



# Shifting trends of heritage destruction in Cambodia: from temples to tombs

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## Abstract

Globalisation, the integration of previously dispersed communities and peoples, presents difficult challenges for developing countries. Although globalisation is having an impact on most nations, Cambodia is a post-conflict country coming to terms with the massive changes that accompany the phenomena. It is probably safe to say that Cambodia, since 1953, has undergone the most dramatic and turbulent period in its 1,200-year history. The country has traversed a landscape that saw independence, war, complete social, economic and political upheaval, invasion by a foreign power, an international transitional authority and now political stability. The problems in Cambodia are problems seen in many countries around the world and the political and economic challenges facing Cambodia provide an excellent opportunity for analysis and understanding. The following pages shall, metaphorically, shift the lens to focus on issues of poverty, law enforcement, and heritage at the national and the local level in Cambodia. Having considered the roots and manifestation of some of the problems facing this post-conflict nation, possible strategies for a solution to reducing the rampant destruction of heritage are presented. It is likely that the lessons that may be drawn from Cambodia may be applicable in other nations recovering from the trauma of war including Iraq and Afghanistan.

## Introduction: background on heritage loss in Cambodia

The vestiges of Cambodia's ancient past have long been recognized for their beauty, skilful rendering and potency. The art produced by the Khmer during the Angkorian period has long been sought after, indeed, bronze statues of temple guardians, lions and the elephant Airvata were purportedly carried off by invading Thai armies during the 15th century. These same bronzes can now be seen in Mandalay, Myanmar as they were captured during the Burmese overthrow of Ayutthaya in the following century. Renewed interest in Khmer antiquities came with the arrival of the French colonial regime in Southeast Asia. The French authorities were aware of the need to protect the ruins of the Angkorian empire as the newly discovered art fascinated the public. One of the most celebrated instances of looting is that of, future Minister of Culture to France, André Malraux's attempted theft, in 1923, of four *devatas* from the recently discovered ruin of Banteay Srei in Siem Reap.

Heritage theft is largely undocumented during the period of civil unrest in Cambodia from the 1970s to early 1990s and beyond. From the establishment of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia the number of incidents of looting appeared to increase with blame being laid both with the Khmer Rouge guerrilla forces and the Cambodian armed forces opposing them (see Net 1994). During this period incidents of looting were reported at the 13th century temple of Banteay Chhmar, the nearby temple of Banteay Torp, Koh Ker and at Prasat Preah Khan of Kompong Svay to name a few.

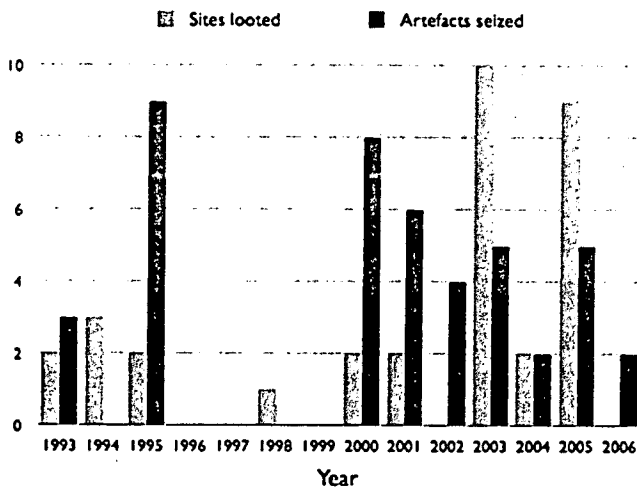
Thefts were also reported from the temple complex near Siem Reap in the mid-1990s and anecdotal reports began to surface of antiquities dealers showing prospective clients photographs of Angkor's temples in a loot-on-demand basis. This activity was documented in a story that ran in the *Phnom Penh Post* newspaper (Anon 1992) which stated that Thai individuals in civilian clothes carrying M-16 machine guns and video cameras visited the temples of Angkor. The videos, the story alleges, were to be used as a marketing device by Bangkok antiquities dealers. In 1997 the *Phnom Penh Post* reported that ten tons of stone carvings, hacked from Angkor-period temples at Koh Ker, were intercepted in the possession of armed men under the command of military general Khan Savoeun (Chaumeau 1997). In 1999 a representative of the Ministry of Culture was quoted as saying 'More than half of the nation's invaluable artefacts have been stolen since 1986' (Roëun 1999).

One Hundred Missing Objects, a publication of the International Council of Museums was published in 1993 in response to the rapid increase in the looting of temples within Cambodia (Anon 1993). To date, six pieces have been returned, three of which were discovered to have been sold through Sotheby's auction house (International Council of Museums 2007). Today most temples are devoid of statuary and tourists interested in viewing the sculptural achievements of the ancient Khmer must visit the National Museum in Phnom Penh. Much is also held at the Conservation d'Angkor compound in Siem Reap, itself the target of brazen raids in the 1990s. Many more sculptures are housed in provincial museums which are currently having their inventories catalogued.

The rapacious destruction of Cambodia's heritage is not restricted to monumental sites alone. Since the turn of the millennium Cambodia's prehistoric sites have come under threat. The construction of a road in Cambodia's north-western province of Banteay Meanchey in 1999 led to the discovery of a prehistoric cemetery at Phum Snay (O'Reilly 2001, 2004; O'Reilly and Sytha 2001; O'Reilly *et al.* 2004). The discovery of carnelian, agate and glass beads led to the widespread destruction of the site as demand for the objects grew. The materials were traded at provincial markets within Cambodia and trafficked across the border into Thailand. In succeeding years the number of sites that have been illicitly excavated has increased dramatically. The problem was recognised early by Pottier (2000, 2001) and Thosarat (2001) and reported widely in the Cambodian press (McPhillips 2000; Oudam 2000; Sa Roëun 2000; Lon Nara 2000).

Stories reported in the *Raksmei Kampuchea*, a Khmer language newspaper published in Phnom Penh, indicate that there has been an increase in the incidence of looting and seizure of antiquities since the year 2000 (Figure 1). An examination of reports on antiquities seizures and reports of looting also indicates that these incidents were not widely reported from 1996 to 1999. The majority of seizures involved the confiscation of Angkorian period sandstone pieces. It is, of course, important to bear in mind that these are only the

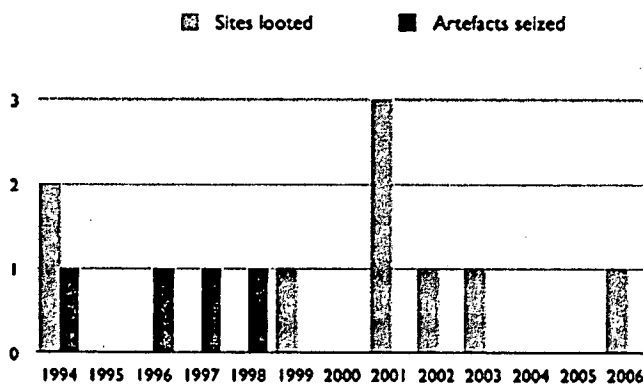
## Reports printed in Raksmei Kampuchea Newspaper



**Figure 1.** Reported incidents of looting of sites and seizures of artefacts in Raksmei Kampuchea newspaper 1993-2006. (Compiled by author)

incidents reported in the local press and actual events are likely much more common especially in the looting of sites. There is little change evident in the situation judging from reports printed in the *Phnom Penh Post* from 1994 through to 2006 (Figure 2) other than an apparent increase in sites being looted over artefact seizures, evidence which is refuted by the data from the Khmer language newspaper. In 1999 it was reported that there were at least 10 organized gangs working to loot the temples around Angkor and in the same year over 40 tons of antiquities were intercepted by authorities on the way out of Cambodia (Doole 1999).

## Reports printed in Phnom Penh Post Newspaper



**Figure 2.** Reported incidents of looting of sites and seizures of artefacts in Raksmei Kampuchea newspaper 1993-2006. (Compiled by author)

It is clear from the preceding paragraphs that heritage theft and destruction is an on-going problem. The same pattern has been noted elsewhere (Roosevelt and Luke 2006; Kersel and Kletter 2006; Parks *et al.* 2006; Davis, 1987) but why is it important? Heritage represents an important non-renewable resource with legal, environmental, health, and geographic relevance. In the current climate of global uncertainty and the rise of terrorism the antiquities trade is further cause for concern as it represents an estimated multi-billion dollar (Sease 1997) black-market

business the proceeds of which could well be used to fund terrorism. Furthermore, the analysis of heritage through archaeology allows us to access a data set that encompasses the entire spectrum of human experience. Through archaeology we may extend our knowledge of human history beyond written records. Heritage represents data with an unparalleled time-depth and allows the study of important processes such as social and political development and the evolution of technology, the advent of diseases, changes in environment and other crucial trends that may be vital to our own survival. The case for preservation was poignantly expressed by Meyer (1973) who likened heritage destruction to the burning of the library of Alexandria by the Roman army. Cambodia represents a microcosm of the global challenges of heritage preservation, in the face of poverty and rapid development.

## Current situation – destruction of sites

A recent archaeological field survey recorded twenty-three looted archaeological mounds in a one hundred kilometre area surrounding the town of Thmar Puok, Banteay Meanchey Province (Heritage Watch 2006). These mounds contained ancient burial remains, likely dating to the Cambodian Iron Age (c. 500 B.C.-A.D. 500). Illegal excavations were undertaken with the aim of recovering semi-precious stone and glass beads as well as other saleable artefacts including ceramics and bronze and iron items. Heritage Watch staff conducting the survey discovered that most sites had been looted by local people seeking to supplement their incomes. Anecdotal evidence suggests that individuals of poorer socio-economic status would seek permission to dig on other people's land, paying a small fee for the privilege. Sites in the survey area were looted by between fifty and two hundred individuals depending on the richness of the site and the reputation of the site for containing high value artefacts. One of the most thoroughly looted sites in Cambodia is the site of Wat Jas, adjacent to the provincial town of Thmar Puok. This non-descript site, currently used for grazing, covers over 100 ha. The site has been systematically looted since the beginning of the new millennium and continues to be looted today by individuals employing anti-personnel mine detectors to find buried metals. The looters have employed an ingenious technique to find ancient burials. Shovel testing is done to ascertain the location of prehistoric graves. Where the soil colour differs from that surrounding it, the looters have learned that a grave will be found and proceed to excavate the area digging up to three meters down. Consequently the site of Wat Jas has been extensively shovel tested and is riddled with thousands of larger looter's pits where the goods have been extracted from prehistoric graves.

A further ten ancient temple sites had been targeted by looters in the survey area. These temples are undated but many are likely to date to the pre-Angkorian and Angkorian period (c. Pre- and Post-802 A.D. respectively). In many cases these temple sites are devoid of statuary and it is unclear what looters hope to recover by digging at temple sites. Many of the temples from these periods have the area inside the central sanctuary excavated, often with the massive floor stones removed. It is likely that thieves are in search of the foundation deposits of the ancient sanctuary which would have limited monetary value usually being comprised of gold leaf, and a few semi-precious stones. Such deposits have been discovered at other structures in Angkor (Pottier 1997).

## Motivation

Elsewhere, looting has been classified as being opportunistic, semi-professional or professional (Parks *et al.* 2006). Opportunistic looting is defined as the chance discovery of artefacts and the onward sale of these when the opportunity arises. Semi-professional looters are those who supplement their income on a regular basis by exposing valuable artefacts at known archaeological sites. These individuals have known contacts who will purchase objects immediately. Professional looters are those who are organized into armed gangs and acquire looted material for purchasers on a regular basis (Matsuda 1998). The looting of prehistoric cemetery sites in Cambodia began as an opportunistic activity but has since escalated to a semi-professional activity with individuals spending the dry season (November-March) hunting for artefacts in the fields near their homes. Recently the activity has become more organized and looters are beginning to employ metal detectors usually used in the search for anti-personnel mines in Cambodia. Information provided to Heritage Watch by informants indicates that these individuals are more formally organized and may represent professional looters as defined by Parks *et al.* (2006).

It is therefore apparent that there are two types of looting occurring in Cambodia, semi-professional and professional. The destruction of Angkorian period temples appears to have been undertaken by organizations with considerable power. The looting of monuments such as Banteay Chhmar in Banteay Meanchey Province are examples of professional looting. A twelve-metre-section of this temple's wall was removed by looters in a failed attempt to smuggle it to Thailand. Although the perpetrators were not charged, Cambodian government officials blamed members of their own armed forces for the outrage (Fawthrop 1999). This type of large-scale looting has also been undertaken at other temples including Prasat Preah Khan (also known as Prasat Bakan) in Preah Vihear Province where nearly every decorated piece of the temple had been removed. The remote location of this temple meant that the destruction went undocumented in the Cambodian press. Local sources have indicated that looting at the site began in 1996 and continues to the present day with looters employing metal detectors to search for underground treasure. Should these pieces turn up on the international market there is a chance that they could be repatriated to Cambodia since they were stolen after the enactment of the 1996 legislation protecting heritage resources outside the Angkor area. The looting of this site has been documented by Heritage Watch and a report sent to the United States Department of Homeland Security and foreign embassies in Phnom Penh.

The motivation, in many cases, for looting in Cambodia is likely poverty. According to the World Bank, an estimated 35 per cent of Cambodia's population lives on less than 0.45 US cents per day (World Bank, 2007). Although there is only anecdotal evidence to support the contention that poverty motivates looting it is likely that the professional and semi-professional looters have different motivations (Lor 2007). The thefts by organized crime groups are likely motivated by a combination of factors including impunity and personal enrichment rather than escape from poverty. In the case of the semi-professional looters poverty probably plays a considerable role in their decision to search for antiquities.

## Legal efforts to arrest the trade in antiquities

There is no doubt that there is a strong commitment within the Cambodian government to safeguard its patrimony. In 1994 the value of preserving sites at Angkor was recognized with the enactment of a law (*kret*) entitled 'Establishing Protected Cultural Zones in the Siem Reap/Angkor Region and Guidelines for their Management'. In 1995 a *kret* established a Supreme Council on National Culture. The following year a 'Law on the Protection of Cultural Heritage' was adopted by the National Assembly providing protection for all of Cambodia's heritage. Cambodia is a signatory of the 1970 United Nations, Education, Science and Culture Organization's Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property and of the 1995 UNIDROIT (International Institute for the Unification of Private Law) Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects. In 1999 the United States government imposed an emergency ban on the import of artefacts dating between the sixth and sixteenth centuries AD that originated in Cambodia. In 2003 a Memorandum of Understanding signed by the Cambodian and U.S. governments replaced this ban and talks are currently underway to extend the agreement to cover artefacts predating this period. In 2004, Angkor Wat was removed from UNESCO's World Heritage danger list after 12 years, due in part to the establishment of a specialized heritage protection police division. Previously it was reported by Authority formed to manage Angkor, APSARA, that an artefact was lost every day through looting at Angkor (Doole 2001).

Aside from this good news at Angkor, the enactment of clear laws protecting the country's patrimony has done little to hinder those who seek to profit from the theft and sale of Cambodia's heritage assets. The reason for this failure is an apparent inability to enforce the law. As we have seen in some cases the military and police have been implicated in heritage theft by the Cambodian government (Perlez 2005). The irony of this is apparent, as the military has often charged with protecting heritage sites. Cambodia's heritage is widespread and often located in remote areas. Much has yet to be discovered and so many prehistoric sites are not even documented. In a positive step, the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts and the École Française d'Extrême Orient have produced a map documenting all known heritage sites in the Kingdom of Cambodia but the country still lacks a proper accession system for archaeological sites and most of the existing sites are unguarded.

## Trends

The trend in increasing sales of antiquities is a global phenomenon. Perhaps one reason for this is the expansion of electronic media. The internet has become a boon for dealers in artefacts, legitimate and illicit (Barker 2007). The internet provides a whole new buyer base for dealers and large on-line auction houses such as E-Bay have such large user bases that antiquities marketed via the site reach a whole new audience. E-Bay tends to rely on users to monitor and report the sale of illegal items a laborious task at best and one that rarely seems to have any result. Antiquities provide a good source of income for the traditional marketers of this material also. Christies averages an income of over one million US dollars per annum from their sales in the United Kingdom alone (Cranwell 1999). The Christies share of the market pales in comparison to the

illegal trade in antiquities however. The United States Federal Bureau of Investigation estimates that the trade in illegal antiquities is valued at over six billion US dollars annually (Kremer and Wilkening 2007).

Demand for antiquities of Asian origin appears to be on the rise. According to *Business Week*, in an article recommending investment in antiquities as a personal-wealth growth strategy; 'A keen interest among Westerners about Far Eastern religions and practices...is also spilling over into the antiquities world' (Anon, 2005). The article goes on to quote a New York city gallery owner as saying 'things are up 25 per cent in the last two years, easily.' A growing trend in the overall market may also be reflected in an online article provides a how-to for those wishing to begin collecting antiquities which begins 'Many people don't know that it is entirely possible to find and purchase antiquities from across the ancient world, all from the comfort of your home!' (Butler 2005). The Associate Director of Bonham's auction house writes 'You will soon realise that items from the ancient world can be bought for as little as £30, demonstrating that antiquities are not just for the wealthy.' (van der Lande, 2005). The *Business Week* article mentioned above, enthuses that 'Collectors don't need big bucks to get started' going on to state that '[o]pportunities still abound to get into the market before the door shuts tight.' (Anon 2005). Even if the antiquities are not legally obtained they will still often find a market as may be demonstrated Norton Simon, a New York collector, quoted as saying 'I spent between \$15 and \$16 million in the last two years on Asian art, and most of it was smuggled.' (Keefe 2007). These articles may reflect a trend in collecting for investment purposes of smaller, lower value antiquities, a trend that encourages the looting of sites rich in such items including burial grounds.

Davis (2006) has charted the post 1980s growth in popularity of Khmer antiquities by tracking the sales of pieces through the New York branch of Sotheby's Auction House. According to Davis (2006) from the late 1980s few Khmer pieces were available but their numbers steadily rose until 1994 after which the number of pieces on offer declined. Davis speculates that the 1999 emergency ban imposed by the United States on Cambodian antiquities may have had an impact on sales through Sotheby's New York as sales dropped by more than 80 per cent.

## Strategies

Alarmed at the incredible rate at which prehistoric archaeological sites were being destroyed in the search for valuable artefacts, a non-governmental organization was established by the author in 2003. The purpose of the organization was to try to mitigate the impact of the widespread destruction of ancient sites. With funding from the United States Ambassador's Fund, Heritage Watch undertook a series of village training sessions in areas where looting is a problem which, to date, have seen nearly 1000 people trained. The sessions explain the concept of cultural heritage, its importance and the value of preserving heritage using lectures and specially designed training manuals. These training sessions were evaluated using questionnaires and the results were encouraging with over 90 per cent of the respondents replying that they had learned about the negative impacts of heritage destruction and would reconsider their actions. Heritage Watch also employed a novel approach to reach out to the rural population many of whom are illiterate (1998

Cambodian census data indicates that 35 per cent of the rural population are illiterate). *Wrath of the Phantom Army* is an illustrated storybook depicting the impact of looting on a small village. The magazine was printed in Khmer language and distributed for free at training sessions.

Heritage Watch also released radio and television public service announcements that have been running for over two years. These announcements implore the audience to respect Cambodia's cultural heritage resources and to report looting if they encounter it. Limited funding has restricted the airing of these announcements but they have had a significant effect judging from the response to calls on the Heritage Watch hotline. This telephone hotline was established to log calls about current looting activity. All information reported on the hotline is passed along to the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts for appropriate action.

The key to this strategy is education as most respondents indicate that prior to trainings they did not consider subsurface archaeological sites to represent cultural heritage. Most responded that they thought they were doing nothing wrong by engaging in illicit excavations but would never loot a temple site. While the strategy of training sessions is effective a broader approach is needed to have a significant effect. A nationwide programme of training at the village level needs to be implemented supported by a widely accessible television and radio campaign promoting site preservation. The strongest weapon conservationists have in their arsenal is the intense patriotism of the Cambodian people, and this should be used to promote the preservation of the nation's heritage.

It has been noted above that one of the main motivations for heritage destruction is poverty. Poverty is, of course, a major issue which confronts Cambodia and is the root of many problems including heritage destruction. Targeted programmes of poverty reduction near heritage areas, combined with education are one course of action being undertaken by Heritage Watch. In 2007 a Sustainable Tourism and Heritage Preservation Project began in Preah Vihear Province. The site chosen for the project is Koh Ker, a 10th century temple site about 2 hours drive from the Angkor Archaeological Park. The project aims to provide training in heritage, preservation and the importance of the site on the social, economic and cultural levels and will see community heritage patrols organized to provide monitoring of this site that has been targeted by large-scale looting in the past. The community will also receive training in small business management, tourist relations, English language as well as infrastructure that will allow them to undertake small business enterprises. Such a strategy sees the local community invested in the heritage resource and promotes a desire to protect the resource through education and economic incentive.

## Conclusion

Cambodia is facing a crisis as scores of subsurface heritage sites are illegally excavated and the looting of Angkorian temple sites continues. There is clear evidence that the major threat to Cambodia's heritage now comes from semi-professional looters, motivated by poverty to supplement their incomes. The sites they target are, for the most part, not documented and represent a rich archaeological resource which has not been studied in any meaningful way. The rise of socio-political complexity and the rise of the greatest state in Southeast Asia has seen minimal research in Southeast Asia and at the current rate of destruction

archaeologists will be pressed to retrieve meaningful data from these heavily disturbed sites. It behooves the academic community, heritage professionals, national governments and the tourism industry to work together to preserve these precious resources for future generations. Sites outside of the Angkor Archaeological Park need to be promoted as destinations. This will have the effect of boosting local economies, reducing the need to loot the site and instilling a sense of value among the local population in the heritage site. Management plans should be devised for the sites and assistance provided to locals in micro-enterprise and tourism. Academic research also needs to be undertaken to provide interpretation for the local population and tourists. Although the challenges are significant the problem of preserving heritage in Cambodia and in other post-conflict, developing nations is not intractable.

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