

# ORIGINS OF ANGKOR

## EXPLORING THE BIRTH OF A CIVILIZATION



*Ban Non Wat, Nakhon Ratchasima Province, Thailand*—Human history is filled with the rise and fall of civilizations. Often we have more information about the fall than the rise. Some civilizations seem to have been prompted by outside, more advanced communities, while others seemed to rise up spontaneously from their own unique social organization. Due to its proximity to both the more advanced civilizations of India and China, it had been previously assumed that the civilization comprising the regional states of Angkor was spawned by Indian culture that had extended its influence into Southeast Asia in search of new trade routes to the Far East. Principal Investigator

<b>500 AD</b>	<b>Iron Age</b>
	<b>Pre-Iron Age</b>
	<b>Bronze Age</b>
	<b>Pre-Bronze Age</b>
<b>3000 BC</b>	<b>Neolithic Age</b>



*A really strange find was the body that was interred in a very large pot. What could that mean? Why would it have been done? And why does the individual hold a cup in his hand?*

— Michael Dion  
Earthwatch volunteer



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**Dr. Charles F. W. Higham** and other expert archaeologists around the world challenge this theory, instead suggesting that the Angkor civilization was more complex than previously thought, and had in fact arisen of its own.

## IN THE BEGINNING

Until the late 1960s, little was known about the Angkor civilization. Archaeological efforts in Thailand were still in their infancy and history was based more on theory than hard evidence. Thirteen years ago, Higham and his teams of skilled data analysts and archaeologists began their search for empirical evidence of the prehistoric changes occurring in Thailand. Three years later they began to focus on Angkor; and most recently the Ban Non Wat, or village of the temple mound, because of its rare example of the prehistoric sequence following the introduction of rice cultivation in the late Third Millennium B.C. Here, the excavation exposes the layers of change within the kingdom through the Neolithic to Iron Age. The information collected from this area has led to extraordinary developments in the understanding of prehistoric Southeast Asian cultures.

## CULTURAL HISTORY

Discovering how and why certain civilizations developed tells us much about the social structure of ancient peoples, as well as exposes our own roots of modern social and community interactions. As societies changed from hunter/gatherer to agricultural, populations were forced to adapt their social structure. Agriculture and irrigation stabilized society by having a steady food supply, thus allowing people to focus on other activities, such as the making and trading of goods. With the increased consistency of life, complex social structures and religion began to take shape. Many



ancient civilizations, such as the Roman and Greek, were ruled by **secular** powers prone to conflicts with the people, but Angkor's society was guided largely by its religious leaders. This religious leadership is considered to be one of the chief reasons for the Angkor kingdom's prolonged success.

## EXCAVATING THE SITE

Fieldwork is divided into three main tasks: excavation, documentation, and reconstruction. As with any long-term project, the efforts of previous seasons are an active part of ongoing research. Trenches dug 3.5 meters (11.5 feet) deep expose the five phases of change: Neolithic, Pre-Bronze Age, Bronze Age, Pre-Iron Age, and Iron Age. In each, researchers have found remnants of particular societal characteristics. Some volunteers spend their days gently digging with hand **trowels** and brushes, extracting pottery, shell bangles, beads, moulds, and even human remains!

Every component of the excavation is meticulously documented. Each feature is identified for its particular characteristic, whether a burial, pit, hearth, or other structure; and then recorded by its location, depth, and layer designation. Material is also graphed by its proximity to other objects and features, and photographed before extraction for further analysis.

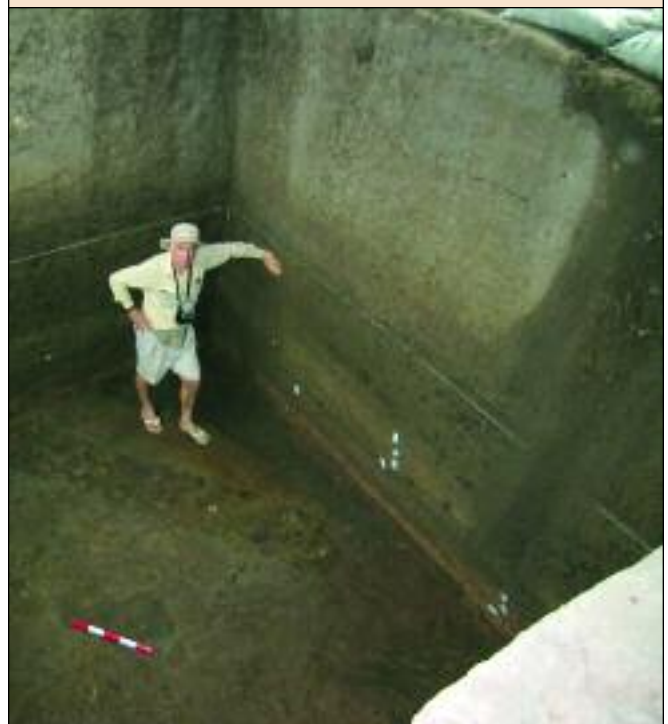
Other volunteers may be tasked with carefully sifting and cleaning artifacts or reconstructing a piece of pottery from a puzzle of pot **shards**.

## EUREKA!

You're digging for hours under the shelter of the roof over the excavation area. Suddenly your trowel hits something hard buried beneath the surface. For a second, your heart stops. Thoughts race through your head. Is it a bone? A pot? A

*Perhaps the skeleton at my feet and the others excavated here with the aid of Earthwatch volunteers will reveal clues as to how humans lived, worked, and ate in this region 3,000 years ago. The experience of being an amateur archaeologist gives me a greater appreciation of the work and study that goes into providing these answers.*

— Earthwatch volunteer





foundation? There, right in front of you, is something that no one else has seen for thousands and thousands of years. The boundaries of time melt away and you find yourself now personally connected to a world long forgotten. This is the moment for which all archaeologists live.

### WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

The revelation of burial sites has exposed some of the best indications of social structure of each time period. Recent finds have included the discovery of two

### HOW TO LEARN MORE

As research continues, the objectives of the project evolve. Theories are tested, then proved or disproved. With every success and failure a new question arises and a web of theories emerges. Following this evolution of learning is an exciting way to become involved in the living history of the human race.

Archaeologists continue to work at sites around the globe searching for further clues to understanding the factors that have contributed to the evolution of human civilizations. Long-term projects

skeletons that were buried, partially removed soon after, and then re-interred. The findings sometimes offer more questions than answers, leading to the development of new theories.

The quantity and quality of burial offerings have been particularly revealing of the social organization of the civilization. Prior theories suggested that the Bronze Age civilization had been largely egalitarian, but these recent finds suggest otherwise. Being buried with numerous coveted items is often an indication of high social rank, which sheds new light on the importance of social class in this ancient society.

Organic samples such as charcoal or resin from plant fibers can be particularly revealing as they can be carbon-dated to pinpoint time periods to within a few years. Through a process of fine water screening, biological samples are used to reconstruct environmental changes. This is of particular importance due to the tropical location of the kingdom. Historically, ancient civilizations in tropical regions had a hard time surviving

are currently underway in Majorca, Spain; Danebury, England; and Taosi, China, to name a few. Much publicity and educational materials are available on these and many other excavations. For more information on the work being done at Ban Non Wat, visit the project's website: <http://www.otago.ac.nz/anthropology/Angkor/index.html>

To take part in archaeological projects going on in your area, consult your state's official web page. Here you can get links to your State Archaeologist, who can provide you with information on projects close to

### GLOSSARY

**shard/sherd** – fragments of pottery vessels found on sites and in refuse deposits where pottery-making peoples have lived

**secular** – not overtly or specifically religious

**trowel** – a scoop-shaped or flat-bladed garden tool

the difficult environment that had only limited open space for agriculture due to dense tropical forests. Therefore, it is speculated that the Angkor civilization thrived mainly due to its employment of commercial fishing. Southeast Asia had difficulty due to the sharp difference between the wet rainy season, and the long dry season. The prehistoric communities, and the people of Angkor, survived through the skillful manipulation of water in reservoirs, and the careful tilling of their rice fields cut from the forest.

you and suggestions on how you can become involved. In addition, [www.archaeolink.com](http://www.archaeolink.com) is an excellent site for general archaeological information. You can keep on top of the latest archaeological developments taking place around the world and take advantage of a number of other resources relating to this exciting and dynamic field.

Volunteers have joined this project through Earthwatch Institute. Read more about this study and other scientific field research at [www.earthwatch.org](http://www.earthwatch.org).



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