

A Lime-Paste Jar from Cambodia or Thailand – 11th to 13th century



The ancient Khmer empire is best known for its enormous temple complex, Angkor Wat, which was founded early in the 12th century and is the largest temple complex in the world (over 400 acres). The Khmer empire was active from the 9th century to the 15th century, with Angkor in present-day Cambodia as its capital, and at its peak it ruled over most of South East Asia.

Initially the Khmer people only made unglazed and ash-glazed (green or yellow) pottery. As the empire expanded north and west from the capital its domain moved into regions of present-day Cambodia and Thailand where the local pottery had a dark brown, high iron glaze which was not glossy. These brown-glazed wares were very popular with the Khmer and they became the main Khmer pottery for centuries.

The small pot in the picture above is a Khmer lime-paste pot, just 9 cm tall, dating from between the 11th century and the 13th century. Lime paste was an important ingredient in making betel quids (also known as paan), which have been chewed in Asia for thousands of years. Betel quids are made from areca nuts, which are the primary active ingredient, wrapped in betel leaves to hold the nuts together in a small package and to add to the flavour, with lime used to bind the leaves together. They have a mild stimulant effect and are used for a variety of reasons – maintaining alertness, staving off hunger pangs and for social purposes. For example in Vietnam they are used ceremonially at weddings and the phrase “matters of betel and areca” is synonymous with marriage, supposedly because betel and areca are such an ideal combination.

Unfortunately there are significant disadvantages to chewing betel quids, the main one being that it results in significantly increased rates of several types of cancer. Another problem is that chewing

betel quids produces a bright red residue which is usually spat out onto the ground. In fact one of the most visible signs of betel chewing is the red teeth of the person doing it.

You can see in the photo that this little pot has been made into the form of a bird by adding a head with a beak and a short tail. It has been reported that this represents a bird called an ak and that this vessel in ancient Cambodian is called the “ak kambor” or lime ak. The ak was apparently known in folklore for its fidelity to its mate – when one bird of a pair dies the other bird would supposedly kill itself by flying into a hard object. Maybe this form was chosen for lime pots because of the association of betel chewing (at least in Vietnam) with marriage and weddings. Another possible connection that has been suggested is that the ak feeds on a diet of shellfish and the lime that the vessel would have contained was made from burnt shells. Although this is all an attractive story I remain a little sceptical as I have been unable to find a single reference to this bird on the internet other than when discussing this type of lime-paste jar.

Although this is the most common form for this type of jar, similar lime pots were made in the forms of various birds and animals, including rabbits. It appears that an alternative name in the Khmer language for this type of pot is a khlen, which is also the word for a kind of eagle. However, I find it difficult to believe my little bird is an eagle!

Kevin Akhurst
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