

# Kulen Mountain Rock Art: An Initial Assessment

The following is a presentation on rock art in the Kulen Mountain of Cambodia by archaeologist Heng Than at the 2011 SEAMEO SPAFA workshop on rock art studies.



*Rock art at the base of Kulen Mountain*

**T**he study of rock art, a new discipline in Cambodia, has arisen due to recent discoveries of rock art sites in the country. In 2005, rock art sites located in Kravanh Mountain, near the southern coast of Cambodia, were discovered by wildlife conservators. In 2010, the team of Living Angkor Road Project of APSARA Authority (National Authority for Protection and Management of Angkor and the Region of Siem Reap) found many rock paintings on the southeast of the Kulen Mountain.

## History

While community members living near the rock art sites in the Kulen Mountain have long been aware of these sites, researchers on the other hand had no knowledge of them. In 2010, through the Living Angkor Road Project (LARP) which carried out studies in archaeology, remote sensing and geographic information system (GIS), as well as Geo-physics of the Kulen Mountains, five rock paintings were discovered. The sites were photographed and mapped. In a training conducted by Prof Paul Tacon of Griffith University in early 2011, four more rock paintings came to light.

## Methodology/Research Approach

The inspection in the area was primarily based on archaeological survey, remote sensing and GIS studies. While the archaeological survey was based on the data collection form developed by the LARP, the survey form was used as a guideline to collect archaeological and cultural data from the field. The three primary respondents of the interviews were the village chiefs, monks, and former looters.

## Key Observations at the Rock Art Sites

The rock paintings were found on eroded sandstone boulders on scree slopes or raised terrace-plateaus below the cliff's edge. Given the distribution of similar looking boulders, there may be many more sites around the base of Kulen Mountain.

The locations of the rock art that were identified during the 2010-2011 surveys are as follows:

### *Group A: Poeng Komnou*

The “*Poeng Komnou*” site is located approximately 5 km to the northwest of Tatem village, Kan Tout commune, Svay Loeu district, Siem Reap province, and about 10 km from Svay Loeu central district. The site consists of an enormous sloping boulder next to a small one on the flat plateau below the mountain.

The name of this site means *sculpture rock shelter* for many Cambodians but for the local community, it means *rock art painting*. Features of the large boulder include 12<sup>th</sup> century Hindu bas-reliefs on its eastern and western vertical sides. The sloping northern side of the main boulder forms a large rock shelter. Found on its sloping ceiling is a large and solid red painting of a fork-tail catfish. The painting is 108 cm wide by 64 cm long, and is located 2.5 m above ground level. Also found in the rock shelter are some red zigzag lines and recent charcoal drawings of the head and shoulders of two human figures.

### *Group B*

From 2010 to 2011, LARP members discovered nine rock art sites (located approximately 7 km to the east of Thma Chhrouh village, Khnang Phnom commune, Svay Loeu, Siem Reap). These sites are situated close to a natural stream with a north to south orientation.

This group consists of a sloping boulder and bedrock on a scree slope. There are red outlines and solid paintings, solid orange painting, and line charcoal drawings. The paintings include solid red human figures; a red outline of cattle with solid red heads and horns; a partially solid red cattle head and horns; a cart-like design with two wheels; and a few faded solid orange or outline geometric designs. Recent charcoal drawings consist of an animal, human figure, and the names of individuals.

Some glazed Khmer pottery typical of the 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries were also found on the ground below the shelter.

Local community members who live up in the mountain commonly camped in the shelter overnight when they came down to clear the nearby area for agriculture.

## Conclusion

Kulen Mountain is the most sacred part of the Cambodian landscape. Today, it is a special place not only for the Khmer people but also for Hindus, Buddhists, and other visitors around the world. The recent rock art discoveries indicate the mountain's importance in the mythology of the



*Boulder shelter containing painting*



*Poeung Komnou site*

people perhaps for thousands of years, even before Hinduism influenced them. The rock art in Kulen Mountain is unique and diverse, and were made over a considerable period, with the earliest phases consisting of paintings typical of hunter-gatherers, while the more recent ones are associated with agriculturalists. Some of the imagery in bas-relief and recent charcoal drawings relate to Hindu monuments spread across the larger Angkor region.

Rock art of many different forms and styles can be found spread across the 10 sites, and it includes paintings, drawings, engravings and bas-reliefs. Solid red animal paintings appear to be the oldest surviving rock art, while the most recent, consisting of charcoal drawings, was found in three of the largest shelters at the eastern end of Kulen Mountain, where the widest rock art distribution is located.

#### *Future Research*

Documentation is necessary to record all the sites by using the site checklist approach to provide consistent comparative details.

More field surveys of rock arts should be made in the area, particularly at the top and along the scree slopes of Kulen Mountain and in the vicinity of Kravanh mountain.

A comprehensive database of sites with photographs, GPS/GIS and all site details, should be maintained.

Partners for joint research projects should be sought.

#### *Management and Conservation*

Fire, whether caused by humans or wildfires, is obviously a major threat to some Kulen Mountain rock art sites. Vegetation should not be allowed to grow in rock shelters or close to painted panels. Moreover, extensive clearing of tall trees near the front of rock shelters should not be undertaken as changes to sun exposure could cause negative impact on the art.

Graffiti is a major threat to rock art sites world-wide. Fortunately, the Kulen Mountain rock art sites have not been damaged in this regard, although some rock art at Kbal Spean have been extensively damaged by graffiti. Local villagers would be asked to cooperate in carefully removing graffiti (while making sure the rock paintings are not negatively affected in the process).

Insects, especially termites, mud-wasps, and birds, are other threats. Some bird nests at the sites could be carefully removed, but termite

tunnels on shelter walls and ceilings cannot be interfered with as the termites would just build new tunnels, possibly causing further intrusions of some paintings.

As before, local inhabitants should be discouraged from camping near the main panels in rock shelters, and from adding graffiti or writing anywhere in the rock shelters.

An education/awareness programme would be implemented to inform the local community, and others, that the Kulen Mountain rock art sites are important places of heritage, and that some of the paintings were made by their ancestors.

For various reasons, Kulen rock art sites should not be developed for tourism; the exception being *Poeun Komnou* (Group A), which is already visited by a small number of people for its Hindu carvings. Outside specialists who want to visit rock art sites should be supervised by staff of the APSARA.

### **Photographs courtesy of Heng Than**