

# Prasat Phra Viharn

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*Prasat Phra Viharn is one of the most beautiful ruins of antiquity. Situated at a majestic height on the Dongrek Mountain Range, which marks the frontier between Cambodia and south-east Thailand, it is a Khmer shrine built between the 11th and 13th centuries. A series of sanctuaries and flights of stone stairways leads up the mountain to the temple tower, the centre of the worship of the god Siva, to whom the shrine was dedicated. The extensive ruins, older than Angkor Wat, are evocatively preserved; roofs and columns have fallen, but the great native stone walls remain, and the massive carvings have been only softened and mellowed by the centuries.*

A visitor from Bangkok should allow three days for the round trip if he wishes to see the shrine at leisure. The best plan is to take the express train that leaves Bangkok every day at 21:00 o'clock, bound for Ubon Ratcha Thani. The overnight trip brings the visitor to his disembarkation point, the town of Sisaket, at 6:00 o'clock the following morning. the rest of the journey must be made by car. From Sisaket, a highway leads to Amphoe Kantharalak, 62 kms. away. From here, a road winds for 24 kms. among jungle and small villages to the last settlement, the village of Phumsarol. The last stretch of 10 kms. goes up the mountain to the foot of the shrine. The whole car-trip takes about one hour; the visitor arrives in time before lunch. He can then make the ascent of stairs and gates to the temple at the summit. The return to Sisaket should be made in time to board the 20:07 o'clock train, which arrives in Bangkok at 5:20 o'clock the next morning.

The best time to visit Prasat Phra Viharn is between December and March, when the weather is temperate and there is no rain.

Prasat Phra Viharn, constructed as a succession of *gopura* (gate) and stairs ascending the mountain to the main sanctuary at the summit, is narrow but very long. Built from the northern slope up to the southern summit (about 657 m. above sea-level), it totals 896.50m. in length. Each of the four *gopura* is larger than the last, with more wings and additional rooms, as one approaches the shrine. A detailed description is here given (see the accompanying

plan):

First, as one walks from the slope towards the sanctuary, one is confronted by a gigantic stone staircase of 162 steps, some of them hewn from the living stone. At the upper end of this great flight is a smaller flight of 54 steps. Both sides of this staircase were cut into pedestals for stone lions, most of which have broken or crumbled. The staircase leads to a wide stone pavement sweeping gently upward to the first *gopura* and balustraded on east and west by the great recumbent stone bodies of two *naga* (snake), supported by low stone pedestals, each lifting its seven heads to face the slopes below (fig.1). the absence of haloes around these heads is a peculiarity that, when compared with other Khmer works of art and correlated with many inscriptions in this temple to be described below, indicates that these *naga* were constructed in the 11th century A.D. On the west lies a stone-paved passage probably used for transporting stone for the construction of the temple.

The first *gopura* is an open, four-faced pavilion, the roof of which was originally a wooden structure covered with tiles. The wood has disappeared, but some of the tiles lie nearby (fig.2) To the east of this *gopura* is a descent through the jungle to Lower Cambodia; this is called Bandai Hak (Broken Stairs) because all the steps have collapsed. Behind this *gopura*, a flight of steps leads to a stone-paved avenue 275 m. long, rising up to the second gate. This avenue is lined on each side with stone pillars 2.15 m. high, each capped by a great carved lotus-bud.

Most of these pillars are not in their original places; it is said that they were toppled by wild elephants. On the right of this avenue are many traces of the cutting of stone for use in the construction of the sanctuary. On the left can be seen a small passage that leads to a stone-paved pond, called Sra Song (fig. 3) The stones were arranged in steps leading down to the bottom but now many of them are broken, preventing the capture of much water here.

More steps lead up to the second *gopura* which, larger than the first, is built in the architectural plan of a Greek cross (fig.4). The sculptures on the lintels and pediments are superb, especially those of the southernmost entrance. On the lintel here, Vishnu is represented lying on the Naga in the episode of the creation of the world, and on the pediment his incarnation as a tortoise during the episode of churning the Milk Ocean for nectar is depicted. (Though Prasat Phra Viharn was dedicated to Siva, many sculptured scenes portray the incarnation of Vishnu as Krishna). These sculptures indicate an 11th century origin again, in such features as *naga* without haloes, a *garuda* (king of birds) having wings but no arms, and the particular costumes of various angels and demons (fig. 5).

From the second gate, another flight of stairs leads to another stone-paved avenue, 148 m. long and lined on each side with more stone pillars terminating in carved lotus-buds. Beyond these, tall trees rise against the sky. Prasat Phra Viharn differs from other Khmer sanctuaries in that here architecture and nature mingle.

On the left of the avenue are steps leading to a small passage and another stone-paved pond which also has steps leading down to the bottom. This pond was probably made for lustral water, since in the middle of the southern embankment is a stone lion head from whose mouth, now broken, water once flowed. It is a great pity that this stone lion head has now been stolen. As one ascends the steps to the third *gopura*, one can see, in front of its right wing, another small stone structure, which was probably built in the 13th century, later than the other buildings in the same vicinity (fig 6). The third *gopura*, also in the Greek-cross plan, is much larger than the first two, having a small parapet around the buildings as well as additions to both its wings. Wood covered with bricks composed the roof of this gate; though the wooden structure has vanished, its existence is attested to by square holes cut into the stone pediments to hold the wooden beams that made the triangular, brick-covered roof. Some bricks can still be seen on the remaining roof-tip. On one of the southern pediments of this gate is a very beautiful carving representing the Lord Siva and his consort riding on a sacred bull and flanked by attendants holding emblems of royalty. Only a few figures appear in the scene, leaving the large background vacant. This restraint accentuates the depth of the reliefs and heightens the effect of beauty. This scene very much resembles those of Banteay Srei, one of the most beautiful Khmer sanctuaries, created in 967 A.D. (fig.7).

An avenue 34 m. long leads from the

third to the fourth *gopura*, which is composed of many wings and adjacent rooms. This short avenue is lined by stone pillars and *naga* without haloes. Some sections of this *gopura* are covered with bricks. Nearby, on the east and west, stand two separate edifices made of stone and beautifully carved. They are probably the type of architecture termed 'libraries' by French archaeologists; their precise function is unknown.

A passage leads from this fourth *gopura* through a large room to the stone galleries surrounding the main sanctuary. These galleries are walled on the outer side, pierced only by two doors on the east and west; the inside walls are cut into many windows. This architecture illustrates the evolution of Khmer technique, for at that time the Khmer architects had just mastered the method of roofing galleries with stone; they did not yet dare to build broad ones or to create open galleries supported only by pillars. Though the wings of the fourth gate consist of open galleries supported on the front by pillars, their superstructure was of wood. This evolution in technique is demonstrated by the successive methods of roofing with wooden structures, brick, and stone; these three materials co-exist at Prasat Phra Viharn. Sometimes sandstone was used as a base for brick roof.

Inside the galleries is a court, in the middle of which was a main sanctuary with a porch; the main edifice has unfortunately crumbled, (fig. 8) leaving only a northern porch with a bas-relief representing the figure of Siva dancing on its

pediment. It is curious that Siva is standing on an elephant's head instead of a bull, his usual mount. It is possible that the sculptor combined Siva's act of dancing with that of destroying the elephant demon, Gajasura. Though the main sanctuary has fallen in ruin, there fortunately remains a model of it which was originally fixed as a decoration on the roof, after the Indian fashion, and which will be most useful when this sanctuary is restored by the Anastylis Method. In the porch, many late Buddha images are now installed for worship. Outside the eastern and western galleries are two other large buildings whose functions are not altogether certain. The eastern edifice was perhaps the place where worshippers came for a sacred bath, since the four corners of the inner room are basins, which in the old days were used to hold lustral water. The western structure was probably for girl dancers, since the stone screens in front of the doors, and the high windows, give it privacy. Each window is barred by two rows of typical Khmer balustrade. In front of this western building are traces of a large pond.

The southern gallery of the sanctuary is solid, and exit can be made only through the door of the western one, which opens to a terrace named Pei Ta Di. From this terrace, where traces of the cutting of stone for construction can be seen, a sheer precipice drops 547 metres to the plains of Lower Cambodia, stretching to the horizon (fig. 9). Beneath an overhanging ledge of this cliff is an open cave where one can descend to rest and enjoy the view.

Many inscriptions found at Prasat Phra Viharn aid in determining its age fairly clearly:

1. One stone inscription, which fortunately was reproduced before it disappeared from its site, is in Sanskrit and includes the date equivalent to 893 A.D., falling in the reign of King Yasovarman I of Cambodia (889-900). But if the details of Prasat Phra Viharn are compared to those of other buildings by Yasovarman—for instance, the Phnom Bakheng in Cambodia—it can be seen that the decorations at Prasat Phra Viharn are not so early. It is therefore probable that, if Prasat Phra Viharn was actually erected in the reign of Yasovarman, it was constructed in wood and has totally disappeared. What exists here now was built later.

2. Many Sanskrit and Khmer inscriptions on the third and fourth gates, and one stone inscription indicate dates in the reign of King Suryavarman I (1002-1050). These dates correspond to many decorations which, as has been said already, indicate an 11th century origin; and we can therefore surmise that Prasat Phra Viharn began to be constructed in stone during that period.

3. Another stone inscription in Sanskrit and Khmer has a date equivalent to 1119, in the reign of King Suryavarman II (1113 - after 1145), the builder of the famous Angkor Wat. This date fits in very well with the additional structures and some works of art in the Angkor Wat style at Prasat Phra Viharn, for instance, a many-headed

naga furnished with halo and trunk, as well as some figures of deities. These sculptures were found lying in the court behind the fourth gate (fig. 10).

Some other structures indicate that they were built at an even later period, i.e. the above-mentioned stone tower in front of the eastern wing of the third gate. This tower was probably built in the 13th century (fig 6).

That Prasat Phra Viharn was dedicated to Siva can be inferred from the first stone inscription in which the sanctuary is referred to as 'Cikharecvara' (Lord of the mountain, which implies Siva). A Sivalinga (phallic emblem of Siva) was probably installed in the main sanctuary. Such carved scenes as those of Siva dancing and Siva and his consort riding a bull seem to support this theory. Though there are many Vishnuite scenes, Vishnu was probably regarded as secondary to Siva.

Though Prasat Phra Viharn was built by ancient Khmer artists, this great shrine was undoubtedly meant for the people of the northern highland which now forms one part of the Thai kingdom. Usually Khmer sanctuaries faced east, since the east was the most important direction to oriental people. Only necessity could force them to build their temples facing in other directions. Thus, Angkor Wat faces west either because the sanctuary was destined to be the tomb of King Suryavarman II, the founder, or because the builders of the temple, wishing to situate it on an important road running north and south, were

forced by exigencies of space or the existence of such earlier temples as Phnom Bakheng and Baksei Chamkrong on the western side of the road facing east, to place Angkor Wat on the east of the road and facing it west. The Phimai Temple in Thailand faces south because a road from Cambodia had already been cut that way. Prasat Phra Viharn faces north in order to greet the peoples from the north, from such places as Sisaket and Ubon Ratcha Thani. A big pond called Sra Trao, for the people, was also built in the north, not far from the slope at the base of the shrine.

Now that the Cambodian Government allows us, Thai people, to visit this great shrine it is indeed a good omen for a better understanding between the two countries.

Near Prasat Phra Viharn, there is a bas-relief carved on a hill in Thailand on the east. We may go down the cliff to see this sculpture. It represents a seated divinity flanked by two female attendants (fig. 11). The male divinity might represent Siva or Kubera, the god of wealth. The figure is thought to be Kubera because he wears a flower on each of his ears. This characteristic belongs to a demon as can be seen from a demon *dvarapala* (door-guardian) in Khmer art. Therefore the figure might portray Kubera who is a demon. These three figures might have been carved in about the 10th century A.D. if one will judge from the designs on their diadems. Nearby are unfinished sketches of four-armed Vishnu (?) seated on a naga and flanked by two wild boars. This site is called in Thai 'Mo I Daeng'.



FIGURE 1. THE SEVEN-HEADED NAGA IN FRONT OF PRASAT PHRA VIHARN ON THE NORTH



FIGURE 2. THE FIRST GOPURA (GATE)



FIGURE 3. THE POND CALLED SRA SONG NEAR THE SECOND GOPURA



FIGURE 4. THE SECOND GOPURA



FIGURE 5. A PEDIMENT ON THE SOUTH OF THE SECOND *GOPURA* DEPICTING THE SCENE OF THE CHURNING OF THE MILK OCEAN



FIGURE 6. A TOWER IN FRONT OF THE THIRD *GOPURA*



FIGURE 7. A PEDIMENT ON THE SOUTH OF THE THIRD *GOPURA* REPRESENTING SIVA AND UMA RIDING ON THE BULL, NANDIN



FIGURE 8. THE FRONT PORCH OF THE MAIN STANCTUARY OF PRASAT PHRA VIHARN



FIGURE 9. THE SCENERY BEHIND PRASAT PHRA  
VIHARN

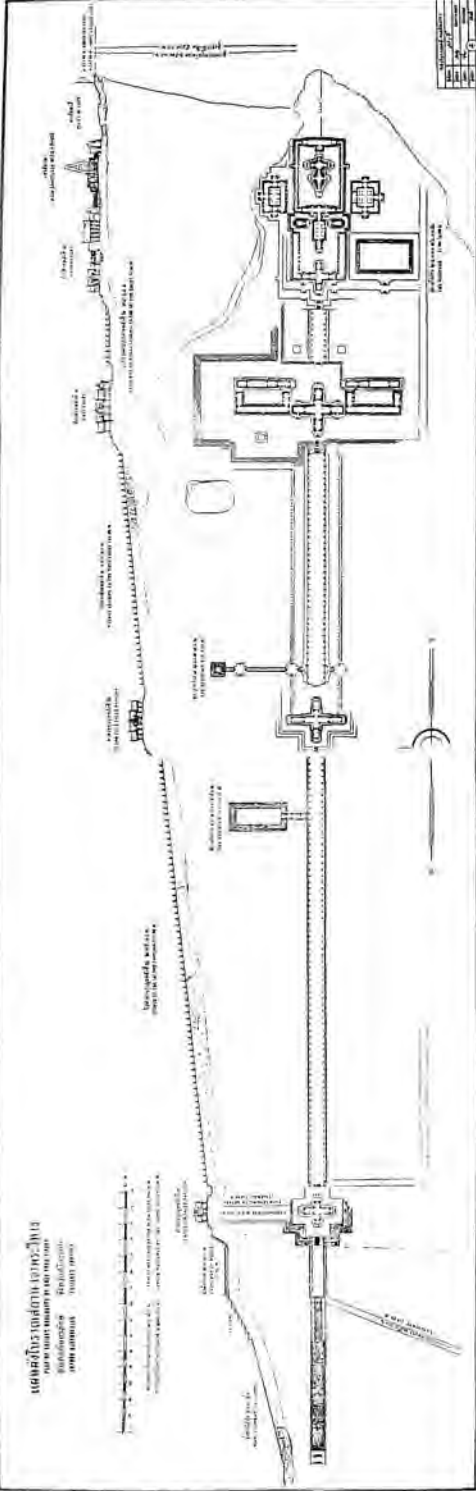


FIGURE 10. NAGA OF ANGKOR WAT STYLE  
(FIRST HALF OF THE 12TH CENTURY A.D.) IN  
THE BOUNDARY OF THE FOURTH GOPURA



FIGURE 11. BAS-RELIEF AT "MO I DAENG"

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