

Premodern Khmers and their Mekong: Ecology and Agency in Archaeological Perspective

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The Mekong River is Southeast Asia's longest drainage system, originating in China's Qinghai Province near the Tibetan border and wending its way southward through Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia and Vietnam to empty its nine 'mouths' into the South China Sea. More than 60 million people today rely on the Mekong River to support farming, fishing, and other livelihoods. The Mekong is the region's ricebowl and a biodiversity hotspot; it is also a contested space whose existence is now threatened by both human and natural forces. A complex web of international agreements and a fully-functioning multi-country Mekong River Commission have not prevented the construction of six hydroelectric dams in China, with more than ten major dams in the planning stage for Laos and Cambodia, and dozens more on its tributaries. These dams, and increasingly unpredictable rainfall, have already impacted Mekong River communities downstream, and the future promises to be even more bleak. What was life like before the dams? How did the Mekong River ecology shape the everyday life of its communities in the premodern world? Archaeological research in Cambodia offers insights on major turning points in human-river relationships with the Mekong: the Pre-Angkorian and Angkorian worlds.

My Pre-Angkorian case study examines 6th – 8th century CE livelihood and transportation along the Mekong River and in the Mekong Delta. My Angkorian case study explores efforts by 9th – 15th century Khmers to manage their Tonle Sap basin through six centuries of increasing climatic unpredictability. I argue that Mekong river ecology shaped the everyday life of Pre-Angkorian riverine communities, who adapted their farming strategies to the annual flood cycle and crafted transportation communication systems that relied on the Mekong River and its tributaries. Archaeological patterning suggests a bottom-up system of riverine management, in which local communities provided the political capital with goods in exchange for some regional autonomy. Economic production remained largely localized after the 9th century foundation of the Angkorian state, which never controlled areas more than 25 km beyond its urban epicenter. A growing body of archaeological research suggests that top-down efforts to manage local rivers had unanticipated consequences, that ultimately contributed to the collapse of Angkor as a political capital and the departure of Angkor's elite to the south. While archaeological research offers limited evidence for local community management of the river and Tonle Sap lake, we are documenting a kind of residential continuity through time that suggests local resilience and long-term ecological sustainability.