reliefs (south-west), first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century.



Fig 11: Scene from the Churning of the Sea of Milk, Angkor Wat, Gallery of Bas-reliefs (south-east), first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

Today, the authenticity of this jar is uncontested. When compared with other Khmer pieces, it conforms stylistically in form, clay, glaze, and potting method. Thermoluminescence testing carried out at the University of Wollongong, School of Geosciences in Australia in 2002 provided a date of 1,200 years BP or the mid-thirteenth century. However, from his experience of handling hundreds of such pieces and shards, Pariwat Thamapreechakorn, Curator of the Southeast Ceramics Museum in Bangkok, believes that this jar, in terms of dating, fits comfortably in the period of late eleventh or early twelfth century.

## Iconography

The elephant was a revered, symbolic animal and an important part of Khmer beliefs and mythology. It features in both Hindu and Buddhist iconography, and is found in sculpture at Khmer temples. A well-known example is that of the 300-metre long façade of a hunting scene at the Terrace of the Elephants in the Royal City of Angkor Thom, which was built at the end of the twelfth century during the reign of Jayavarman VII, the last great king of the Angkorean period (Figure 9). The model for this *howdah* can be seen in bas-reliefs at temples, such as Angkor Wat, built in the first half of the twelfth century, which depicts Suryavarman II standing on the back of a royal elephant (Figure 10).

Many myths are associated with the elephant, and illustrate its importance in Khmer society, such as the Churning of the Sea or Ocean of Milk from a Hindu text about creation. This story is the most celebrated relief depicted in the gallery at Angkor Wat (Figure 11). According



Fig 12: A mahout sits behind the elephant's head (original).



Fig 13: A tear-drop, symbolizing intuitive wisdom on the forehead of the elephant (original).



Fig 14: Two figures drinking from a jar (original).



Fig 15: Two figures drinking from a jar (replica).

to the myth, a white elephant was born from a struggle between gods and demons to obtain a magic elixir that would render them immortal. After thousands of years, they finally succeeded and obtained not only the elixir but also many other treasures, including a white, three-headed elephant that became the mount of the Hindu god Indra, the goddess Lakshmi, and the *apsaras* ('celestial nymphs').





Fig 16: Two figures playing musical instruments (replica).



Fig 17: A figure holds a rod with both hands above his head (original).



Fig 18: A figure holds a rod or sword and a disk or shield (original)

## Interpretation



Fig 19: A skillfully hand-modelled figure with a rod and shield (replica).

While there is no doubt of the importance of the elephant in Khmer culture, interpreting the meaning of this elephant-jar remains a challenge. The narrative scenes on the body of the elephant provide some insights on its meaning. A *mahout* sits behind the elephant's head in typical fashion with his knees pressing against the back of the head and his legs turned outwards on the sides of the animal's shoulders (Figure 12). A tear-drop, perhaps a third eye symbolizing intuitive wisdom, was applied on the forehead between the ears surrounded by a brown band with short, vertical incised marks (Figure 13). Two figures at the centre of the elephant are drinking (perhaps rice wine) from a jar – one through a straw and another one from a cup (Figures 14, 15). Towards the rear of the elephant, two figures are playing musical instruments (Figure 16). Another figure holds a rod above his head with both hands (Figure 17). There is also a figure holding a rod or sword and a disk or shield (Figure 18). This same figure is skillfully modelled by hand from a lump of clay on the replica (Figure 19). A small figure holds two round objects, perhaps a pair of cymbals. Two other figures on the elephant's side seem to be in ritual combat.



Fig 20: Green- and brown-glazed Khmer elephant-jar, c. 12<sup>th</sup> century.



Fig 21: Celadon-glazed Khmer elephant-jar made in 2008 by the National Center for Khmer Ceramics Revival, Siem Reap, Cambodia.

Perhaps the closest explanation of the meaning of the iconography on this jar comes from a description of an indigenous ceremony described in a paper written by Prince Damrong, and later illuminated by Khun Pariwat Thammapreechakorn. It depicts a ceremony in the repertoire of animistic beliefs in Thailand known as *Cho Tang Bang, or Salar* ('Eight people with bamboo sticks dancing in circles') that was performed for the spirits of ancestors to nurture and pacify them.

Whatever the interpretation of the iconography may be, this green-glazed elephant-jar in the collection of the Southeast Asian Ceramics Museum remains today, 23 years after its discovery, a unique example of the genius of the Khmer potter's creativity and skilful workmanship (Figure 20). Fascinatingly, the legacy lives on through this twenty-first century replica made by the National Center for Khmer Ceramic Revival (Figure 21).

#### Photograph Credits

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- Dawn F. Rooney: Figs 5, 9, 10, 11

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