

Valerie Fenwick

Picking up the Pieces; Goa's Endangered Traditional Craft

Summary

In the absence of other records, three sewn boats surveyed in 1838 are the starting-point for an evaluation of traditional Goan sewn craft endangered today. Types additional to those recorded in the 19th century have recently been located during fieldwork. Indian West Coast forests and palm groves provided an abundance of raw materials. Both timber and cordage were exported to countries which lacked them; unknown is the extent of the export of local expertise. A consistency of sewing methods, materials, waterproofing and antifouling are evidence for an indigenous boatbuilding tradition. The materials and techniques used are detailed. In Goan pirogues the weight of the crew and nets is carried at the level of the sheer-strake seam. At an early period large pirogues of Goan type would in theory have been capable of making oar-assisted long-distance voyages using an outrigger to confer stability, but to date archaeological evidence is lacking.

Introduction

One hundred and seventy five years ago the young François-Edmond Pâris completed his voyages of circumnavigation. In the course of these he recorded world's indigenous watercraft (1843). He was aware even then that they were fast disappearing and that future generations would have only travellers' tales and pictures. That the succinct records he made at his brief ports of call remain a primary source of information is testimony to failure - the failure of subsequent scholars to adopt the standards of recording he had set - that is, until our day, when, as all of us gathered here in Muscat are aware, there is so little left to record. Now as archaeologists and ethnographers we can only pick up the pieces.