Veronica Walker Vadillo, University of Helsinki

THE BOAT AND THE PLOUGH: ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT, TRADITIONAL ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE, AND THE INTERPRETATION OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES IN THE LOWER MEKONG RIVER BASIN

The location of pre-Angkorian archaeological sites in the main course of the Mekong River Basin between Kratie (Cambodia) and Champassak (Laos) has been attributed to local populations’ attempts to control goods moving in and out of the hinterland based on Bronson’s model of river hierarchies in Southeast Asia. These interpretations have placed an emphasis on trade, in addition to rice cultivation, as a marker for social complexity and wealth accumulation. In this presentation I will argue that the location of these sites can be linked to fish resources, and that social complexity can be similarly attributed to societal responses to fisheries management, adding to an increasing list of examples of convergence in cultural niche construction surrounding floodplain fishery in tropical river environments. In doing so, the essay reviews two data sets that are rarely used to discuss the selected archaeological material: regional fish ecosystems and traditional ecological knowledge of fishing practices among local communities. The location of these fishing grounds and the constraints that fishing resources impose on people is discussed in relation to archaeological data and livelihood activities related to fishing and fish processing.

Veronica Walker Vadillo is a maritime archaeologist specialized in Southeast Asia working as a postdoc at the archaeology area in the Faculty of Arts, University of Helsinki, where she is the PI of the project Ports and Harbours of Southeast Asia supported by the University of Helsinki. She obtained her doctorate from the University of Oxford, for which she focused on Angkor’s riverine cultural landscape. The thesis analyzed the different ways in which the people of Angkor adapted to their environment in terms of practical usage (i.e., landscapes of communication and transport) and in terms of mind-set (i.e., cosmology and ritual behavior).