

7 An Interview With Angela Clark

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Angela Clark is a doctorate student at the University of Otago, in New Zealand. Her research is focused on Southeast Asian human remains, and last summer, she presented a paper at the European Meeting of Palaeopathology Association, discussing the relationship between sexual dimorphism and health status. I had a few questions for the busy bioarchaeologist, and thankfully she gracefully and speedily replied.

CC- What are your current projects?

AC- Currently, I am examining skeletons from a site called Ban Non Wat in Northeast Thailand. We are really fortunate to have nearly 700 skeletons dating from the Neolithic period (1750 B.C – 1050 B.C), the Bronze Age (1050 – 420 B.C) and the Iron Age (420 B.C – A.D 500). I specifically examine the adult skeletons, looking at the differences in size and shapes between the males and females. The level of sexual dimorphism has not yet been intensively studied in prehistoric Southeast Asia. The main aim of my PhD thesis is to assess how the level of sexual dimorphism relates to the health status of the prehistoric people from Ban Non Wat, and determine if we see changes over time associated with the intensification of rice agriculture and changing social-political structure.

CC- What is it like to excavate in Southeast Asia? Do you encounter any difficulties in obtaining permission to study the human remains?

AC- Professor Charles Higham (University of Otago) originally set up the “Origins of Angkor project” in Thailand over twenty years ago, and has formed a great working relationship with the National Research Council, the Fine Arts Department and the people of Thailand. They have graciously permitted our research to continue and it is our privilege to work with these human remains.

CC- When you work in the countryside, are the locals supportive of your work? Are some really interested to know what you do?

AC- The site of Ban Non Wat is located in a small village; 40 minutes drive from the small town where we stay called Phimai (population size: 13,000). The locals have been involved in the excavations from the beginning. The field season takes place in winter, this is after the annual rice harvest and normally the locals would have to leave the village to find work in the nearest town. We provide paid work for the villagers to enable them to stay at home for the winter months. After seven field seasons some of them have become so skilled with a trowel they come close to out-doing the professional archaeologists! Although, I know my job is safe, when it comes to human remains excavation only the skilled and experienced bioarchaeologists are needed. Although, most of the locals find the fact that we study human remains very strange indeed and would not touch the bones anyway.

CC- What is your greatest memory of your time in Southeast Asia?

AC- Christmas time in Phimai is always great fun. Last year there were about 17 of us for Christmas Eve dinner, where we had sort-of traditional roast pork dinner with a few Thai specialties. There was Christmas music, decorations and even a glowing christmas tree! On Christmas Day all the farang (Western’) archaeologists went to Ban Non Wat with gifts. The local villagers cooked a spectacular lunch and ate it outside until the sunset. Then everybody, the villagers and farang, gathers for a secret-Santa, but of course in typical Thai

style there was no Santa and it definitely isn't a secret! Each person's name is put into a hat, if you are chosen you go up onto a small stage, and then receive a gift from that person already on stage. Then you choose a name of a villager out of a hat, and then give your gift to that villager. That villager then stays on stage and picks the name of a farang to give their present to, and this cycle continues until everyone, villager and farang gets a gift. The evening ended with a lot of dancing, laughing and was in all a great Christmas!

CC- How did you become interested in human bones and Southeast Asia?

AC- I aspired to work with human remains from a young age, and I have been fulfilling my vocation for a while now. Originally I undertook a Forensic Science (BSc) at the University of Central Lancashire, specialising in forensic anthropology. This inspired me to continue in a very focused field. After completing a Master of Science in Human Osteology and Paleopathology, at the University of Bradford, I travelled across the globe gaining many personal and professional experiences. At this point I joined Dr. Nancy Tayles from the University of Otago, New Zealand, whilst she conducted her research in Thailand. I worked for a month in the field, doing a mixture of excavation and post-ex work. From my travels, I ended up moving to New Zealand in June 2009 to embark on a PhD. My bioarchaeology research group at the Department of Anatomy and Structural Biology, University of Otago, specialise in human remains from Southeast Asia and the Pacific. I am particularly interested in prehistoric mainland Southeast Asian populations, as little research has been conducted in this area. There are lots of questions which still remain unanswered about the demography, health status, movement, interaction between populations, the social, cultural and economic factors and the interaction with the natural tropical monsoon environment.

CC- What are your plans for future research?

AC- For now, I am continuing with my PhD, which I should finish in another 18 months. There are many opportunities for further research in Southeast Asia and I hope to answer a few more research questions after my PhD is completed.

CC- Is the weather pleasant? Or is it more difficult to work in such tropical conditions?

AC- I am currently in the field until the end of February, so I can give you a first-hand account. Right now, it is over 30 degrees celcius inside, we have a fan that is cooling us down – but this is quite a mild day. Just having arrived from a very hot summer in New Zealand, I haven't found the transition that bad this year, and the heat is quite bearable. There are, however, some down sides to the seasonal weather. The recent flooding in Thailand hit the global news, and we got quite a scare with the prospect that our collection could be ruined due to the flooding. However, we were extremely lucky, as our storage house wasn't affected at all, the bones are in great condition and we are able to carry on with our research. Thankfully, natural disasters like this only happen every decade or so... hopefully I will have finished my research by then!