The Angkorean Temple-Mountain: Diversity, Evolution, Permanence

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In many ancient religions, mountain tops—from the Greeks' Mt. Olympus to the highest Himalayas of Hindu mythology—were believed to be the privileged home of the gods. Southeast Asia, largely dependent on India for its principal religions of Hinduism and Buddhism, is no exception. On the island of Java in Indonesia, for example, the ancient holy site of Dieng was established in the crater of an extinct volcano. Its name in old Javanese, Di Hyang (in Sanskrit, Devalaya), means, in effect, "home of the Gods."

In Cambodia, in the classic Khmer architecture of the Angkorean period, we find a temple type in which the sanctuary is built atop a stepped pyramid. Nineteenth-century archaeologists called these "temple-mountains." Each important sovereign was apparently obliged to build one in order to establish his power (see Stern 1954).

Let us explore this architectural expression of royal eminence through three of its aspects: diversity, evolution, and permanence.

DIVERSITY: THE SYMBOLISM OF THE TEMPLE-MOUNTAIN

In the Indian religious context, a sanctuary functions primarily as the terrestrial dwelling place of the gods, the place from which they will be able to provide aid and prosperity to humankind. Many countries of Southeast Asia were under Indian influence; each resolved in its own way the problem of creating a divine residence in the world of human beings. Generally, architects and builders based the construction of their sanctuaries on strict religious texts (unfortunately, we have none from ancient Cambodia). To the rules prescribed by these texts were added numerous others relating to astronomy, geomancy, or numerology, the meanings of which are often lost today. Our lack of knowledge of almost everything that guided the creation of the sanctuaries makes it difficult to understand them and to explain their symbolism.

In Cambodia, however, the study of local ancient epigraphy has furnished a variety of insights into the symbolism of religious architecture. In the light of some of these inscriptions, we can make a connection between Mount Meru, the center and axis of the universe in Indian cosmography, and certain temple-mountains of Angkor, the ancient Khmer capital. These structures provide us with an image of representation of Mount Meru on a human scale. The best known example is the sanctuary built around A.D. 906.
on the top of Phnom Bakheng, the precise center of Yasodharapura, Angkor's first capital (Fig. 2). In addition to being constructed on one of the rare hills (phnom in Khmer) of the region, the monument was conceived as a square pyramid with five levels. Locating the pyramid on a natural hill at the geometric center of the royal city underlines the symbolic identification of the monument, center and axis of the city, with Mount Meru, center and axis of the universe.

In fact, the temple of Phnom Bakheng redetermines, with much greater complexity, the symbolic principles expressed earlier at the temple of the Bakong, founded in A.D. 881 (Fig. 1). At the Bakong, the summit of the five-level pyramid is occupied by a single sanctuary tower, whereas 5 towers arranged in a quincunx (a square of 4 towers with a fifth in the center) occupy the summit of Phnom Bakheng. Again, 12 temple annexes occupy the fourth level of the Bakong, but at Phnom Bakheng these 12 annexes appear on each of the five levels. Finally, only 8 large brick sanctuary towers are distributed at the foot of the Bakong, whereas 44 comparable towers ring the base of the Phnom Bakheng pyramid.

The temple-mountains of the Bakong and the Bakheng seem to suggest similar symbolic considerations in their main features, although those of the latter are more lavish. But the interpretation of the other temple-mountains at the Angkor site is different, at least in part. No temple-mountain of Angkor is truly comparable to another. Contrast the simplicity of the early temple of Baksei Chamkrong (Fig. 3) with the immense complexity of the Bayon (Fig. 4). Baksei Chamkrong was founded under the reign of Harshavarman I as the representation of Mount Kailash, private domain of the god Siva; the Bayon was the state temple of Jayavarman VII in which secular symbolic Hindu principles and new Mahayana conceptions from the reign of the founding king were unified.

Photograph by the author, 1993

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If there was any continuity in the function of the temple-mountain, it was above all as the seat of the protective divinity of the realm.
periphery of the first levels of the pyramids of the Eastern Mebon (A.D. 972) and Pre Rup (A.D. 961; Fig. 5). At the unfinished temple of Ta Keo (end of the 10th, beginning of the 11th century; Fig. 6), the series of long rooms of the two preceding temples is transformed into a ring gallery along the perimeter of the second level (Fig. 7). This gallery at Ta Keo was covered with a framework and tiles and is, curiously, totally inaccessible.

To be rigorously accurate, it should be pointed out that the transformation of long rooms into galleries could be simply an innovation, an addition, to temple-
Fig. 10. Angkor Wat, general view from the west-southwest. Angkor Wat (first half of the 12th century) was the major accomplishment in Angkorean Khmer architecture. It is certainly the most celebrated monument in Cambodia's architectural history. Photograph by the author, 1995

Fig. 11. The eastern face of the southern "library" of Banteay Srei. The pediment's bas-reliefs depict inhabitants of the god Shiva's celestial home at Kailasa. Photograph by the author, 1992

Fig. 12. The western gate of Angkor Thom. Situated on the summit of Mount Meru, the city of Indra is guarded by the four great kings of the Orient; we find their faces in the monumental gates of Angkor Thom. Photograph by the author, 1991
The Khmer epigraphy often refers to a monument's precise place in Indian cosmography.

Fig. 13. Towers with faces on the upper level of the Bayon at Angkor Thom. According to some interpretations, Angkor Thom was a replica on earth of the city of India—the king of the gods—at the center of which was built the Room of Good Order (Sutthammanuha) of Buddhist mythology.

Photograph by the author, 1991

path would Khmer architecture have chosen, given the methods of dry wall construction they used? The question remains unanswered here but it invites reflection and is worth asking.

PERMANENCE: THE "ARCHITECTURE-IMAGE"

The most constant aspect of Khmer architecture, whether individual structure, sanctuary complex, or city, is that of "architecture-image," that is, the representation in architectural form of images provided by the texts. Khmer epigraphy often refers to a monument's precise place in Indian cosmography (see Bouissac 1976). As mentioned above, in the Indo-Khmer religious perspective the sanctuary could be likened to a mountain. In the case of Phnom Bakheng, the quincunxial arrangement of the five sanctuary towers at the summit corresponds in a very concrete way to the peak of Mount Meru buttressed by four other strong mountains. All forms of religious architecture in Angkorian Cambodia must therefore be as close as possible to the image suggested by the texts.

The image of a divine home, in this case that of Siva, is shown in what seems to have been its most important form in two famous bas-reliefs on the Bayon Sri temple (consecrated in A.D. 967-968) near Angkor. The reliefs occupy the tympana of the pediments on the southern library in the monument's first enclosure. They show us Siva surrounded by many divine or semi-divine personages in his private celestial home of Kailasa; he is seated at the summit of a stepped pyramid (Fig. 11). It is thus perfectly appropriate to designate the stepped pyramid monuments at Angkor as temple-mountains, even if it hints of redundancy in that every sanctuary in the Indian tradition is akin to a mountain. In building their pyramids, the Khmer simply solidify this image.

The bas-reliefs of the library present another picture of the inhabitants of Siva's home; hybrid figures with human bodies and animal heads. These figures are also found on the stones leading to the monument's three sanctuaries and, again, permit us to regard these temples just as though they were divine mountains.

According to Professor Jean Filliozat, the conformity of the architecture to the texts is such that some of the texts may have been inspired by the architecture (1961). Professor Filliozat concludes that the description of the Hari (Vishnu) Temple in the Indian text Karmaprameya may have been purely and simply inspired by the temple-mountains of Angkor Wat. Its builder, the great king Suryavarman II (A.D. 1113 to at least 1145), was a fervent devotee of Vishnu. Whether the text influenced those who created the temple, or whether the temple—well-known, important and prestigious—inspired the description in the Karmaprameya remains a question for further study.

The mount and the system of concentric walls at Angkor Wat certainly will arrest one's attention more. These features characterize all the temple-mountains. They evoke divine residences perched on top of concentric chains of insurmountable mountains surrounded by oceans, in the image of Mount Meru. At Angkor Wat, the central courtyard situated at the same height as the central gallery on the second level, as well as those that surround the central sanctuary at the summit of the pyramid, could even be likened to the primordial ocean, seat of repose of Vishnu during his sleep between two cosmic eras. In fact, during the rainy season, these courtyards fill with water. It is easy to imagine that on certain occasions, with the drainage systems blocked, they were turned into basins.

Our last example of an "architecture-image" is that of Angkor Thom and the Bayon, an immensely complicated monument with multiple meanings. The equivalence of the Bayon to Mount Mandara has long been invoked to explain the birth of the city. Using Mount Mandara as a churning rod, giants supporting the body of an immense serpent stir and agitate the Sea of Milk just as the gods and demons have done from time immemorial. In Hindu mythology, the purpose of stirring up the Sea of Milk was to obtain the elixir of immortality. This elixir appeared only after the appearance of a certain number of other precious things, among them the goddess Sridevi (Beauty, Prosperity), the elephant Aravia (the god Indra's mount), or the apsara (celestial nymph). The churning myth also helps us to understand Angkor Thom, the city of Jayavarman VII, as a source of benefits, treasures, or riches, and by extension, the source of prosperity of the Khmer Empire itself. (See the Voar purna [Book I, chapter 9] and the Bhagavata purana [Book 8, chapters 6-11] for versions of this myth.)

In the case of Angkor Thom, however, several images are superimposed on one another. Professor J. Boisselier sees in the Bayon an image of the Room of Good Order (Sutthammanuha) of Buddhist mythology.
Viewed this way, the monument's striking towers covered with faces would be in communication with the Brahma Sanankumar ("perpetually young"), those who transmit the teaching of Buddha to the Buddhist and Hindu divinities periodically reunited in the Room (Fig. 13). Angkor Thom thus becomes a replica on earth of the city of India—the king of the gods—at the center of which this Room was built. Situated on the summit of Mount Meru, the city of India is guarded by the four great kings of the East; it is their faces that one should recognize in the monumental gates of Angkor Thom (Fig. 12). Moreover, 54 giant figures supporting a massive serpent are stationed on each side of the dikes crossing the moats; they recall the image of the Churning of the Sea of Milk. We might go farther and liken the giants to divine or semi-divine armies assuring the protection of the city (see Le Bonheur 1989). And finally, the scene recalls the symbolic equivalence of the serpent (naga) and the rainbow—a celestial bridge permitting passage from the human world outside the city to the divine World created at the heart of Angkor Thom by the Bayon itself (Fig. 14).

Diverse, evolving, permanent: Khmer architecture, of which the temple-mountain is at once the best-known and most important expression, remains one of Asia's major contributions to the world's cultural patrimony. Despite the considerable number of studies, both general and specific, devoted to it, it is far from being completely explained. It still constitutes a field of exploration and research as rich as the religious traditions that gave rise to it.

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