OxEmp podcast

My name is Morgan Breene, and I am a doctoral student in history at Oriel college. But I am also a maritime archaeologist, and I am excited by all things boats. If it floats, can hold weight, and carries you from A to B over water, I’m interested! My enthusiasm isn’t always returned in kind, though. During the first term of my doctorate at a high table dinner, when I finished explaining my new project about the role of native boats in the development of the British empire older man next to me replied with the worst three words that I could have imagined: ‘Boats. Are. Boring.’

Today, imagining myself standing in the main hall of the Pitt Rivers Museum, I can *almost* see his point. If you look up from the busy collection of wood and glass cases, you will see, hanging from the middle balcony, a collection of watercraft from around the world. These boats are still, frozen in space and time, without their culture, their history, or their watery context. Staring up at their never-meant-to-be-seen underbellies makes me wonder, if this is how I knew about boats, would I find them boring too? But this absence of sensory information presents an opportunity to explore multiple perspectives, to think about *why* these boats might be important, and *how* different people might come to appreciate them.

I am picturing one boat from the collection in particular, and I invite you to stand in front of it, or look at the picture attached. I’m going to be telling you about the Coromandel Coast catamaran, which is a full-sized example of a boat type from southeastern India, used along the coast of the Bay of Bengal for centuries.

Reason 1. What is it?

Catamarans were originally developed as a fishing craft, and vary greatly in appearance and size along the coast. This example is of the type used at Madras, or modern Chennai, in the early 20th century. Catamarans were constructed out of three shaped logs, and lashed together using coconut-fibre rope. The middle log would be longer than the two side logs, and shaped to form a prow, which would help keep the boat stable while cutting through waves. During the British occupation of Madras in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, catamarans were also used to maintain communication between the town and ships anchored offshore. Catamaran-men would carry correspondence, act as lifeguards, recover lost cargo, and transport heavy or unwieldy objects, such as chain or anchors. Catamarans that were used for fishing, such as the one here, were also equipped with a mast and sail, though these elements are not on display. When not sailed, catamarans were paddled by one or two men, depending on their size.

Looking at the boat as it hangs, try to imagine it in the environment for which it was built and perhaps used in before making its way to the Pitt Rivers. Imagine the salty smell of the ocean, and listen for the waves crashing on the beach, the conversation of busy people preparing to head out to sea to fish, or coming back in again to prepare and sell their catch. The Coromandel Coastline at Chennai remains very shallow almost two miles out to sea, and therefore is subjected to near constant waves that reach an average daily height of 1.5 meters—that’s five foot waves, at any given time. There are sharks in the water, and multiple reported shark attacks in the nineteenth century suggest they would have been a concern for catamaran-men. Catamarans are also very heavy, especially once saturated with water—the example before you weighs a whopping 103 kilograms, or 227 pounds. Instead of a dried-out chunk of wood, picture this craft being paddled through big, crashing waves, multiple times a day, by just one or two men—do you think you could do it? This catamaran is a monument to skill, environmental knowledge, and ingenuity, even if it looks quite simple and staid at first glance.

Reason 2. British Empire Exhibition

But where catamarans were used, why, and how, are not the only reason I find this boat to be important. While ostensibly on display as an example of a type, this particular catamaran also has an fascinating life story, especially for those interested in the breakdown of the colonial relationship between Britain and India. This catamaran was brought to Britain in 1924 by the Fisheries Department of the Madras Presidency, and originally displayed at the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley. The Exhibition was meant to celebrate, and strengthen the ties of empire in the post WWI period. It was extremely unpopular in India, however, as it coincided with a failure on the part of the British government to recognize the rights of Indian settlers in Kenya, and a realization amongst even the most dedicated proponents of imperial cooperation that British professions of ‘racial unity’ across the empire were a farce. Indian commentators who attended the exhibition criticized the Indian display for ‘primitivizing’ the technology of India, and this catamaran could easily have been one of the objects they had in mind. A travel guide to Madras, published just a few years earlier in 1919, classified the boats of the city as crude and antediluvian, the skill required to maneouver them ‘akin to instinct.’ After the Exhibition closed in 1924, the catamaran was donated to the Pitt Rivers, to take its place in a watercraft collection that was being collated for the purpose of creating a notion of progress, drawing lines between the ‘ancient’ or ‘basic’ designs of non-European societies and the wonders of British nautical engineering.

To wrap up, look at the catamaran one more time. Think about all it’s display represents—efforts to project a nonexistent imperial unity in the 1920s, the persistence of racist stereotypes about the skills and knowledge of non-Europeans, a disregard for indigenous technologies, and Eurocentric qualification schemes to determine what is ‘primitive’ versus what is ‘advanced’, as opposed to what is ‘useful’, what is an effective solution to a difficult and dynamic environment. Our experience of the catamaran and the watercraft collection as a whole, suspended above us in time and space, is just a starting point for appreciating these objects. They not only have rich life histories of their own just waiting to be shared, but stand in as powerful representations of colonial relationships and attitudes towards non-European technologies and skilled practitioners in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Thank you for listening. If you are interested in learning more about the catamaran, its display, and the British Empire exhibition, you can find my blog post on the topic on the Oxford and Empire Project website.