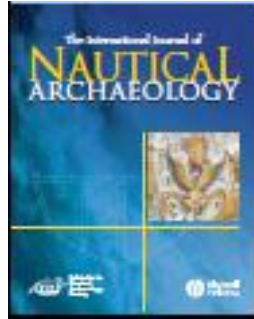


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BOOK REVIEW: Somasiri Devendra

Boats of South Asia

SEAN McGRAIL, LUCY BLUE, ERIC KENTLEY, COLIN PALMER
336 pp., 142 b&w figures, 8 tables
Routledge/Curzon, 11 New Fetter Lane, London
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This monograph is a collection of studies by a multidisciplinary team comprising Seán McGrail, Lucy Blue, Eric Kentley and Colin Palmer, and financed by the Society for South Asian Studies. Basil Greenhill provided an 'Introduction' and, obviously, inspiration.

In the first chapter, 'Aims and methods', McGrail describes the scope of this volume. The boats selected for documentation certainly merit in-depth study. Yet it is open to question whether these papers can collectively be titled *Boats of South Asia*. The chapters deal with selected vessels encountered in Bangladesh, along the eastern coast of India, and one in Sri Lanka. This preoccupation with the east coast is partially justified on the basis that there is 'less outside influence on boat building techniques there than on the west coast'. This is a generalization, and may be misconstrued, with possibly damaging results, as typecasting western coast boats as hybrids. A case in point is that a large plank-built boat, recently partially excavated in Kerala, was presumed, by its nonspecialised finders, to be a 'foreign' ship even before excavation was commenced. This apart, the first chapter is notable for its very useful section on a methodology recommended for recording traditional boats. This is both basic and comprehensive enough for Asian researchers to follow: a subsidiary and admirable aim of the Boats of South Asia project was to involve South Asian scholars in such studies.

The chapters 'The reverse clinker boats of Bangladesh' (McGrail and Blue), 'The reverse clinker boats of Orissa and West Bengal' (McGrail, Blue and Kentley), 'The *vattai* fishing boat and related framefirst vessels of Tamil Nadu' (McGrail, Blue, Kentley and Palmer) and 'Hide boats of the river

Kaveri' (McGrail, Blue and Palmer) form the core work done by the team. These are supported by two chapters by Kentley: 'The *Masula*—a sewn plank surf boat of India's eastern coast' and 'The *madel paruwa* of Sri Lanka—a sewn boat with washstrakes'. Colin Palmer contributes a study of 'The smooth-skinned traditional inland boats of Bangladesh' and an analytical chapter on 'A hydrodynamic evaluation of four types of boat' complete with two annexes explaining technical terms and systems: the whole demonstrating the need to view traditional craft through the discipline of nautical architecture.

The studies have all been done competently, within the material and time limits available; there is a distinct difference, however, between the multi-authored chapters and those written by single authors. The latter show the writers' personality and involvement with the craft studied and make easier reading: the former display scientific objectivity and the hand of several writers with their personal idiosyncrasies erased. No value distinction between them is imputed, however. I will limit my comments to the problems commonly encountered in documenting traditional craft.

Three chapters deal with the reverse-clinker and *hulc* construction of boats in the Bangladesh, West Bengal and Orissa regions and a boat of the *hulc* type, but smooth-skinned, also from the same region. In the fieldwork, certain problem areas were encountered that are encountered over and over again in studying and attempting to classify traditional boats. 'Flexibility of nomenclature ... and the difficulty of transliterating type names' is referred to. In Asia, there is no requirement for a standard classification. Standardisation is a discipline we seek to impose on boats, now, but it has its roots in European concerns. Names for very similar craft vary from area to area. When, therefore, it is necessary to group boats with different names together, it is better to use code numbers than to assign Indian-sounding names. In chapter 2, for example, a code name—*Sylheti nauka*—is artificially assigned, but it is used (apparently) as a type in the next chapter. Kentley, speaking of the *masula*, comments that no builder or user recognizes the word which he, himself, justifies the use of only because it 'has a widespread currency among those interested in ethnographic craft'. Colin Palmer, while noting a differentiation between smooth-skinned (*binekata*) and reverse-clinker (*digekata*) construction comments that even the Bangladeshi authorities found it difficult to find a standardised nomenclature, and that 'boatmen have a more consistent set of names for the parts of their boats'—a true indication of what matters to a user. 'Flexibility of nomenclature' should, now, not be considered so much a problem than a 'given' and specific methods of dealing with it should be devised.

Another problem encountered involved trying to figure out why a particular form was chosen and how it was built. 'The *patia* is built "by eye": judgement, based on experience but possibly on other (unrevealed) formulae'. The choice of technique, it is concluded, is cultural, rather than technological. I recall questioning a builder in Sharjah, UAE, about what formulae he used. The measurements, he said, depended on the maximum usable length of the keel log, and the other measurements 'grew' around this. On this subject, it is pertinent to comment on the use of metric units for documentation. While, for accurate documentation, metric units are necessary, confining ourselves to them may rob us of another dimension. It is by recording measurements in indigenous units of measurement that the ratios between elements become clear. Kentley follows this: he gives measurements in indigenous units—cubits, hand's width, handspan, finger width, thread—which are given in whole numbers, not fractions.

Kentley's two single-author chapters deal with sewn boats, the *masula* which is found over most of the eastern coast, and the *madel paruwa* of Sri Lanka. The difference between the *madel paruwa* and the Indian boats studied is that it stems from a logboat tradition, with its most distinctive feature—the chine strakes—being made of hollowed-out logs. Apart from the careful description of the construction and form and the comparison with the *masula*, Kentley seeks to place this craft in the context of a broad 'Indian Ocean boat-building culture'. He finds, though, that only the sewing pattern links it to that culture. He has unfortunately missed examining the other *paruwa*, the passenger boat: some information on this is found in the reviewer's paper, referred to by McGrail (with my name, alas, mis-spelt!). More importantly he has missed a reference by Hornell (1946) to his own work (1943) that Kentley quotes: Hornell comments that the *yathra dhoni* is an example of 'the conversion of the dug-out into a fully plank-built boat'. Kentley has also missed Tom Vosmer's study of the *yathra dhoni* where he follows almost the same process of analysis and documentation as Colin Palmer (Chapter 9), particularly in the use of

MacSurf computer package. These comments notwithstanding, Kentley's examination of the chine strake in different cultures and the suggestion that Sri Lanka is a distinctive culture in terms of maritime ethno-technology are worth noting. Similarly, his precise description of the sewing patterns on the *masula* and *madel paruwā* must be considered almost a tool permitting comparison with other sewn boats in the Indian Ocean.

The study of 'The *vattai* fishing boat and related frame-first vessels of Tamil Nadu' is perhaps the major contribution to this volume. The characteristics of the Palk Strait and the Gulf of Mannar, where boats of this type are in use, is described fully, inviting the reader to see the link between the foreshore and the design of the craft. The existence of a frame-first boat in a corner of India is reason enough to document it. It is inevitable that the question should arise whether or not the technology was introduced through the Portuguese or French. At the end McGrail muses on the possibility that the transfer of European design techniques was not limited to Newfoundland, Brazil and India and on whether there may have been transfers to Africa, South East Asia and China. He suggests that a systematic international research programme 'might also identify ideas which flowed in the reverse direction'. I, too, agree that even more detailed documentation must be made of the *vattai* and related craft, like the *thoni*, which are yet very much in use. Apart from static recording, much can be gained from actual sailing of the craft.

The last chapter is on specific boats. 'Hide boats of the river Kaveri' goes quite far away from concerns with reverse clinker, *hulc*, frame-first and sewn boats—in fact, even from the sea itself. Undertaken within 30 hours between two periods of research, it documents a fair amount of material about the provenance and construction of these coracle-type craft on inland rivers. Seemingly slight, they are known to have carried '50 men or 40 bags of grain'. A surprising number of these are being built and in use though the hides have been replaced by plastic fertilizer bags. This raises a question: how far must the materials of traditional boats change before they cease to be traditional? In extreme cases—as in the *vallam*, *oru*, and *tepparn* of Sri Lanka and more complex craft seen in the UAE—the traditional form is reproduced completely in fibreglass and made on a mould. Only the form remains.

In the final chapter, 'The way ahead', the fieldwork done and the difficulties faced are commented on. The difficulty of working through translators is one. A most welcome aspect of the Boats of South Asia project was to involve South Asian scholars in the type of research McGrail and others are involved in. This would, it is hoped, produce a few Indian workers from different parts of India who would be able to dot the 'i's and cross the 't's of the work of western researchers. The writers make some very constructive suggestions about other research fields, and I note that Sri Lanka is mentioned. I have, myself, tried to document some of the recently-vanished watercraft here. But very important documentation carried out by Gerhard Kapitan (over 60 detailed drawings on a consistent 1:20 scale, showing plan, section and details, about 200 photographs and unpublished field reports) languish for the lack of a publisher. Even *IJNA* stopped the publication of his papers as they were 'not archaeological'. (Which brings us back to McGrail's comments in the first chapter on the zig-zag path of this field of study between informed observation, anthropology, ethnography, 'material anthropology' and 'ethno-archaeology' in keeping with the prevailing academic slant.)

The volume ends with 'A fundamental query'. Without going into detail, it concerns the relationship between forms, types and characteristics on the one hand and the nature of the landing places on the other. The existence of several variables that will influence such a study is acknowledged. And one wonders how far this approach will be similar to Gropius' dictum: 'Form follows function'. The final paragraphs deal with the possibility, and difficulties, of conducting archaeological excavations of boats or ships in South Asia. In our work in Sri Lanka, we have faced and do appreciate the work of recovery, long-term treatment and display of large waterlogged artefacts. Last year, a large ship on reclaimed (but seasonally submerged) land was located in Kerala and begs to be excavated and conserved. Difficulties there are, to be sure, but sometimes it is essential that we find a way.

This book is one to be read and absorbed. Its main value, however, is the thoughts regarding the future and the attempt to involve Indian scholars in the documentation of their heritage.

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