

The Symbolism of Angkor Thom

by Jean Boisselier

In 1177 A.D. the Cham army captured the town of Angkor by surprise. In reality this event signified a renewed rivalry between the Khmer and Cham kings for dynastic rights. This rivalry dated back, if not to the time of Funan, at least, to the 7th century following the accession of Isanavarman I, the Chenla monarch and the founder of the town of Isanapura which is now known as Sambor Prei Kuk.

The capture of Angkor in 1177 was of dramatic importance for the

Khmer empire in the moral, religious and political aspects rather than in the material one. Hardly any traces of destruction attributable to that period can now be seen. The fall of Angkor was actually much less significant than the fact that the king, who was a usurper, was killed. His death resulted to the destruction of the magicoreligious system on which Khmer power was based.

This magicoreligious system stemmed from a ritual performed on Kulen Mountain, at the beginning of the 9th century, by King Jayavarman II to ensure the total sovereignty and inviolability of Kambujadesa. This system was perfected by his successors, especially Yasovarman I, the founder of the first town of Angkor at the end of the same century, and Rajendravarman II, who came back to reside at Angkor in the middle of the 10th century. The whole system was based on the connection of Angkorian power with the inviola-

bility of the capital. But when Angkor was captured by an enemy, whoever it might have been, the fall of the capital made evident the weakness of the system. It brought about the disappearance of Angkorian power.

It was Jayavarman VII (1181 A.D. - circa 1219) who tried to revive the glory of the system. He did it not by repairing the damage which had been done, but by eradicating, even the slightest effects of a degrading defeat, by constructing a new power. Such power was still perfectly bound to the ancient system and the kingdom became even more powerful and extensive than it had ever been before.

To accomplish this true *tour de force* in a record period of time, Jayavarman VII did not try to restore what could not be spiritually revived from its ruin. On the contrary, he bypassed the Brahmanic traditions which had thus far prevailed and developed a system that was entirely new. To do so he relied only on Buddhist cosmology, especially on information from the Mahayana sect. According to epigraphical evidence, the royal family and the king himself were fervent adherents of the sect.

The king then set out to do the following:

First, to show the world -- that is to say, Southeast Asia -- that he was a *cakravartin* (*universal monarch*), by extending his conquests as far as possible and covering his empire with pious monuments. By this feverish construction, usually criticised as megalomania through misunderstanding, the king was in reality trying to follow the example of King Asoka, the model for every Buddhist sovereign.

Second, to build a new capital

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Fig.1 The Bayon Temple at the center of the town of Angkor Thom. Constructed by King Jayavarman VII, late 12th - early 13th centuries A.D.

resembling that of the God Indra in Tavatimsa Heaven. It was to be a model for all sovereigns of other kingdoms. This capital would be situated at the center of the kingdom in the same way that the capital of Indra was on top of Mount Sumeru. The Khmer inscriptions always referred to it as “The Kambujadesan heavenly semblance.” Jayavarman VII had also identified himself with

Indra, who reigned over a Kambujadesa identical to Sumeru at the center of the world.

This new capital was Angkor Thom -- Mahanagara (*the Great City*) which was in the form of a square. Three kilometres on each side, it is surrounded by a large moat and a high wall with five monumental gates. In the centre was a vast temple called the Bayon, the conception of which

has long been enigmatic (*Fig.1*). The Royal Palace served as an element intentionally linking the new capital with the former Angkor.

Local traditions were nourished by the Buddhist texts and, its recognized basis, the cosmological diagrams and the Jatakas. Surprised and dazzled by the astonishing symbiosis of forest and deserted temples, western researchers and

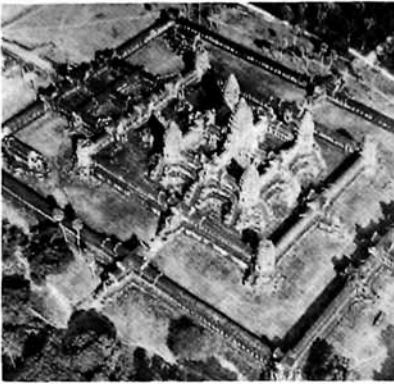


Fig.2 Angkor Wat, the most famous Khmer temple in Cambodia. Constructed by King Suryavarman II, first half of the 12th century A.D.

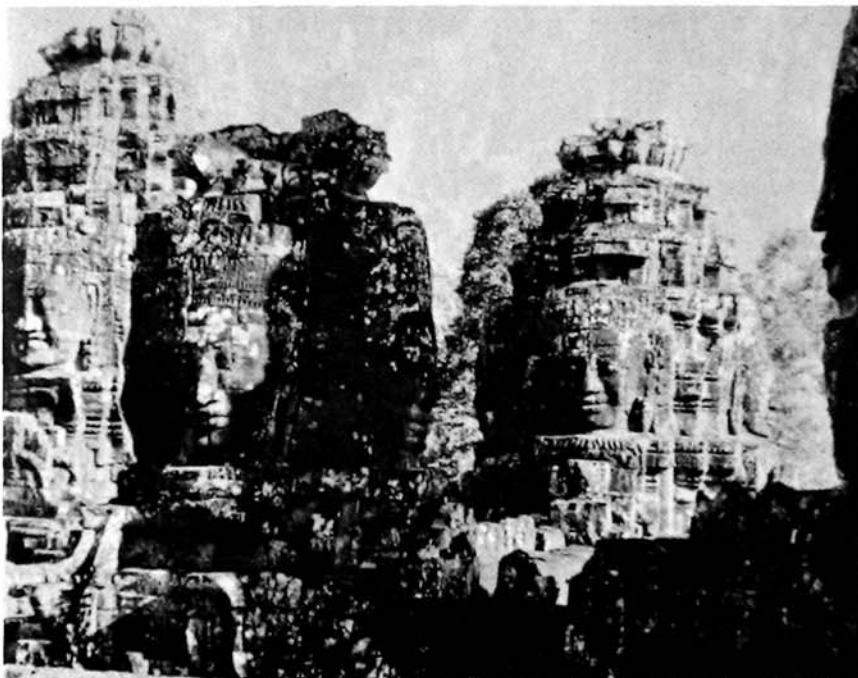


Fig.3 The towers of Bayon with the faces of Brahma carved on top.

visitors could only think of its romantic and enchanting aspect. They thus came up with most fantastic interpretations suiting their fancy... a dizzying assemblage which kept them from looking into the Buddhist texts and inscriptions. In fact, their interest was concentrated more closely, at least since the 17th century, on Angkor Wat.

Angkor Wat is a masterly work in the first half of the 12th century. Its totally classical perfection is more

directly accessible and more easily adaptable to Theravada Buddhism. Hence, it was able to continue its activity even though the capital was later abandoned.

But if Angkor Wat might be regarded as a methodic and a rational masterpiece of Khmer architecture (Fig. 2), Angkor Thom is undeniably an expression of the highest genius. In three dimensions and on a scale worthy of an entire nation, it is the materialization of Buddhist cos-

mology. Ideas that only great painters would dare to represent.

No city among those that are most revered in India, Sri Lanka, the Indochinese peninsula or in Indonesia, can come close to the totality inspired and desired by Jayavarman VII. Angkor Thom combines a profound knowledge of Buddhist cosmology with an exceptional power of adaptation employed by a true genius in the realm of architectural sculpture.

Angkor Thom is not an architectural "miracle" as conceived by Westerners. Neither does it constitute "edifying" imagery comparable to that of the Christian world. It is, in reality, the world of the gods springing up from the heart of ancient Cambodia: supra-human, but nevertheless still within normal limits.

What then does Angkor Thom actually represent?

Even if one disregards the allusions to historical events occurring in epigraphy, the Khmer inscriptions still clearly establish that the new capital, after the fall of Angkor, is the **City of Indra** (with whom the king is identified). And **Tavatimsa Heaven** -- the **Heaven of the Thirty-Three Gods** -- (with whom the princes and provincial governors under the king's authority are identified) -- with its Royal Palace, its pleasure gardens and the **Assembly Hall of the Gods**, is none other than the **Bayon** (Epigraphy asserts such a notion, destroying a multitude of perilous or whimsical hypotheses).

The **Bayon** is the (Assembly Hall of the gods). On auspicious days the gods assemble in the Bayon while Brahma, in "every youthful" aspect of Pancasikha Gandharva, multiplies

his image to honour each of the gods. No more faithful illustration, even in painting, could ever be brought into being from the descriptions left by inspired visionaries (*Fig. 3*).

No less surprising are the walls of the city -- impregnable, invulnerable as the city of Indra. A faithful illustration from a text will be summarized briefly by going back to a "historical" event.

When Sakra (*Sakka*) was born in Tavatimsa Heaven as Indra (*Chief King*) of the gods, he found that the summit of Mount Sumeru was occupied at the same time by both the gods and the Asura. Regretting this deplorable situation, Indra decided to rid his realm of the Asura. After having them all drunk, he hurled them down to the bottom of Mount Sumeru.

The Asura then found themselves in a domain at the bottom of Mount Sumeru which actually corresponded symmetrically to Tavatimsa heaven. A tree grew there. When in blossom, the tree reminded the Asura of the marvel of the Tavatimsa abode. And this gave birth to the Asuras' desire to reconquer their former home. They then rushed to attack Mount Sumeru "like a swarm of termites climbing up a pillar".

From this comes the parallel consisting the attack of the Asuras and the attack of the Chams on the first Angkor, identified as the town of Indra. This attack dominates the symbolism on the gates of Angkor Thom. An important part of that symbolism is on the temple of Preah Khan at Angkor. Although very complex, the meaning fortunately could be understood from the inscription on the foundation stela.

Now back to the attack of the Asura. Taking advantage of the surprise of the gods, the Asura advanced rapidly. The gods fled in confusion, only to be saved by a fortunate incident. After having been vanquished in the ocean, Indra continued to flee in his chariot.

The gods happened to encounter a group of young *garudas* who were frolicking in their forest.

The chariot was not only stopped by the *garudas* but also turned back to where it came from. The Asura, thinking that this was an offensive with reinforcements, fled in disorder. Thus, Indra won a complete but unexpected victory.

To consecrate that victory, the Palace of Indra's Victory -- the *Vaijayanta Prasada*, appeared miraculously at that moment. In

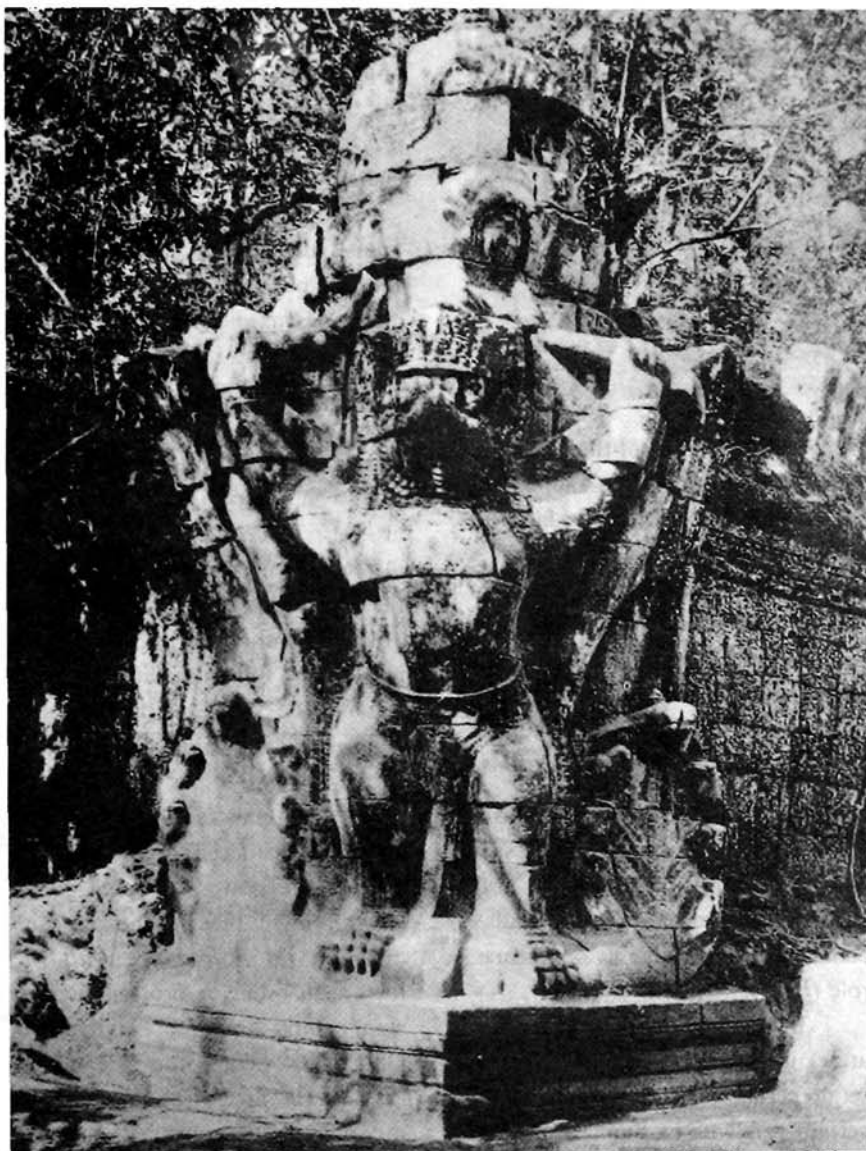


Fig. 4 A corner of the walls around the Temple of Preah Khan of Angkor. It shows a standing garuda holding two naga.



Fig. 5 The southern gate of Angkor Thom late 12th century A.D.



Fig. 6 A closer view of the southern gate of Angkor Thom. The upper portion of the gate depicts the faces of the four Kings of Directions while figures of Indra riding on the three-headed elephant are shown on both sides. Late 12th - early 13th centuries A.D.

reality this is the Temple of Preah Khan of Angkor, erected on the site of the victory. Large figures of garudas, sculpted around the walls, commemorate their highly opportune role (Fig.4).

To preclude any risk of surprise attack in the future, Indra decided to set up permanent guards drawn from certain residents of Sumeru and its environs. This explains the astonishing concept of the gates of Angkor Thom (and not the more or

less beguiling hypotheses lately set forth on this subject: the best known and the least acceptable of which is that it represents the Churning of the Milk Ocean).

Actually, the Theravada and Mahayana texts differ only in minor details. They both inform us that one type of guard on duty was given to a particular class of Naga and to two families of Yaksa. These two families should not be confused with the Asura despite some of their terrible appearances. Because how could one put the Deva together with the Asura (Fig. 5), when they are irreconcilable enemies.

Another type of guards, the **Four Great Kings** guard the four cardinal points of the compass. This group of guardians is completed by images of Indra himself holding the vajra in his hand and evidently riding on the three-headed elephant, Airavata or Erawan (Fig.6).

The exceptional merit of the artists (*silpin*) and of those who directed them lies in their having used these ideas to create the most remarkable monumental composition inspired by Indian traditions:

- **The Nagas and the two Yaksa families** in association on both sides of the causeway.

- **The colossal faces of the Four Great Kings** over each gate (all possess the power of being everywhere). Each face in the opposite direction (in accordance with the texts). In order to protect his own area behind him, for example, the God of the west would face east.

- **The images of Indra** on his mount, the three-headed elephant Airavata or Erawan, at each angle of the five gates -- guards always on the alert.

Without the help of the texts, this rather rapid evocation of the symbolism of Angkor Thom would not have been able to substantiate the grandeur of an art which is still rather often misunderstood. The architects and sculptors in the time of Jayavarman VII possessed an undeniable genius (though their technique sometimes displays too much haste). And those who inspired them also possessed a profound knowledge of the texts on cosmology. All of them knew how to stage an interpretation whose originality remains unequalled to this day.

Translated from French into English by Professor M.C. Subhadradis Diskul and Virginia M. Di Crocco

GLOSSARY

the Asura - a group of demons

Cham army - army of Champa, a kingdom formerly located in the centre of Vietnam

City of Indra - Tavatimsa Heaven

Jataksa - tales on the previous lives of the Buddha

Kambujadesa - Cambodia

Pancasikha Gandharva - one of the demi-gods who has five top-knots on his head and plays a musical instrument

stela - a stone inscription

Tavatimsa Heaven - heaven where god Indra resides with the thirty-two attendant gods

vajra - lightning, the usual weapon of Indra

Yaksa - a type of demon