

A PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE EXCAVATION OF A LATE PREHISTORIC CEMETERY IN NORTHWEST CAMBODIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper contains a short report of a newly-discovered late Iron Age site in northwestern Cambodia. Inhumation burials with bronze and iron artefacts were exposed by road construction, and later by looting.

Phum Snay is a village located along National Route 6 in Preah Neat Prey District, Banteay Meanchey Province, Northwest Cambodia (48P UTM 0305983/1506856 N13° 37' 26.3" E103° 12' 23.5") (Figure 1). The village of Snay is located on the edge of a large natural mound, 3 km in diameter. It is one of several small hamlets that exist on the edge of this hummock. The Anlung Thma River is located approximately 100 m to the west of the site. During 2000, roadwork was undertaken to link the village with National Route 6. This construction work revealed the presence of a number of inhumation burials. Investigation proved the burials to be prehistoric and they were associated with a great deal of material culture including bronzes and semiprecious stones.

The discovery led to widespread looting at Phum Snay by the local inhabitants. The extent of the archaeological remains is difficult to gauge but the looting covers an area of 0.24 km² on the edge of the large natural mound. There is a large, apparently anthropogenic mound comprised of rocks near the centre of the cemetery (Figure 2), which has recently been disturbed.

In February 2001, a 15 x 5 m area was selected in a field along the dirt track that leads to Phum Snay (Figure 2). A concrete datum was set up to the northeast of the unit for the purpose of measuring levels.

The site was excavated, following the natural stratigraphy where possible, using both layers and 10 cm spits. The soil was sieved using 6 mm screens. The first 10 cm

(Layer 1, spit 1) represents a zone disturbed by agricultural activity. Very few artefacts were recovered in the upper layers. Layer 1 spit 4 was only 5 cm deep as the soil colour changed below it, heralding the advent of Layer 2.

Layer 2 spit 1 revealed greater amounts of well-preserved potsherds, a projectile point and a carnelian bead. Some ash-glazed and iron-glazed stonewares were also found. The number of features increased, especially postholes. There was also an increase in the amount of faunal material. Layer 2 spit 2 was darker and several features were defined which contained scatters of ceramic sherds and whole pots. A human central incisor and fragment of an adult maxilla were also found. Unidentifiable iron artefacts were also recovered in this layer. Layer 2 was approximately 50 cm in depth. Below Layer 2 spit 5 the deposit changed to Layer 3 spit 1, distinguished by a yellowish soil and soft texture.

DISCOVERIES AT PHUM SNAY

Layer 2 spit 2 contained two features consisting of lumps of burnt clay, in the centre of which were a number of animal bones. Further down in the sequence, the central area of the southern end of the excavated area in Layer 2 spit 5 revealed a linear scatter of sherds and complete vessels on a north-south axis. The soil around the sherds was dark and included some charcoal fragments, while the soil outside of this area was sandier and darker red. It is unlikely that the area was used for cooking as there was very little bone, but it may represent a discard area.

The number of sherds across all of the units in Layer 2 was significantly higher than in the preceding layer. This may suggest that the area was used for domestic activity, but little other evidence of this was found except for the faunal material and the presence of hearth-like features.

Layer 3 is the lowest layer that lies atop the natural substrate of the site and is markedly different in colour to

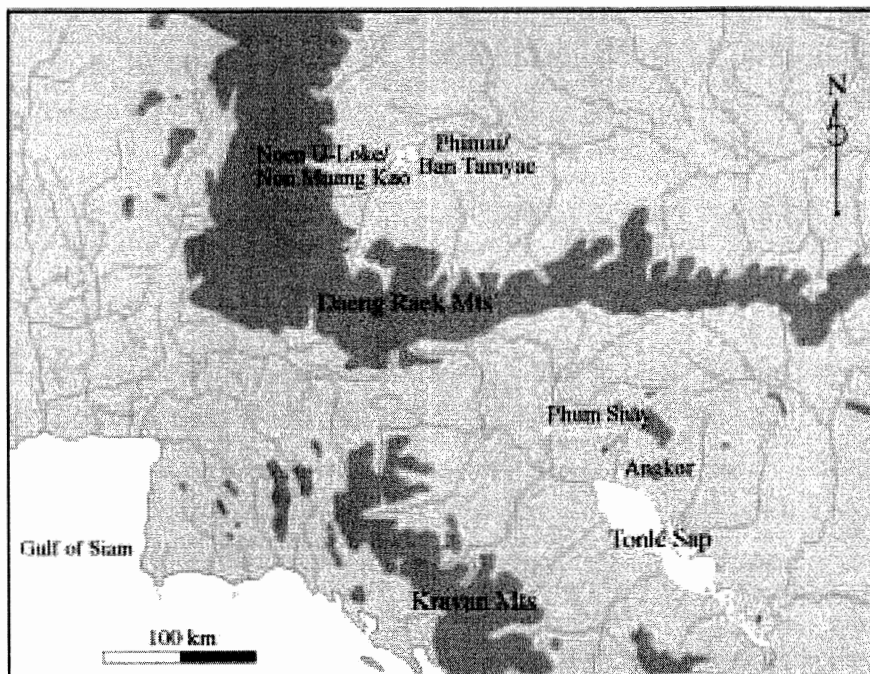


Figure 1: Map showing location of sites in the text.

Layer 2. As excavation continued, a substantial rock dome began to appear, the surface of which was heavily pitted and grooved as if by water action. This material appears to be a conglomerate of quartz and lime. The amount of pottery found decreased around this rock feature, although some scatters of sherds and animal bone were recovered. Excavation revealed that the highly weathered or leached rock formation covered the entire northern portion of the unit and would seem to account for the decrease in the number of artefacts found there.

Burial 5, a well-preserved and articulated child burial, was uncovered on the northwest side of the unit sitting directly atop the rock formation. This infant was interred with a set of ivory bangles on each arm and bronze anklets on each leg. Four pots were broken at the feet of the infant and some glass beads were recovered from the thoracic area. Burial 8 was recovered in the western baulk in Layer 3 spit 5, atop the natural substrate. It comprised the lower half of articulated adult skeleton - the upper portion remained in the baulk.

In the southern portion of the excavated area, the artefacts in Layer 3 spit 1 were concentrated in the eastern half of the square. Much of this layer appeared to have been heated, possibly from a feature found above in Layer 2 spit 5. Human bone was encountered in Layer 3 spit 2 in the northwest quadrant of the square, where Burial 3 was found as an incomplete disturbed adult situated in clean sand. No artefacts were found in association with it. Another

disturbed adult burial (Burial 4) was also situated in Layer 3 spit 2, with no artefacts in association.

In Layer 3 spit 3 a large pot was discovered during the sectioning of what appeared to be a post-hole. This large vessel was found to be in association with human remains (Burial 7). The semi-articulated remains of an adult were found at a range of depths. Three broken but complete pottery vessels were found in association with Burial 7, as well as 10 spindle whorls and some bronze fragments.

Burial 6 was discovered in Layer 3 spit 5 at the interface with the natural substrate. The grave abutted the natural rock formation that covered almost half of the unit, and contained the articulated remains of an adult in excellent condition. All bones were represented, although a few were not complete. This burial was found in association with a number of artefacts. The skull was

adorned with a green glass earring 5.5 cm in diameter. At the neck, the individual had a large tiger canine that bore no evidence as to the method of suspension. Glass beads were found scattered in the thoracic area. Two ivory bangles were associated with the burial, and an unidentifiable bronze object was found clasped in the left hand that also bore a number of bronze finger rings. To the right of the burial an iron sword was found along with the hind leg of a deer. Another unidentifiable iron implement, possibly a weapon, was found at the shoulder. A cache of iron projectile points was recovered at the feet, as were four ceramic vessels.

A final burial (Burial 9) was encountered in Layer 3 spit 5, where it met the surface of the natural substrate. This burial was considerably disturbed and lay below the water table. Excavation was difficult due to continual seepage of water, but the burial was of a semi-articulated adult skeleton in good condition. The artefacts recovered were found in a disturbed state, mixed with the human remains. One spindle whorl and a whole pot were recovered. Bronze rings were found on the left hand and one ring was found loose in the matrix with a bronze bangle. Several black glass beads were recovered from the area around the bones. Faunal remains in the burial comprised two buffalo hooves and a buffalo horn.

CERAMICS

The ceramic material from Phum Snay is currently undergoing analysis, but some preliminary data are available. A total of

74.0 kg (349,131 sherds) were recovered in the excavation of the three layers at the site. The majority of the ceramic material was located in Layer 2. Most pottery was made using the paddle and anvil technique and exterior surfaces were smoothed. A proportion was cord-marked or paddle impressed.

Aside from the plain smoothed sherds, there were a number of glazed, slipped, painted and burnished sherds. The glazed sherds are of two types - ash and iron-glazed - and are very similar to the vessels produced at the Tani kiln site near Angkor. Some bases are incised with what appear to be potters' marks. The pottery was very varied, with over 100 rim forms being identified (Phoeurn Revant 2002).

A small component of the provenanced pot sherds are similar to what Welch (1985) has identified as the Phimai Tradition. In Thailand, this tradition includes ceramics that

are primarily chaff tempered, although sand, laterite or grog may be used in conjunction with the rice husks. The surfaces are sometimes slipped or burnished. The most distinctive vessels of this type are the Phimai Black pots, but the tradition also includes thick fibre-tempered earthenware (Solheim 1965; Solheim and Ayres 1979). The iron-glazed stoneware sherds from Phum Snay probably correspond to the Khmer or Lopburi Tradition at sites in Thailand (Welch 1985).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The modern village of Phum Snay sits atop a large cemetery that probably dates to the late Iron Age of Cambodia. The cemetery ceased to be used after this period, perhaps due to a change in religious or cultural beliefs. The site, however,

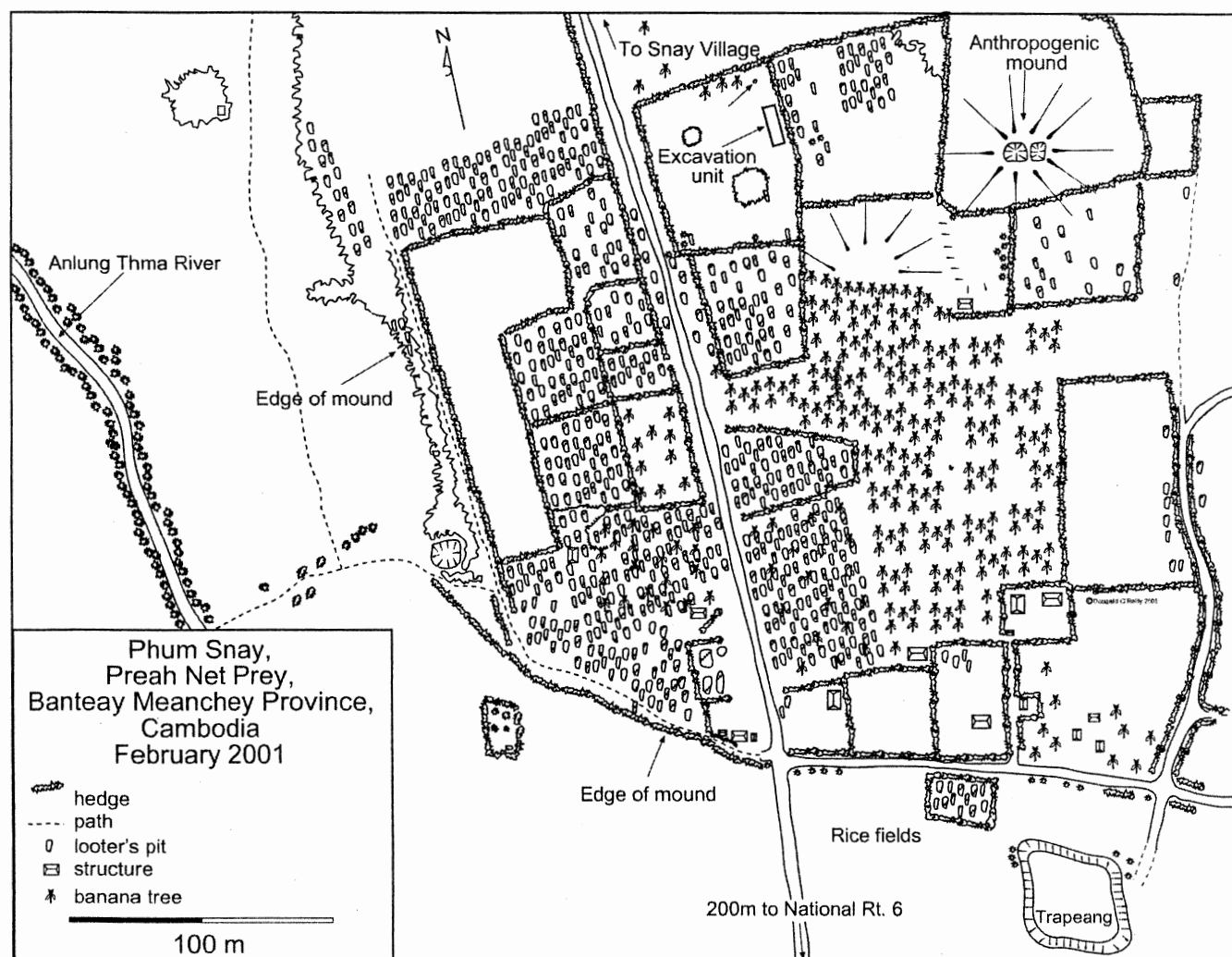


Figure 2: Map of areas of archaeological interest at Phum Snay.

continued to be occupied, as evidenced by ceramic remains that date, stylistically, to the early Angkorian period. The discovery of Phimai Black style ceramics may indicate that Phum Snay was a component of an interaction network which stretched over the Daeng Rack mountains. This type of pottery is commonly found in Thai archaeological sites dating to the Iron Age, including Non Ban Kham and Ban Tamyae (Welch 1985), Non Tung Pie Pone (Nitta 1995), Ban Prasat (Fine Arts Department Thailand 1992), Ban Suai (Parker 1966), Nakon Ratchasima (Welch 1985), Muang Phet (McNeill 1997), Noen U-Loke (Higham 1998, Higham and Thosarat 1998, Higham and Thosarat 2000) and Non Muang Kao (O'Reilly 1998).

The burials at Phum Snay are, in many ways, similar to those in Thailand dating to the same period. It is difficult to make a reliable comparison based on such a small data set, however, and it is hoped that the data from this site will be augmented before it is destroyed by looting. It is imperative that the archaeological sites in Banteay Menachey Province be documented through field survey. Future research should target other archaeological sites near Phum Snay that are currently threatened by looting, and efforts to arrest the destruction should be implemented.

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