

# Prasat Thom of Koh Ker and Banteay Srei

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*The purpose of this article is not to make a journey to discover archaeological sites, which are already more or less known. Such a course would today seem rather out of place because it would bring forth for most of us much sadness, and for some, too many thoughts about uncertain tomorrows. Hence, the aim here is to be more precise about and to better understand certain unusual aspects of Khmer art.*

In a general manner, and greatly simplifying matters, one must admit that the standard type of Khmer architecture is that of the temple, which has been given the name "temple-mountain," and which is characterized by a tiered pyramid bearing one or several sanctuaries. If this description creates an image, it is however, not exactly accurate because the sanctuary is considered to be a mountain which by definition is the abode of all divinity. Khmer epigraphy makes this quite clear by having designated since the most ancient times the head of the sanctuary with the title "Khlon Vnam"; the exact translation in Sanskrit of "*sailadhipa*" (chief/master of the mountain). The chief/master is nothing more than a pleonasm, proposed for the first time in 1866 by the English photographer J. Thomson, a title which he used for Borobudur as well as Angkor Wat. This designation came into use over a half a century ago through the work and teachings of Philippe Stern.

It is the temples with tiered pyramids, although not that numerous and only characterized by a few large royal establishments, which best illustrate the concept of a Khmer temple. But it should also be pointed out that these temples with or without tiered pyramids appear to always be marked by the importance accorded the main sanctuary which always dominates the surrounding space and which is an image, visible from afar, of the mountain abode of the god and identified with the god himself.

This long tradition appears to have found its outcome with the Phra Buddha Prang of Wat Arun (Bangkok), completed during the middle of the 19th century, the spire of which stands at a height of 104 metres. Even though of an entirely different context than the preceding monuments, it conveys just as well similar cosmological preoccupations.

Thus, although this architectural tradition seems to be so well established in the central Southeast Asian Peninsula, during the 10th century there was an attempt to impose another totally different formula on Khmer territory. Granted, its success has been ephemeral, but its influences were nonetheless evident. It is this formula which leads us to connect two temples which are very different in appearance: Prasat Thom Koh Ker, marked by gigantic dimensions and an illusionary austerity and

Banteay Srei, miniaturized and described by M. Glaize (cf. *Les Monuments du Group d'Ankor, Guide*) as a "bijoux precieux," and "une sorte de caprice" where detail is "so abundant and so incomparably pretty that it prevails on the whole." Such lyrical enthusiasm, particularly understandable from a western and profane point of view, tends to neglect and somewhat forget that all this, down to the details, is of a religious inspiration and purpose, leaving no place for "caprice."

We are rather well-informed, thanks to abundant epigraphy, about these two complexes, both located to the northeast of Angkor; the first at a distance of approximately 80 kilometres and the second at about 20 kilometres. Again, the purpose here is not to undertake an historic study of these two monuments, but instead to be concerned with the architectural and iconographic problems which they pose. Thus we will provide only a summary of what is important about each of them.

Prasat Thom was founded in Koh Ker (old Choc Gargyar) in 921 AD by Jayavarman IV, brother-in-law of Yasovarman I, the founder of the first Angkor. Therefore he was uncle by marriage of the reigning king Harsavarman I, son and first successor of Yasovarman. The temple was founded under the name of Tribhuvanésva (The Lord of the Three Worlds, here meaning Siva) and seems to have had its *prang* enlarged in 927 AD, when Jayavarman IV was officially recognized as sole sovereign. He was able to use this to his advantage in rituals of the *devaraja*, due to the disappearance of the ruler of Angkor, Isanavarman II, the second son of Yasovarman I, who was still mentioned in 925 AD.

Banteay Srei, founded in 967 AD "at Isvarapura" is another Sivaite establishment, with an almost identical vocable, that of Tribhuvanamahesvara (The Eminent/Supreme Lord of the Three Worlds). It is the foundation of the Vrah Guru (Venerable Spiritual Teacher) of King Jayavarman V, son of Rajendravarman II, the restorer of Ankorian power. The guru, named Yajnavaraha, was the son of a Brahman and Harsavarman I's daughter, making him a great-grandson of Yasovarman I, the founder of Angkor. Inscriptions reveal that this learned person was assisted by his younger brother, also a great scholar.

So dissimilar at first (above all if one thinks in function of measurable sizes instead of proportions), both temples present, nevertheless, sufficient characteristics in common which differ from the Angkorian architectural tradition for us to suppose that they follow similar architectural concepts.

Certain arrangements (for example the number of sanctuaries) are related to the purpose of each of them. As for other aspects, the general plans are similar; and if the dimensions are vastly different, the proportions remain fairly similar. As a rule, Indian treatises on architecture never give the dimensions of the various parts of a temple nor of the idols housed in them in absolute measurements. Measurements are given only in reference to standard unit of measure chosen for the whole.

Thus we can observe that Prasat Thom and Banteay Srei are characterized, according to their plan, by their development in length (an axial plan); by their moat enclosed between two surrounding walls, and encircling only the concentric part of the plan; and by the grouping of the sanctuaries in the interior of a restricted space enclosed in a surrounding wall.

The elevation confirms the originality of this choice. Instead of magnifying the importance of the sanctuary or the sanctuaries, these are found here to be almost hidden from view. Although of dimensions which are hardly unassuming, grouped on a simple, common platform, they disappear behind the gopura when the dimensions cross as one progressively distances oneself from the sanctuary. Noting as a reminder, that the Prasat Kraham gopura is of the third wall of Prasat Thom (itself preceded by a fourth gopura, of a still more significant development, with doors which are 4 metres high and "colonettes" of more than 50 centimetres in diameter.

The only important difference for Prasat Thom is the presence in the west (on the axis, but in fact, in a west-southwest direction according to the general orientation) of the *prang*, a high, five-storied pyramid with a single, unfinished sanctuary (with a total remaining height of more than 35 metres) and with a pedestal intended for an enormous 9 by 9 cubits *linga*, according to

inscriptions (which is approximately 4.5 metres high and 4.5 metres in circumference, i.e. approximately 1.50 metres in diameter). As already mentioned, this addition appears related to the association of Prasat Thom with the Angkorian system following the disappearance of Isanavaman II, second son and successor of Yasovarman I, which lead to the recognition of Jayavarman IV as sole ruler of the Khmer kingdom in 927 AD (according to inscriptions.)

The plans of Prasat Thom and Banteay Srei, so unusual in Khmer architecture, are however, not completely exceptional, as we shall now see... And without doubt the adoption, relatively speaking, of a new type of architecture in Angkorian Cambodia (specifically the region to the northeast of Angkor) can be explained by a temporary interest in new Sivaite texts tending to supplement those which traditionally prevailed. If the epigraphy of Koh Ker is silent on this subject, those of Banteay Srei give some answers, and in any case, a direction for research. Let us recall that we are informed that the very learned founder Yajnavaraha, was seconded by his younger brother. As Yajnavaraha, the latter practiced Sivaite yoga, and even entirely recopied the *Kasikavrtti* (Commentary/Gloss of Kasi [Varanasi]) from the grammatical teachings of the Panini school, held to have been revealed by Siva); the *Sivasamhita* (cf. K. Bhattacharya, also named Vayu or Sivapurana, as the Tantric text is named in yoga later) and finally the *Paramesvara* (*agama* [tradition]) a text of monist orientation, seeming to be useful in aiding in the understanding of the originality of Prasat Thom and above all Banteay Srei, where all iconography concentrates around Siva, leads to the primacy of Siva.

Thus perhaps can we find the sources of inspiration for what appears to be a true architectural revolution, beginning with the foundation of Prasat Thom by Jayavarman IV, but of a duration barely exceeding the reign of Jayavarman V (968–1001). This resulting from the latter's succession leading to difficult times, with nine years of internal conflict, which was put to an end by Suryavaman I, the founder of the Prang Khao Phra Vihan and whose reign opened a new era for the Angkorian royalty.

In any case, the formula for Parsat Thom and Banteay

Srei partially adhered to a school (apparently, above all in the region to the northeast of Angkor), with temples such as Prasat Trapeang Khyang and Prasat Sek Ta Tuy, 'co-partners' of Banteay Srei, and also Prasat Trapeang Suay, Prasat Suay Kbal Tuk, Prasat Phnom Sandak...etc. A list which, although not exhaustive, is sufficient to justify the designation of "Art of the Northeast", favored by those who worked in the area during the years 1929-30, though categorically rejected by P. Stern and his school. In reality, no one was wrong! All was a question of language: the first group speaking of architecture, and the second of 'architectural decoration'....In the first case, of rupture, and in the second of evolution!

But these comments about Prasat Thom and Banteay Srei lead us to evoke, without considering the dates, (the Indian archaeological treatises do not consider a specific period, they just recognize varying trends) the two types of temples so characteristic of Tamilnadu: ones where the sanctuary is visible from all directions (Mahaballipuram: a shore temple, Tanjore: Brhadisvara...) and the ones with enormous surrounding walls and *gopuras* (Madurai: Minaksi-Sundarisvara: Srirangam: Visnu temple, etc.)

We have underlined that for Prasat Thom and Banteay Srei, the pre-eminent divinity was Siva. This attribution merits an exceptionally rich iconography (above all at Prasat Thom), implying the presence of guardians/ attendants rarely appearing with such insistence, even in India: the *gana* (i.e. "the troop, the multitude, deities of a lower level," Siva's followers and servants) whose domain is the *ganaparvata*, which is the Kailasa, the abode of Siva, but obviously at the bottom of its slopes.

That is what is represented on the east and west tympanums of the pediments of Banteay Srei's south library, each very well preserved and of a free interpretation. To the east it is the Ravananugrahanurti ("a mark of favour" [from Siva] to Ravana) when Ravana strives to tear apart, shake Mount Kailasa. To the west is the Kamadhanamurti ("that burns, destroys Kama") or the Kamantakamurti, ("that leads Kama to death"), where Kama, god of love, tries to deter Siva from his asceticism by arousing his love for Parvati and is reduced to ashes.

We shall return to a few of the lessons that we learn from these two scenes, but before, let us see what can be found, or could be found until recently, about the *gana* in the two temples. Observing first, that those of Prasat Thom were placed on the doors of the *gopura* with the hands together in *anjanimudra*, while those of Banteay Srei are on the sides of the stairs giving access to the sanctuary's common terrace, and all(?) holding some type of short weapon (*sanku* or *churika*?) on the right knee.

Our study of these *gana* leads us to notice that the first researchers hardly paid any attention to them. Thus despite all the existing photographs, the monkey headed *gana* at Prasat Krahhm was described as "man with the head of a crocodile" due to being confused with the horse headed *gana* of *gopura* III and was described by H. Parmentier as a heraldic lion...when it comes to Victor Goloubew, he qualified those at Banteay Srei as "grotesque figures, sometimes ferocious, sometimes humorous."

Having pointed this out, and taking into account that the two series are more or less complimentary, and that the tympanums of Banteay Srei provides us with valuable evidence, we believe to have found the equine head of one of the *gana* of Banteay Srei in the Saigon Museum (TP. Ho Chi Minh, Historical Museum). Here the head is identified as Kalkyavatara(?), although we prefer the identification of Vajimukha. This head, of pink sandstone (of the same kind as Banteay Srei), was brought from Angkor or from that region, around 1920 and placed in a pagoda in the Gia Dinh province (location from which came the mistaken provenance quoted by L. Malleret). Most likely it belongs to one of the Banteay Srei *gana*: it is made of the same pink sandstone, has the same dimensions, and the same stylistic details (in particular a mane's toupee similar to those of the horses in the representation of Kamsa being put to death by Krsna, north library facing west or the lintel showing Hayagriva (hippocephalic Visnu, minor avatara) killing the Daitya, ravishers of Veda, *gopura* I east, west face.

More important are the problems posed at Banteay Srei by the identification of the "simian" *gana* and the *ganas* of the west central flight of stairs. For the first of these, let us

return to the Ravananugrahamurti scene. Appearing here are two "monkey" *gana*, much larger than the other *gana*. The one to the right of Siva appears to be urging the troops through gesture to be quiet and calm. This is Nandisvara (Nandikesvara, Nandisa), the guardian of Kailasa, whose name must not be confused with Nandin the Bull, the mount of Siva. On route, and mounted in his chariot Puspaka, Ravana encounters Nandikesvara on Mount Saravana (birthplace of Karttikeya). Nandikesvara intends to stop him from going further. Ravana, upon making fun of his monkey face, receives the response that it will be the monkeys in appearance and force just like himself, that will destroy Ravana (making allusion to the outcome of the Ramayana).

We also find in the same text a valuable description: Nandi (kesvara) is said to be *vanararupam*, that is to say, "of the appearance of a monkey". But it is added that his body is that of a dwarf (*vamana*), strong, fierce, dark in complexion and with "short arms" (thus different from the monkeys). Keeping in mind his significant role (see Banteay Srei pediment and the Phum Or Taki lintel, recently at the Vat Po Veal Museum, Battambang) it is certainly him that we must recognize at the entrance of Prasat Kraham, the huge *gopura* of Prasat Thom. It is also he who should have been reinstalled in front of the *mandapa* of the central sanctuary of Banteay Srei, to the east. But V. Goloubew (see above quotation) most likely feared adding to the "grotesque" for visitors who had not been forewarned...This *gana* is, moreover, a little larger than the other *gana*. This is the same for the second "monkey" (cf. Banteay Srei tympanum) that we propose to identify as Vrsakapi (from *vr̥san*, vigorous, powerful...; from which: the monkey chief/lord) believed to be the son of Indra. Thus the name is one of the eleven Rudra, indeed even for Siva or Visnu... Previously, we had thought to identify him as the monkey that appears with the *deva* in the scene at Angkor Wat representating the Churning of the Ocean.

What should be the identity of the *ganās* that were made to be hung to the west of the terrace? Here we point out the presence of a *gana* with a gentle and smiling face, often confused with that of Siva (Phnom Phen Museum) and with another, in situ, evocative of some *yaksa*, with crimped hair arranged in a small

chignon, Negroid face, bulging eyes and protruding fangs. The first would, once again, be Nandisvara, who the texts inform us was metamorphosed "to have the same appearance as Siva" and placed at the head of the *gana*. Consequently, the second would be Mahakala, who is normally associated as a guardian, even in Khmer inscriptions. The texts describe him as having a black complexion, with bulging eyes (because he drinks to excess), with pointed fangs and spiky hair. He is also described, through reference to Siva, as having three eyes, but in matters of saivite iconography Khmer sculpture rarely follows the texts with complete exactitude.

Believing to have, therefore, identified the principal *ganās* of the monuments, and to have restored them to their legitimate place, their presence brings us to the conclusion that these temples built on one level are, with their concentric surrounding walls, identical to the "temple-mountains", and specifically to Kailasa. Which is proved once again by the study of the tympanum of the Ravananugrahamurti: at the foot of Mount Kailasa the frightened flight of the wild animals (in particular the lions), and above, the *ganās* reassured by their vigilant chiefs, and even higher the *devās* and the *devatās* and the ascetics in prayer or contemplating the divine couple. Again, we find the same arrangement on the monument itself, and if on the level of the *devās* and *devatās*, religious figures and ascetics are lacking, they are found again on the terraces of the roofs. We should not forget either that the priests in charge of the temple officiate amongst them.

Thus Banteay Srei and Prasat Thom represent very well, as does Baksei Chamkrong, the Kailasa, but a Kailasa which has become the meeting place of all gods (Prasat Thom) or the place affirming the importance of Mahesvara (Banteay Srei). Strangely, the symbolism is the reverse in relation to what was desired by Yasovarman I for Bakheng (see J. Filliozat, *Le symbolism du monument du Phnom Bakhen*, BEFEO XLIV, 2, 1952, p. 527 sqq.): importance is no longer placed on Mount Meru, but on Kailasa. Instead of complex symbolism as at Bakheng or one reduced to the basics at Baksei Chamkrong, we find at Koh Ker, a Meru —the *prang* —having only one five-storey sanctuary and with one stairway for access, and a

Kailasa —Prasat Thom—where all the gods are reassembled around the “Lord of the Three Worlds.”

The thoughts that are inspired by these two temples, so different in appearance, and yet so similar in their conception, seem at times to have led us a bit far from our subject. But during a time when one must resort to no longer studying Khmer art except by following the methods that apply to M. de Buffon of Natural

History, and not even having as much information as he had, for us it is not disagreeable to use the maximum of given information that we have available in order to conclude that the study of interest that we have taken here will not have disappointed our listeners.

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