

Otago researchers delve into enigmatic burial rituals

May 9 2012, By Dr. Nancy Beavan



Burial Jars at Phnom Pel. Credit: Ouk Sokha

University of Otago researchers working in remote Cambodian mountains are shedding new light on the lost history of an unidentified people by studying their enigmatic burial rituals.

The Otago researchers have now provided the first [radiocarbon dates](#) for unusual jar and log [coffin](#) interments on exposed ledges high in southern Cambodia's rugged Cardamom [Mountains](#). Since 2003, they have been working to geo-locate and survey 10 interment sites and to date these using samples of coffin wood, tooth enamel and bone.

With colleagues from Cambodia, Australia, USA and Scotland, Drs Nancy Beavan and Sian Halcrow of the Department of Anatomy have

just published the dating of four sites in the journal *Radiocarbon*. These reveal that the mysterious funerary rituals, which are unlike any other recorded in Cambodia, were practiced from at least 1395AD to 1650AD.

Dr. Beavan, who is currently in Cambodia, says that this period coincides with the decline and fall of the powerful Kingdom of Angkor, which was seated in the lowlands.

“Funeral practices in the Angkor Kingdom and its successors involved cremation rather than anything remotely like those found at sites we are studying. This stark difference suggests that, in cultural terms, these unidentified mountain dwellers were a ‘world apart’ from their lowland contemporaries.”

To date, the bulk of research that makes up what is known about cultural history of the Khmer regions has focused on the lowlands, she says.

“Through our work we hope to broaden the understanding of this history beyond the legacies of the great Khmer Kingdom alone to those who lived within its margins,” she says.

Dr. Sian Halcrow says that archaeological findings from another of the 10 sites, which she and Dr. Beavan are currently preparing for publication, will offer important new clues about who these mysterious people were, their culture, trade connections and biological adaptation to the environment.

Given the rugged and remote locations of the sites, the fieldwork has not been without its challenges, Dr. Beavan says.

“In 2010 one of our campsites was invaded by a wild elephant in the dead of night and it had to be driven off by our camp crew banging on

cooking pots. It turns out we had pitched camp between two tempting stands of wild banana. We packed up and headed off soon after that.”

Provided by University of Otago

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