

## ANGKOR WAT

In 1861 Henri Mouhaut , a French naturalist, was trekking through the jungles of northwestern Cambodia when he stumbled upon the ruins of the ancient Khmer civilization and a great temple, Angkor Wat (Fujioka 7). Located just east of Siam Reap, Angkor Wat was one of the main temples of the Khmer empire which ruled much of what is now Cambodia and Thailand, and parts of Vietnam from the 500s C.E.. until 1431 (Srivastava 20-30, Stone 1364). Angkor Wat was built during the reign of Suryavarman II (1114-1163) and dedicated to the Hindu god Visnu (Fujioka 14). It was only after Mouhaut's discovery that Angkor Wat was made known to the West, but he was not the first to "discover" it after its decline in 1431. In the 17th century both the Chinese and Spanish have records indicating that they had come upon this ancient kingdom (Fujioka 7). Angkor Wat is a place surrounded in mystery and magnificence not only in its aesthetics, but also in its history and religion.

The history of the Khmer people is full of myth and legend. One legend (Reed 210-212) states that Prince Cambu, who was forced out of India after a severe drought had overcome his land and people, had made his way to the mighty Mekong river. Here he met a local man who has found a grain of rice, and the Prince had a vision of how this rice will conquer the jungle, and how a new race would be "raised up for the glory and worship of the gods" (Reed 210). Prince Cambu went back with the local man to meet the ruler, The King of the Cobras, in order to set up a space in his land. Prince Cambu married the King's daughter, the serpent princess. The princess was immortal, so when Cambu died, she married each successor in order for her to look after her children, the Khmers. The sons of Prince Cambu were called Camboga, and they ruled the land called Cambodia.

The serpent Queen in this legend, as Reed points out, plays an important role in both Hinduism and Buddhism (212). The cobra, or Sacred Naga, is featured in many of the carvings and sculptures found in the temples, especially Angkor Wat, and also in Hindu and Buddhist literature.

While the beginning of the Khmers may not be clear, it is thought that Indian culture and language, in the form of the Vedas and Sanskrit, were introduced around the 1st century C.E. (Srivastava 19). While the nobles and aristocracy embraced the new Indian beliefs, the peasants were less inclined to do so. This could be because a king would claim devotion to a particular deity, Siva, Visnu, or even the Buddha, in order to secure power by this divine ruling (Srivastava 15). The first Khmers to come from India were followers of Hinduism, and when they arrived to Cambodia they encountered other religions such as ancestor worship, totem religion, and Theravada Buddhism (Fujioka 16-17). Instead of wiping out the other religions, the Khmers incorporated aspects of the other religions into their own therefore not alienating one group because of differing religious views (Fujioka 17). One of the aspects of Hinduism which was not adapted in Cambodia was the caste system which plays a prominent role in Hinduism in India. Southeast Asian historian John F. Cady notes that this could be due to the fact that Hinduism has a complex cultural basis in India and it is very difficult to transfer as a whole, and therefore only select parts were transferred to Cambodia (Srivastava 37-38).

While the Khmer style of architecture is similar to that of India, Angkor Wat has its own unique design to it (Fujioka 25). It is considered a “precious gem of the Khmer art” and a “masterpiece of architecture” (Srivastava 55). Angkor Wat can be called “Temple of the Royal Castle,” as *angkor* means “town” and *wat* means pagoda or temple (Fujioka 22). What was first

noticed of Angkor Wat was its five towers. The five towers are said to represent the five peaks of Mount Meru, the abode of Visnu, to whom the temple was dedicated (Srivastava 26, 55). The use of the five towers is not unique to Angkor Wat as many Hindu and Buddhist temples in India and other places around Asia use the same pattern (Fujioka 26-27). The layout of the Angkor Wat has many other Hindu features such as multiple corridors and terraces which are laid out in an explicit geometrical configuration, and displays its “true greatness” (Fujioka 30). Another unique feature of Angkor Wat is the direction of its orientation. All the temples around Angkor face east, but Angkor Wat faces west (Srivastava 59, Fujioka 31). Many explanations have been given for this, one being “it was situated on the east side of the road leading to Angkor Thom” (Fujioka 31), but the exact reason for this may be left with the mystery that is Angkor Wat.

The temple itself is made of laterite and sandstone. The foundation and internal structure is comprised of laterite, a relatively soft stone, but when exposed to sunlight becomes extremely hard (Fujioka 32-33). The laterite was then covered with sandstone which was easier to carve.

Angkor Wat is said to be the greatest Visnu temple (Fujioka 18). Visnu is the Hindu “protector” god, and is often depicted with 4 hands carrying a shell, a club, an iron band, and a lotus stem (Fujioka 17-18). Carvings of Visnu are found all over the temple walls and along the corridors, as are his many incarnations, Rama and Krsna, from the great Hindu epics the *Ramanyana* and *Mahabharata* (Fujioka 18).

One of the most detailed reports of the Khmer empire comes from a Chinese traveller, Chow Ta-guan, who visited the region in 1296 (Reed 214). He gives a detailed account of what the ancient empire was like during its most prolific period. Chow Ta-guan notes that the population of Angkor, the main city, was over one million people with many more in the surrounding cities scattered among the rice fields (Reed 214). He observes that while the houses

of the people were made of wood harvested from the encircling jungle, the temples were made of stone and delicately decorated with gold and intricate carvings (Reed 214-215). The ornate designs in the stone suggest a background in woodworking, and not masonry; the use of stone in the same manner as wood suggests the same (Reed 215). Chow Ta-guan also mentions that the king had five wives: one chief wife, and four others representing the four cardinal points of a compass (Reed 216). One of the things that strikes him is the amount of times the Khmers bathed, and the frequency of illness, and particularly leprosy. Chow relates the concepts when he says, “excesses in love and abuse of baths is what bring on the illness” (Reed 216). Chow reports of many lepers among the Khmer, and that those with the disease still lived and ate amongst the others, and that the disease was not contagious because the people were habituated with it (Reed 216). The prevalence of disease may be one of the reasons for the downfall of the great empire.

One of the greatest mysteries surrounding the Khmer people and Angkor Wat is what happened to this once great empire. Many have speculated that the Khmer were overtaken by one of its tributaries from Siam after they had been weakened by disease (Reed 229-231). This would not be that far fetched as diseases such as malaria and yellow fever have crippled some of the worlds largest and most powerful empires like that of the Romans and Greeks (Reed 231). What we are left with today is a mystery hidden among the ruins of this great temple surrounded by overgrown jungle and a multitude of monkeys.

## REFERENCES AND FURTHER RECOMMENDED READINGS

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### Noteworthy Websites Related to the Topic

[http://www.sacredsites.com/asia/cambodia/angkor\\_wat.html](http://www.sacredsites.com/asia/cambodia/angkor_wat.html)

<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/668>

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