

Left: Fig 1. The Neak Pean Sanctuary and the banyan tree. Photographed before 1935.

from 1877, the date when Neak Pean was first mentioned in western writings, to 1923, when the work of Henri Marchal, in cleaning the site, made it possible for us to understand its basic plan, at last.

Louis Finot (at that time Director of the Ecole Francaise d'Extrême-Orient) and Victor Goloubew, an archaeologist and art historian who worked in the same institution seemed

The Symbolism of Neak Pean And Its Importance For The Angkorian Monarchy

by Jean Boisselier

Neak Pean, with its dimensions restricted to a human scale and its composition characterized by an apparent simplicity which is nonetheless quite out of the ordinary, is, of all the works of Jayavarman VII (approx. 1181-1218), most likely to captivate the western mind. Indeed, for almost a century it has not ceased to exert fascination on all who have been able to visit it.

Added to the uniqueness of its plan is the added mysterious allure of a most surprising and harmonious association: that of a sanctuary and

a Banyan tree, crowning it majestically. (Fig.1) In 1935 a tropical storm put an end to this romantic charm. This irresistible charm had aroused the enthusiastic admiration of the orientalist Sylvain Levi. From that moment onward it was possible to begin those works which were to give Neak Pean a beauty of a more classic kind. (Fig. 2)

The whole sanctuary had never ceased to stimulate as much curiosity as interest. Widely varying attempts to interpret the sanctuary's symbolism have been made in great number,

to have brought to an end the quest to interpret the symbolism of Neak Pean, which had lasted for almost half a century. They proposed to recognize, in Neak Pean, an architectural adaptation of Lake Anavatapta (in Pali Anotatta), the mythical lake near the Himalayas. G. Coedes, an eminent epigraphist, had reviewed the progress of that effort. He did this in the chapter, "Architectural Symbolism," of his still extremely valuable book, "Pour mieux comprendre Angkor," which appeared in 1949. In that chapter he emphasized



Fig. 2. Neak Pean taken from the air.

that the text on the stela of the Prah Khan at Angkor, which he had deciphered in 1941, confirms the thesis of Finot and Goloubew.

It is now an established fact that Neak Pean is the representation of Lake Anavatapta. This lake is the source of all the sacred rivers of India and an important place in Buddhist cosmology. But this still leaves us wondering why Jayavarman VII decided to transpose it to the site of Angkor.

We should also look into the significance of the sanctuary's structure. As Zhou Daguan, the envoy of the Yuan Dynasty, would say, a century later: it "was dedicated to the Buddha surrounded by all kinds of divinities." We can surely find these answers in the text of the stela of Prah Khan and in the Buddhist texts.

It seems indispensable that Neak Pean is observed in an architectural context. The drying up of huge ponds, the dominating surrounding forest, and the local agriculture hardly allow us to perceive the original meaning of the temple. Visitors of not

so long ago, relied on the various "Guides to the Monuments of Angkor" to see the small site with such beguiling charm. It is a solitary sanctuary

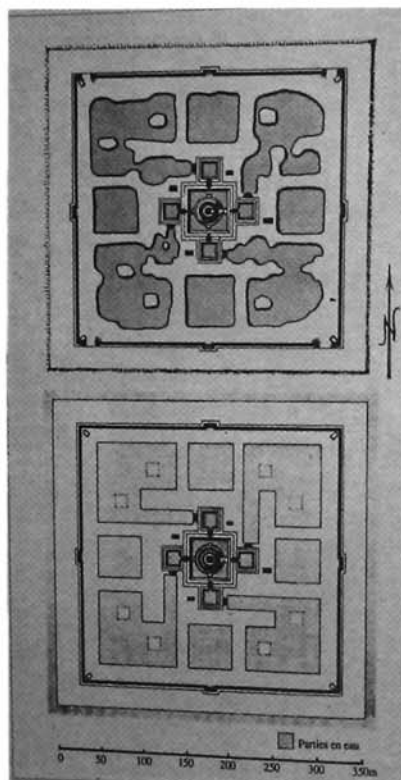


Fig. 3. Plan of Neak Pean

of modest size, constructed on a circular base in the middle of a square pond. The square pond abuts onto four smaller ones, one to a side.

But this view of the sanctuary ignores the fact that this sanctuary was built in the middle of an enclosure that measures 350 metres on each side. This park of 12 hectares is bounded by a wall two metres high. Around the park there is an earthen path. This, in fact, constitutes the real Neak Pean.

It is at the centre of what used to be the sacred pond of Prah Khan, which has long since dried up. It measured 3600 by 900 metres. Neak Pean is therefore only one part, albeit a prominent one, of the entire complex of Phra Khan, from which it cannot be dissociated. (Fig.3)

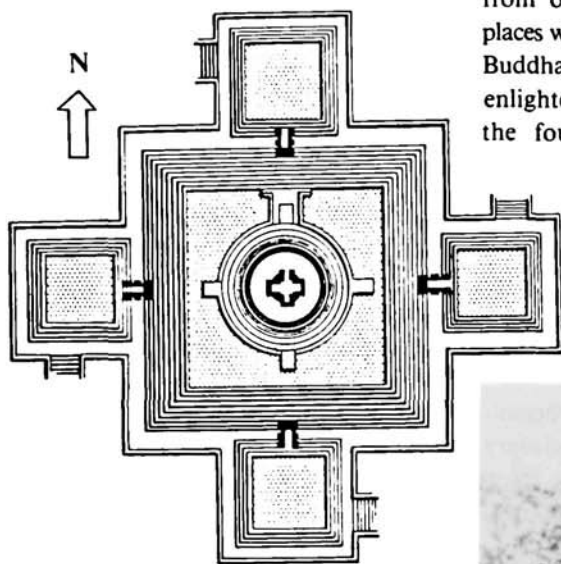
Back to Neak Pean itself. If, by the intention of the builders, one could gain access to Neak Pean only by boat, its wall, which was guarded by four elephants (only one is left) could only be crossed by four axial sets of steps. The four open gaps on the north and the south have a connection with the history of the monument.

Inside the park, the composition is a complex of ponds. Some of them are connected to the central ones but others are free-standing. Among them, four small buildings in laterite can still be found, half buried in the ground. They are very simple and have a very unusual composition. There are also many bases and pedestals, probably the remains of the lightly constructed buildings. These buildings used to protect the 14 divinities mentioned in the Prah Khan inscription.

Neak Pean has pavilions for ablutions, connected with the principal pond and the four smaller axial ones. (Fig.4) The sanctuary in the middle is supported by a gigantic lotus. The lotus is composed of 16 petals. It is placed upon another lotus. Surrounding the base of the

lotus are two *naga*, named the “colling naga”. (Fig. 5)

The modifications made to the sanctuary even in the time of Jayavarman VII, consist of the walling in the three secondary doors. These doors have large images of Avalokitesvara. They do not have any other purpose but to reinforce the original symbolism,



Left: Fig. 4.
Plan of the main sanctuary
of Neak Pean.

to affirm the cosmic import of the composition, and to stress the importance of the cult of Avalokitesvara. An outside image can never indicate the nature of the main image of the sanctuary and that a deconsecration would be totally unthinkable. (Fig.6)

L. Finot and V. Goloubew had only used the evidence of Hiuan-Tsang. They described the replica of Lake Anavatapta that they had seen. This was in the vicinity of Rajagriha in India. It was specially laid out in a hot spring with curative powers, both in the moral and physical aspects. Buddhist texts enable us to be much more specific about the analogies between Neak Pean and its fabulous model.

Anavatapta is a lake. Its water is forever fresh because it receives only reflected light. Because of that, the visitor cannot see the interior of the ponds, unless he has access to their banks. This is also the meaning of the text of the Prah Khan: the water in the ponds is illuminated only by the light from the *prasada* (sanctuary) - that is, a reflected light.

These are the sites, different from one another. These were the places where the Buddhas, the Pratyeka Buddhas (Buddhas who have attained enlightenment but do not preach), the four kings of the directions,

divinities (both male and female,) monks and hermits, all came to bathe. The Pratyeka Buddhas, monks and ascetics retired into the *guha* and the caves. These places are obviously represented by the small buildings in laterite, just like the pedestals for divinities.

Each lake is guarded by a *naga*. But the texts inform that Lake Anavatapta had the privilege of being protected by two *naga* guardians. Their names are Anavatapta and Parnaka (Pannaka in Pali). The two *naga* should be recognized as the guardians of Neak Pean, and not Nanda and Upananda as Przuluski, another scholar, had proposed.

Four rivers flow from Anavatapta, through four channels to the four cardinal points of the compass. The identification of these four rivers,



Fig. 5. Prasat Neak Pean surrounded with two figures of *naga*.

supported by graphical evidence, has been proposed by the author ever since it was first studied.

However, the high importance of the southern river - the Ganges - has never been mentioned. This importance is attested only in the Pali tradition. The Sanskrit texts (Vasubandhu, Tchan-yue, etc.) describe only the four great rivers. They are the Ganges, Sindhu, Vaksu and Sita... which are of more or less equal importance. The Buddhism of Jayavarman VII is Sanskrit and Mahayanist and the builders of Neak Pean were more faithful to the texts.

The wish to endow the Angkorian kingdom with a replica of Lake Anavatapta was completely fulfilled. But several questions are now being raised:

- Why should this replica of the most important lake in the Himalayas be created on the soil of Angkor?

- Why should the Prah Khan inscription mention Neak Pean only in a rather guarded manner. It refers to it as "Rajyasri" (fortunate prosperity of the monarchy) or even "the island of one thousand *linga*," which means one thousand phallic emblems of Siva.

- Why, finally, is the centre occupied by a sanctuary with a unique plan? One searches in vain through the texts, concerning Lake Anavatapta, and find no mention of it.

Answers to these questions are found in the Buddhist sources and the Prah Khan inscription.

The latter text makes clear that there is, this lofty island. It received its charm from its ponds (literally, from the water of its *tirtha* or sacred bathing places.) It washed the mud of sin from those who came in contact with it. It was used as a boat to cross the ocean of existence. Full of the Buddhist ideal and perfectly justified for every king anxious for the *dharma*, this concern is sufficient to explain

the manner in which this myth was made real.

Surely not. Care for creatures is only one component of the major



Fig. 6. Figure of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva added to the original southern door of Neak Pean.

objective. The objective, which is the establishment or restoration of the good order, makes the greatness of a kingdom.

The whole reign of Jayavarman VII consisted of an effort to restore the royal authority. This was to obliterate the effects of the victorious raid of Champa in the town of Angkor in 1177. The king tried to assert his own authority in an indisputable way. He tried to guarantee the inviolability of the kingdom by assuring the supreme power of its kings. The effort to restore royal authority surfaced in the repetition of the establishment of the Devaraja cult in 802 by Jayavarman II. But this time, it was made in the Buddhist perspective. Jayavarman VII knew how to become a *cakravartin*, or a universal monarch. This role

figures in the Buddhist texts. It is also closely akin to its representation in the Traiphum, or Buddhist cosmology. To perpetuate the kingdom, this same power was also given to his successors.

It is more understandable why Jayavarman VII, king in 1181, waited for ten years to build the whole complex of Prah Khan, wherein Neak Pean is the most important place. In the year 1191, Vijaya, the capital of Champa, was taken by the Khmers. It was a victorious operation which definitely obliterated the effects of the Champa raid in 1177. It was then that Jayavarman VII could lay claim to the title of *cakravartin*. And thus started his efforts to enable his successors to enjoy the same title.

The Buddhist texts explain why Lake Anavatapta and the virtue of its waters play a fundamental role in this perspective. They reveal that the lake will last as long as the *Kalpa* (the cosmic period). It will be the last reservoir to dry up. Also, possession of the water will assure its owner the highest degree of magical power (*siddhi*). It says that Emperor Asoka is the model of all the Buddhist kings and *cakravartin*. Everyday Emperor Asoka received water drawn from the lake by magical means. He used the water for his own personal use, and for the use of his near kin. This water was indispensable for the consecration of a *cakravartin*.

In a perspective that associates religion, politics and magic, the importance of this "transfer" of Anavatapta to the Angkorian soil can be understood. Like the Himalayas, Kambujadesa became the favourite abode of the gods to the end of *Kalpa*. During all this time, the Khmer kings were assured of becoming *cakravartin* because they were the only ones who could use the water of the lake. Thus, the construction of Neak Pean had two aims: to guarantee

long life to the kingdom and to assure supreme power to its monarchs.

But if the presence of Anavatapta at the Angkorian site is now fully comprehensible, it is still difficult to understand the name Rajyasri and the allusion to a thousand *linga*.

The name Rajyasri can be explained by the fact that the virtues of the lake could definitely assure the prosperity of the kingdom through the person of its kings. But what about the one thousand *linga*, which place us back in a Saivite atmosphere?

Henri Marchal, was an architect who worked at Angkor for a long time, while he was clearing Neak Pean in 1922, he found a number of sculptures around the base of the monument:

- To the east was the group of the horse Balaha. This group has become very famous and is now often reproduced in pictures. It represents the incarnation of Avalokitesvara for the Mahayanists. (Fig. 7)

- To the south was a complex too dilapidated to identify.

- To the west was the statue of a "reclining masculine divinity."

- To the north was a bloc supporting sculptures. It can be compared "to *linga* carved in the bed...of the Siem Reap River on the Phnom Kulen." (Fig. 8)

It is easy to identify the reclining Vishnu to the west and the "thousand *linga*" to the north. Neither one belongs to the waters of Anavatapta. Just like many others in Khmer epigraphy, it is a case of multiple symbolism. The symbols, instead of



Fig. 7. Neak Pean and the horse Balaha.



Fig. 8. The thousand *linga* and the figures of Siva and Uma riding on the Bull Nandin as well as Vishnu reclining on the Naga, carved on the bed on one of the tributaries of the Siem Reap River.

cancelling each other out, actually reinforce one another.

As P. Mus, another French scholar, has explained, the idea was to group all the ancient royal cults that had been destroyed by the victory of Champa around the Buddha. But the aim, we think, was more of a reactualization than a rehabilitation, in a new perspective.

We should think here of the Buddha preaching to the Hindu gods at Phothisat Cave at Saraburi in Central Thailand. Here, in a definite Mahayanist perspective, assurance was given to the gods (including Siva and his consort Umadevi) that they could attain the state of Buddhahood (Karandavyuha Sutra). (Fig. 9)

For Jayavarman VII, the grouping of the royal cults was one more



Fig. 9. The Buddha preaching to Hindu divinities: Siva or Brahma, Vishnu and flying gods. Photsiat Cave, Saraburi, Central Thailand. Dvaravati style. Eighth to the ninth century A.D.

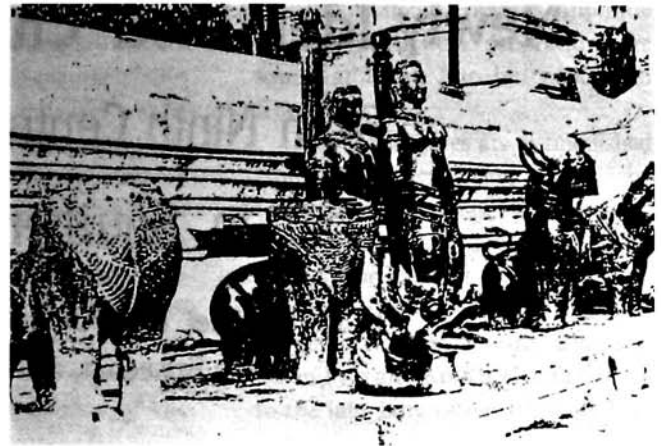


Fig. 10. Khmer bronze statues preserved in the Arakan Temple, Mandalay, Burma, after they had been removed from Combodia to Ayutthaya, Pegu, Arakan, Amarapura and Mandalay. Picture taken in 1936.

way of restoring and spreading the Khmer power to the whole of the universe. To attain that aim, it was necessary for the *tirtha* of the “town of the blissful victory,” or Nagara Jayasri, i.e. Prah Khan, to reunite the sanctity of the *tirtha* of the former sovereigns of Angkor, the Eastern Baray, which is Saivite, and the Western Baray, which is Vaishnavite. And this was done by associating them with the *tirtha* of the Buddha. This explanation comes from the Prah Khan inscription. The interpretation of the inscription was given by G. Coedes, who unfortunately went astray because the knowledge that could be gained from Neak Pean had escaped him.

The text of the Prah Khan inscription should be read like this: It begins with a comparison of Prayaga, the most venerated site in India. The site is at the confluence of the Ganga and the Yamuna (and of the invisible Sarasvati). It is the abode of all the gods striving to escape from the destruction of the world.

Prayaga deserves to be approached with respect because of its

proximity to a double *tirtha* reserved for the purification of all creatures. What can we say then about the Nagara Jayasri (Prah Khan), rendered illustrious by the *tirtha* of Vishnu, of Siva, and of the Buddha? Jayatataka, the sacred pond of Prah Khan, could only carry out its duty by receiving the thrice sacred waters of Neak Pean.

The perfectly coherent work of Jayavarman VII aimed to assure universal power to Angkorian kings. At the same time, it aimed to assure the supremacy of the kingdom for nothing less than the duration of our world.

However, the suzerainty imposed upon the neighboring countries began to crumble in 1220. The birth of the kingdom of Ayutthaya, confronted the power of Angkor with a new force. The new kingdom desire the role of supreme successor. And this was accomplished in 1431. To make the victory indisputable, Thai King Paramaraja II seemed to have followed a course comparable to that set by Jayavarman VII. He proved that he could ruin what was reputed as indestructible. After destroying the

tirtha of Angkor, the damage observed at Neak Pean, and after taking away the divinities and attributes of the Angkorian kingship, he claimed real supremacy.

After 1431, the only surviving works of Jayavarman VII were deserted temples, the overthrown site of Neak Pean, and the mutilated fragments of a few statues, finally he carried to Mandalay in Burma. (Fig. 10)

The wisely conceived edifice, so expertly erected by Jayavarman VII crumbled into ruin after 240 years. The system materialized the power of the *cakravartin* and associated the royal rites of Hinduism with the practice of Buddhism. But just as significantly, the entire edifice played a considerable role in the historical evolution of Southeast Asia. ■

— Translated from the French by
M. C. Subhadradis Diskul and Virginia
M. Di Crocco.

Glossary

Guha - A cave or a cell inside a sanctuary.

Tirtha - Sacred bathing places.

- A landing stage.