Warfare and Piracy: War Prahu Construction and Aggression

The war prahu was a formidable opponent on the ocean as it targeted merchant ships passing through the waters of Borneo. Sea Dayak pirates on the war prahus were well-trained in stealthy tactics of plundering unsuspecting vessels. They were also well-equipped with a vessel design that was conducive to offensive attacks. A fighting stage, flat stem, and mounted cannon are just a few of the features that enhance the effectiveness of the pirates’ actions. The specific construction and design of the war prahu directly serves its purpose as an aggressive fighting vessel.

This war prahu model represents what appears to be a shell-first construction (Figure 1, photo by author). In other words, the outer planking was assembled before the inner framing. Planked boats built after the seventeenth century in Oceania were typically built in this manner. The outer wood planks on the model are placed side-by-side and are held together by long, tied strips of vegetable fibers. These fibers are what are referred to as sewn fasteners, and were also common on planked boats in Oceania after the seventeenth century. Woven through holes carved in the wood, the fibers hold the planks together and seal the hull. The decision to use tied sewn fasteners as opposed to nailed metal fasteners could have been because of resource availability and the sailing patterns of the war prahus. Borneo is rich in fibrous plants so this material was in abundant supply and easily accessible. Additionally, stories of war prahus indicate that they were purposefully beached for easy loading and unloading of the pirate crew and cargo. Sewn fasteners were believed to be more resilient to
the abrasive nature of frequent beaching and better able to withstand rough seas in terms of their strength and flexibility. Because of this, sewn fasteners would have been a logical choice for this vessel. Structural stability on the rough ocean waves and rapid loading and unloading of crews and cargo adds to the power and speed of the Dayak pirates.

On top of the hull planks are transverse planks which are much thinner and create the deck of the war prahu. There is discussion that boats built with transverse planks in the Oceania region included hatches to access the interior part of the hull. While there is no specific indication that the model has hatches, it is possible to untie the sewn fasteners and remove the transverse planks as if they were hatches. One purpose of this would be to bail water if the boat started to take on water, but it also seems likely that this space could have been used for weapon storage. Given the open and narrow layout of the model, storing weapons on deck would increase the risk of weapons falling into the water. They would also take up space that is already limited. It makes more sense to safely store them below the transverse planks. Storage areas can protect the weapons and at the same time can hide the identity of the vessel as a pirate ship, granting it the element of surprise as it nears targeted merchant ships.

The war canoe model has a well-defined keel that extends into the colorful and ornate stempost at the very front and an equally detailed sternpost in the back. The stern of a war prahu was typically elevated, as it is in the model, and was where the flag would have been placed. The flag accompanying the model is disarticulated from the model itself, but could appropriately be attached at the stern. The stem of the war prahu is noticeably flat compared to the rest of the model. As mentioned earlier, stories of Dayak pirates indicate that war prahus would purposely beach for quick loading and unloading of crew and cargo. It makes sense then for the stem to be flat so the crew could easily hop on and off as well as easily push the prahu back into deeper
water when ready. Quick access to the war prahu allows the pirates to utilize both the land and sea in their attacks and respond immediately to newly spotted merchant ships in the area.

Extending almost the full length of the war prahu model is a roof made of reed (Figure 2, photo by author). While the roof protected those onboard from the blistering sun, its main function was as a fighting stage. The pirates climbed on top of the roof with an array of weaponry and rained death upon the unlucky inhabitants of the targeted ship. Weapons included muskets, blow-pipes, and possibly poisoned arrows. At the front of the stem on the model is also a mounted swivel cannon, capable of firing balls of one or two pounds and used to cripple targeted merchant ships. The openness of the war prahu and the elevated stance from the roof increased their area of attack and provided a positional advantage in warfare.

War prahus relied on oars and paddlers to travel through the waters. While numbers vary greatly, about fifty to eighty men were on a war prahu at a time. This model has four oars, one of which is still attached (Figure 3, photo by author). The three unattached oars, since they are smaller, were most likely the standard oars used by the crew to paddle from the sides of the prahu. The fourth oar that is still attached to the model is much longer and narrower, but its specific purpose is unclear. At maximum speed, war prahus could travel twelve miles per hour. The large carrying capacity of the war prahu adds to the physical manpower present onboard.

War prahus were built with features that directly aided its purpose as a Dayak pirate ship. The construction techniques used on war prahus provided a fighting stage, a sturdy hull, and
possibly weapon storage among many other advantageous features. Utilizing these features, the Dayak pirates successfully plundered merchant ships in the waters of Borneo and engaged with maritime trade in the region in their own aggressive way.

References


