

# Rock art of Phrayanaga (Viking) Cave, southern Thailand: the illustration of ancient vessels

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## **Abstract**

Tham Phrayanaga is one of Southeast Asia's most well-preserved but little understood rock art sites. This cave site in southern Thailand has at least 76 depictions of watercraft. Many of the images are accurate portrayals of vessels used by a number of different cultural groups. The nature of the imagery is described and the ways in which the site informs us about the region's recent cross-cultural contact history is explored. Based on relative dating and comparative study, this rock art site has been given the approximately date of from about the late 1500s to the early 1900s. This study will highlight our results that have indicated that some figures are ancient vessels including Thai, Chinese, European, Indonesian, and Arabian. Moreover, it related to the Maritime Silk Route and the spice trade in Southeast Asia and the Andaman Sea, which is a part of the Indian Ocean.

**Keywords:** Rock art, ships, Viking Cave, southern Thailand

## **Introduction**

Tham Phrayanaga (or "Big Snake Cave" because of a large snake-like stalactite<sup>4</sup>) is one of 23 rock art sites found in southern Thailand (Sukkham 2010). It is located in the northeast corner of Phi Phi Le Island in the Andaman Sea, Krabi Province, southwestern Thailand, near the popular tourist destinations of Maya Beach and Phi Phi Don Island (Figure 1). This limestone cave is a large, oval-shaped dome with a high ceiling. The 90 metre wide entrance faces due east. The floor varies from 3-6 metres above sea level while the cave measures 132 metres wide, 95 metres deep and has a maximum ceiling height of more than 20 metres. The cave is home to hundreds of barn swallows that nest on the cave walls, including overtop of the rock art. Nests are harvested year-round and sold as a local delicacy. The site is now managed by a private commercial enterprise so entry is no longer allowed for tourists for risk of disturbing the swallows.

Despite long being known by locals, the earliest mention of the site was in 1972, during a visit by the reigning King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama XI) of the Chakri Dynasty (1946-present). In 1988, the Fine Arts Department (FAD) of Thailand embarked on a systematic recording of the cave's rock art (Chaimongkon and Pigpien 1990). In October 2009 this data was updated as part of a Master of Arts thesis field work

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<sup>4</sup> **Stalactite:** a type of speleothem (secondary mineral) that hangs from the ceiling of limestone caves. It is a type of dripstone.

(Sukkham 2010), with follow-up research conducted on site in May 2010 by Griffith University's *Picturing Change* research program.

### ***Tham Phrayanaga rock art***

The surviving rock art of Tham Phrayanaga consists mostly of monochrome paintings in black, red-brown and brownish-black. There also are bichromes<sup>5</sup> in brown-black and yellow-brown, some red-brown paintings highlighted or partially repainted with black, a small number of charcoal drawings and a few engravings. Few paintings overlap but those that do suggest most red-brown paintings are early in the sequence, followed by the brown-black/yellow-brown bichromes, brown-black and black paintings, charcoal drawings and engravings. During the 1988 study 73 figures were recorded in three panels – on the east wall, south wall and a small chamber in the southwestern corner of the cave (Chaimongkon and Pigpien 1990).

During the 2010 field-survey we recorded 80 figures, 76 of which are depictions of watercraft, even though three of the paintings in the small chamber have been lost to erosion and algal growth. Some of the additional figures we recorded appear to have been made since 1988, possibly by tourists or bird nest harvesters, as they do not appear in the FAD report. Most of the art is concentrated in the main panel, to the left of the entrance if one is looking out to sea. There is a small amount of engraved graffiti and an undecipherable older design in black suggestive of Arabic script.

**Panel A** (Figure 2) contains most of the art, possibly both because it has a long flat surface amenable to painting and because it is located near the cave entrance, which commands an excellent view of the sea. It stretches across the east wall of the cave, the paintings facing west and southwest. The panel is 39.5 metres long. Most of the rock art is located along this length between 0.2-2.0 metres above the floor, with the highest painting about 3 meters above ground level. There are 63 paintings, six drawings and three engravings of ships and boats, as well as three drawn human figures and a horse. Some paintings have recently added engraved features or highlights. The depictions of watercraft show various styles of bowsprit, head, hull, rail, mast, sail, stern, cabin and rudder; a few also have oars and there is one depiction with a paddle wheel. Forty ships can be classified into at least seven types – square-rigged, square and triangle-rigged, triangle-rigged, rigged and rowed, rowed, paddle-wheeled, rectangular sail on tripod mast – with the rest unclassifiable.

There are four depictions of large square-rigged ships, two monochrome<sup>6</sup> and two bichrome (Figure 3), in linear outline<sup>7</sup> or as partial silhouettes<sup>8</sup>. The bichrome square-rigged ships appear to have been purposely made this way and did not result from re-painting later. All four have clearly illustrated and decorated bows, hulls and railings. Three masts for mainsails are usually depicted, supported with braces and sheets. Three (Figures 3) are shaped like Thai junks, with their distinctive curved bows and sterns and layered rectangular sail structures. Thai junks would have been

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<sup>5</sup> **Bichromes:** having two colors.

<sup>6</sup> **Monochrome:** single color.

<sup>7</sup> **Linear outline:** a single line forms the figure by way of an outline.

<sup>8</sup> **Silhouette:** solid infill shape.

considered exotic in this part of the world a few hundred years ago as they would have had a sea journey of at least 1600 km behind them. The fourth is single-rigged but superimposed with many mainsail yards, has a cabin and rudder. Square-rigged ships like this, and decorated with an eye-like design on the head of the hull, are characteristic of Chinese junks from the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) Dynasties, known to have traded around what is now Thailand (Blomfield and Tam 2005:6-7). Chinese visitors came to Thailand to establish direct diplomatic relations and to set up trade agreements, with a Chinese trade in ceramics extending through various dynasties and periods since the Song Dynasty (960-1279) (Blomfield and Tam 2005; Breazeale 1999; Garnier 2004; Virapol 2005).

Five ships with square and triangle-rigged sails are depicted in monochrome as linear outline or silhouette figures. The front part and hull of these types of ship differ from the first type because they are undecorated but usually show a bowsprit transfixed with one or two triangle-foresails. These ships typically have two or three masts that are rarely connected at the top and are supported by many braces and sheets for mainsails. The back of some ships also show a cabin and rudder. They are similar to European tall ships but do not appear identical to any particular vessel. European ships of the 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries typically were square and triangle-rigged. They had a bowsprit transfixed with one or two triangle foresails and usually had a cabin and rudder in the stern. There are at least two similar ships depicted in Panel A but it is not possible to identify country of origin. European contact with Thailand began with the Portuguese in the early 1500s, followed soon after by the Dutch (Garnier 2004). The arrival of the French expanded and assisted the construction of a new palace at Lopburi for King Narai (1656-1688) of the Prasat Thong Dynasty in the Ayutthaya Period (Garnier 2004). The English were the last to establish relations across the region, especially with Ayutthaya (Wongthes 2003; Garnier 2004).

There are 24 monochrome triangle-rigged ships, in either linear outline or as silhouettes, and three shown as bichrome silhouettes. One of the latter has a human figure standing on the rear of the deck. All three of the bichrome ships appear to have been originally red-brown with black added later, and two subsequently were highlighted with engraved lines. The front part of triangle-rigged ships has a bowsprit that uses only one triangle-foresail which, in some figures, is connected with braces. Along the sides of some of these ships are depictions of square holes that look like rails or shutter windows; depictions of cabins and rudders are rare. Some resemble Arabian dhows but most are more likely depictions of large wooden multi-sailed Malay/Indonesian *perahu* that have gaff rigging used since the 17<sup>th</sup> century for fishing and transport (e.g. see Gibson-Hill 1949 for many different examples). These include 17<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century Indonesian *perahu pinisiq* (a specific type of wooden sailing ship partly modeled on European wooden ships; Figure 4) and an Indonesian *kapal layer mesin* (motor sailer). Two ships in black with a single rectangular sail and tripod mast are typical of Bugi/Macassan *perahu* sailed throughout the larger region from what is now Sulawesi, Indonesia (e.g. see Taçon, *et al.* 2010).

Three rigged oared ships and one oared watercraft were depicted in monochrome with linear outline. Braces support the masts but not every mast displayed has a sail and the bow of the ship does not contain a bowsprit. Further differentiating them from the types described above are oars. One oared ship has three human figures

standing on the deck with outstretched arms bent at the elbows together with a rectangular flag at the stern. Another has human figures shown both on deck and in the hull, along with other aspects of the ship's interior. The oared watercraft is simple, with no masts, bowsprits and sails but oars clearly shown. The bow contains a depiction of a straight line, probably a handrail, and the stern appears to contain a cabin. The rigged and oared boats are similar to that used by the *Chaole* or local sea people and miniature models called Plajak (pia/cak), used in ritual offerings to the sea (Sarikabutara 1987; Wongbusarakum 2007).

There is only one depiction of a paddle-wheeled ship, monochrome and shown as a silhouette. The paddle wheel consists of a circle and cross-line design in the middle of the ship and there is a similar wheel on the upper deck. Handrails are found towards the bow of this ship while the stern contains a silhouette square shape. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century American-style paddle-steamers similar to one depicted at Tham Phrayanaga were introduced to southern Thailand, as royal photography from the reign of King Rama V (1868-1910) documents (FAD 1979; Lim 2009).

Unidentified ships are plain, irregular, or damaged, making classification difficult. All are monochrome, in outline or silhouette, and many are small, without sails or oars. Some are simple boats and small vessels typical of various Thai, Malay and Indonesian peoples.

The surviving non-marine images, located on the ceiling next to the cave entrance, consist of drawings, three black human-like stick figures and an outline of a horse with a silhouetted head. Two of the human figures appear to be interacting and each has a hand on one of its hips. One figure carries a long weapon-like object directed toward the other. The third figure was depicted facing, and as if running toward, the horse. It holds something resembling a loop of rope while the horse is shown as if galloping away.

**Panel B** a second small panel, containing two paintings of ships that face north, is located on the south wall of the cave. The first ship is a monochrome light red-brown silhouette, 95 centimeters (cm) wide by 58 cm high. It has two masts, two square-rigged mainsails and a bowsprit with one triangle-rigged foresail. The stern includes a square silhouette that probably depicts the cabin. The second ship is smaller, measuring 55 cm wide by 42 cm high, and is without sails. It looks similar to the first as it has the two masts, bowsprit and cabin. Both are likely depictions of some type of large *perahu*.

**Panel C** a third panel containing three ships and two elephants, one with a *mahout*<sup>9</sup> seated on its neck, in the southern part of the cave was recorded in 1988. Unfortunately, the elephants and one of the ships have since been destroyed by algal growth, which also obscures the two remaining ships, a triangle rigged watercraft and one that lacks rigging.

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<sup>9</sup> **Mahout:** a person who drives an elephant.

## **Conclusions**

Most of the rock paintings of Tham Phrayanaga represent various types of watercraft that traveled through the Andaman Sea in the past few hundred years, a period of accelerated maritime contact and trade between various parts of Thailand, Asia and Europe, fuelled by the lucrative spice trade, diplomacy, evangelism and conquest. By comparing the rock paintings of Tham Phrayanaga with depictions and descriptions of ships in historic documents it can be concluded that most of the art was probably made between the late 1500s and the early 1900s, a period of increased trade and contact between various European peoples, Thais, Malays, Chinese and indigenous peoples of the region. This is also the period in which the *Chaole* occupied the islands around Tham Phrayanaga. It is this group that most likely made much of the rock art. Two of the oared ships, typical of the *Chaole*, at Tham Phrayanaga were painted right next to the two main polychrome paintings of Thai junks. Their placement appears purposeful, perhaps to illustrate important stories of close contact. One can also imagine the *Chaole* using Tham Phrayanaga as a guide for instructing how to identify common watercraft of the region or as a way of recording changing shipping during a period of increased traffic of culturally diverse watercraft.

A second site, Wong Lung Cave, contains a panel about 11 metres long with the remains of at least 14 red-brown paintings of ships, most of which are *perahu pinisiq*, and a *mahout* riding an elephant that has a bundle on its back (see Valli and Summers 1990:116-117). Some are almost identical to those at Tham Phrayanaga, suggesting they were made by the same artists. At both Tham Phrayanaga and Wong Lung Cave there are no Viking ships or other watercraft older than the 15<sup>th</sup> century depicted, despite suggestions from tourist companies, and most are not European contra Niti Sangwan (1987:126).

Tham Phrayanaga is an outstanding example of a site with contact-inspired imagery, containing more depictions of watercraft in terms of sheer number and diversity than any other rock art site world-wide. This site gives us a window into both past pictures and past perceptions of maritime watercraft unavailable from other aspects of the archaeological record. A larger regional and perhaps global study of rock art depictions of watercraft would be worthwhile not only to situate Tham Phrayanaga in larger contexts but also to better inform us of past seafaring generally. But as with rock-art sites everywhere, the images are under threat from both natural and human forces, with nesting birds and the people who harvest them having a big impact at Tham Phrayanaga. In this regard, it is vital to better document rock art sites like Tham Phrayanaga before the valuable visual information they contain is lost forever.

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## Figures



Figure 1: Map of southern Thailand with Tham Phrayanaga indicated.  
(Atthasit Sukkham)



Figure 2: The most dramatic part of Panel A with numerous paintings of watercraft.  
(Atthasit Sukkham)



Figure 3: One of two bichrome Thai junks at Tham Phrayananga (Paul S.C. Taçon).



Figure 4: A painting of an early 20<sup>th</sup> century perahu pinisiq (Paul S.C. Taçon).