

Khmer Civilization in Isan

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Abstract

Follow the footsteps of Khmer civilization from Angkor Wat to the center of cultural heritage in northeastern Thailand, Phimai, Phanom Rung and Mueang Tam. This paper is both an introduction and guide to Khmer temples in Isan. The first part begins with historical details tracing the Angkorean from the 8th to 12th century, and introduces a background to the religious traditions of the Khmer, which both inspired and governed the concept and execution of all their art and architecture.

The second part is an emphasis on architecture and decorative art, which appear in Khmer temples. In its heyday the main concentration of Khmer temples extended far west to the border and associated with an area of the middle Mekong River in the southern part of northeastern Thailand.

Keywords: *cultural heritage, Phimai, Phanom Rung, Mueang Tam, the Angkorean, religious traditions, architecture and decorative art*

1. Introduction

The name "Isan" refers to the northeastern part of Thailand. It covers an area of one third of the Kingdom. Isan, is also known as the Khorat Plateau. The Phetchabun Range separates Isan from the Central Region while the Dongrek Mountains in the south separate Thailand from Cambodia. The Mun and Chi Rivers drain the majority of the plateau. They flow to the east and meet the Mekong River in Ubon Ratchathani.

This grate originates in the eastern Himalayas and flows to China, Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. The Mekong River and its tributaries are dominant features of the waterways have played a significant role in human history.

2. Historical Background

The earliest inscriptions of Khmer history in northeast Thailand date to the end of 6th century AD. The inscription craved by order of Mahendravarman, after he had conquered *all the country* with many attempts being made to assign a specific location to cities mentioned in other inscriptions found within Cambodia.

The other sources of information on this period are Chinese accounts and references, in these to tributary states such as Funan and Chenla.

2.1 Angkorean (8th - 12th century)

The art and architecture of the Khmer has been classified into periods, by French art historians. Each style takes its name from the principal monument built by the ruler at Angkor. The Angkor Period began when Jayavarman II conducted a ritual that installed him as universal monarch and ended with the relocation of the Khmers from Angkor to Phnom Phen in southern Cambodia. The history of this period has been reconstructed from the monuments, reliefs, statuary, excavated artifacts and inscriptions in Pali, Sanskrit and Khmer; all found within the boundaries of the former empire.

During the Angkorean period of Suriyavarman I (1002-50) was the significant king. He strengthened the organization of the government, established internal security, and achieved political acclaim for extending the territorial boundaries southward to Thailand through a series of wars. He conquered the Kingdom of central Thailand, and established a

Khmer center at Louvo (Lop Buri), a move that strengthened the empire's economic control. During Suriyavarman I's reign, the Khmer empire reached its greatest degree of territorial expansion. Ancient Khmer Highway between Angkor and Phimai was built for local communication of people from two cities. It was about 225 Kilometers drawn in straight line from Angkor Wat to Prasat Muang Tam, Prasat Phnom Rung and Prasat Phimai.

Suriyavarman II (1113-1150) was one of the most brilliant of the Khmer rulers and the builder of the great temple of Angkor Wat. He appears in the bas-reliefs of Angkor Wat. At one point he is shown standing on the back of an elephant reviewing his troops and accompanied by his field marshals, and at another he is seated on an elaborately carved throne.

Jayavarman VII was another important king in Angkorean period. He was Mahayana Buddhist, since he believed himself to be the Bodhisattava who gives mercy to all human beings. He built many hospitals (Arokhaya Sala), shelters (Dharma Sala), and sanctuaries along the route from Angkor Thom to Khorat Plateau.

2.2 The Center of Cultural Heritage in Isan

The majority of Khmer temples in Thailand were built after the 10th century; the Khmer control was exerted over an increasing number of northeastern Thai principalities.

The inscriptions of Prasat Phnom Rung offer a unique insight into the nature of Khmer rule in northeast Thailand between the 10th and 13th centuries AD. The most important is the last, a stele erected in 1150 by Hiranya, son of Narendraditya, making clear that they ruled autonomously, not as vassals to the king at Angkor.

He was indeed a relative and contemporary of King Suriyavarman II, he also having defeated many of Suriyavarman II's enemies. In former times, Phnom Rung was midway between the great city of Angkor to the south and Phimai to the northwest. The ruler who controlled the Phnom Rung area most probably also had suzerainty over the fertile floodplain stretching south to Prasat Muang Tam. This powerful fiefdom appears to

have been held during one of the most prosperous periods of the region's history by the family of Narendraditya.

Overlooked by Phnom Rung, and so now known as 'Lower City'. Muang Tam has a particular charm from its tranquil setting and its ponds. So far, however, no inscriptions have been found, which makes it difficult to place the history of Prasat Mueang Tam. Regional accounts state that Prasat Mueang Tam was built after Prasat Phnom Rung, to serve as residence for the governor. The styles of carving particularly in the lintels are the best guide to the temple's dates. Most are combination of Khleung and Baphuon styles, and so were probably carved between the end of the 10th century and the end of the 11th century. The complex must have been built after the first phase of building at Phnom Rung but before the later additions in the Angkor Wat style.

Although the main sanctuary was dedicated to Shiva, a small statue of Vishnu, fragments of which remain has also been found. Worship of the two gods in the same temple was by no means uncommon.

Another parallel to Phnom Rung that can be seen is Prasat Phimai. The earliest inscription in the Phimai area written in both Sanskrit and Khmer was found in 1082 also mentions Vimayapura, the city of Vimaya (Phimai). A monastery is thought to have existed at Phimai also, one which was kept active within the temple wall well into this century. Several inscriptions have been found in Phimai sanctuary, most were broken. The oldest is date to the 11th century, while the other belonged to the 12th and 13th centuries. Prasat Phimai was the sanctuary as Mahayana Buddhism in the 12th century during the reign of Jayavarman VII. He was a devout follower of Mahayana Buddhism and changed the former Deva-Raja cult into a Buddha-Raja sect, this spiritual dedication permeated every aspect of his reign.

2.3 Religion

The appreciation of Khmer temples will be greater if have background to the religious and traditions which both inspired and

governed the concept and execution of all their art and architecture.

2.3.1 Hindu: The Hindu religion developed over time of complex rituals led to the establishment of a powerful caste of Brahman priests. At a simple level, much of this centers on cycles of birth and rebirth, and is personified in the three major Hindu deities, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, with their ability to present themselves in various incarnations. Each Hindu deity is associated with specific symbols or attributes that represent his powers and he often holds these in his hands, which help to identify him.

A deity often rides a mount or vehicle, which is another distinguishing feature. The presence of a wife or consort, representing the god's female energy, or *sakti*, who often carries the symbols of her spouse is yet another clue to the identity of a deity.

- *Brahma* is the Creator, endowed with four faces, allowing him to survey the four quarters of the earth. He carries objects in his many hands, these attributes and his multiple limbs symbolizing his divinity. Brahma's mount is *hamsa*, a scared goose and his consort is Surasvadi. Brahma was most important as a Hindu god than in Vedic times, but he was never as widely worshipped in Khmer as Shiva and Vishnu.

- *Vishnu* is the Preserver, he is riding his mount the *garuda*, the mythical king of birds, with a human body, and he is accompanied by his consort Laksami. Vishnu was a popular Hindu god in Khmer art, widely depicted both in sculpture and reliefs. Vishnu is standing with four arms and holds a conch shell, a ball representing the Earth and two weapons-the club and the discus. One of the most popular of the ten incarnations of Vishnu in Khmer imagery is that of Rama, the principal character of ancient India romantic epic, Ramayana. Another incarnation was Krishna in Maha Bharata, the great epic of the Bharata Dynasty.

- *Shiva (or Isavara)*, god of Destruction that must precede Creation. Shiva was one of the earliest and most popular of the Hindu gods represented in Khmer iconography. Shiva was in the form of *linga*, shaped like erect phallus and usually made of polished stone. The phallic meaning associated with the *linga* was more a

symbol of the 'creative energy of the powers of nature'. Shiva is also most easily identified by his third eye in the middle of upper face. He carried a trident and axe, wear a snake across his chest and may have matted hair. His mount is the bull, popularly known as 'Nandi' and his consort is Uma (or Paravati). Another cult object is depicting Shiva as 'Lord of Dance' (or Tandava).

2.3.2 Buddhism:

- *Mahayana Buddhism*, known as the 'Greater Vehicle', may have reached Cambodia in the 5th century. However, it reached the peak of popularity in the 12th and early 13th centuries during the reign of Jayavarman VII. The religious ideal of Mahayana is Bodhisattva and it was widely portrayed in Khmer art, especially during the late Angkor period. A Bodhisattva is one who has performed enough merit to enter Nirvana, but renounces attainment of enlightenment to return to earth and help the sufferings of all humanity. The principles of this sect are expounded through the Sanskrit language. Several Bodhisattvas appear in Khmer art, particularly in stone sculptures, but the most frequently represented in reliefs is the Avalokiteshvara. He appears in several forms in art during the reign of Jayavarman VII. Some believe the faces of the tower of Bayon represent this. If the Bodhisattva has eight arms, he holds additional objects: a thunderbolt, an elephant goad, a conch, discus and sword.

- *Theravada Buddhism*, known as the 'Lesser Vehicle', adhered to conservative principles preserving the original doctrines and expressed them through the Pali language. Theravada was practiced in Cambodia in the period of Post-Angkorean after the reign of Jayavarman VII. The Buddha apparently had great practical and organizing ability together with his unquestionable personality quickly made him a popular and successful teacher. Finally, the aesthetic of Buddha image was non-ritualistic and simple.

3. Typical Architectural Features

The temple, then, served as a link between man and the gods. It was built according to carefully ordered principles and

base on geometric plan with orientation to the cardinal points. Emphasis was on the east-west axis, which associated the temple with the rising and setting of the sun. Although the cosmological symbolism and astronomical calculations are less understood than other aspects of Khmer architecture, it is clear that the movement of the sun, the moon, stars and planets had significant bearing on architecture forms.

Layouts of temple and monasteries are all symmetrical around a central axis called 'centralization'. This symmetry provides mirrored images, profiles around a central dominant architectural feature such as the central tower on the grand scale or the main porticos on the axial route.

Phimai is a rectangular city, 565 m wide and 1,030 m long. It surrounded by a city wall and moat with the sanctuary in the center. The plan of Phimai sanctuary is similar to those at Preah Pa Lelai and Beng Mealea in Cambodia.

The lower staircase of Phnom Rung is almost half a kilometer on the eastern slope of the hill. These laterite steps lead up to the first of four cruciform platforms, which mark the ascent to the eastern entrance. The presence of steps below the platform suggests that a pavilion once rose above it, to mark its importance on the way to summit. This type of layout is found at other Khmer temples such as Khoa Preah Vihear to the east of Phnom Rung on the Thai-Cambodian border.

Mueang Tam is a substantial 'flat' temple built to a concentric plan, but with two unusual features. It is flat in the sense that there was no attempt at physically elevating the central sanctuary, either by raising the platform or by building a dominant tower.

3.1 Temple Mountain

The Khmers adapted the Indian concept of a temple-mountain so successfully and uniquely that today it is synonymous with Khmer architecture, the temple draws its symbolism from Hindu mythology. It is an earthly facsimile of Mount Meru, the sacred abode of the gods. The temple as a microcosm of a central mountain was an essential concept that had profound influence on Khmer art.

Prasat Phnom Rung located on volcano that rises over the flat farmland that stretches 30 km. south to the visible Dongrek Mountain that increasingly focused on the recreation of Mount Meru and surrounding elements of the Hindu universe, made mountains particularly compelling and special sites. The Khmer word 'phanom' meaning hill, describes the location. Phnom Rung was built to take advantage of its naturally commanding site, and a sequence of causeway; steps and terraces make a long impressive approach to the sanctuary on the top.

Phimai's concentric plan now becomes apparent, a cosmological arrangement found in so many major Khmer temples. The central sandstone prang as the concept of Mount Meru and the surrounding gallery are the earliest parts, construction of these parts began during the reign of Jayavarman VII.

The five central towers of Prasat Mueang Tam and the dedication to Shiva make it clear that the central sanctuary was supposed to represent Mount Meru and the larger main tower probably Mount Kailasa where Shiva lives. The five brick towers are one of Mueang Tam's peculiarities, being built as a front row of three and a back row of two rather than as a quincunx.

3.2 Causeway and 'Naga Bridge'

The combination of a causeway and a moat provide a dramatic backdrop for *naga* or serpent balustrade that appeared in Khmer architecture since ninth century.

The 'naga bridges' link the world of man to that of the gods on the summit of the hill. Having crossed over, the pilgrim ascends the final and grandest staircase.

The cross-shaped terrace marks the beginning of the principal approach to Prasat Phnom Rung. From the middle of this platform the view is directly towards the staircase and the tower. Sixty-seven lotus-bud-tipped boundary stones line each side of the causeway. The architectural style indicated which of the Angkor Wat period from the first few decades of the 12th century.

The '*naga* bridge' of Phnom Rung is one of the finest ever craved. Constructed with sandstone, it is raised up about one and half

meters. A large lotus is lightly inscribed on the stone floor of the unfinished platform. The five-headed *naga* balustrades lining it in the form of balustrades here perform the function of a rainbow, and are a bridge between this world and the divine. The hill beyond, and the sanctuary at its top, are a recreation of the center of the Hindu universe.

The entrance to Prasat Phimai courtyard is marked by the 'naga bridge' leading to the main southern entrance. The construction of such a terrace is the mark of the temple's importance. The *nagas* are similar to those at Phnom Rung, but the slightly smaller head-dresses. To the left of the 'naga bridge' is a large rectangular building date to the end of the 12th century, the reign of King Jayavarman VII, commonly referred to as storehouse (*khleang*), which may have been used by Brahmin priests to mark ritual preparations.

3.3 Gopura

A *gopura* or gateway is the main architectural feature of the wall that surrounds a Khmer temple. The name, which is derived from Sanskrit, originated in 7th century *Pallava* architecture of south India. The *gopura* placed on the principal axes stands out in contrast to the simple laterite walls. Early *gopuras* are rectangular in plan, but later, as the form developed in complexity, they were built much larger and more elaborately, with extensions such as porches and steps.

Prasat Phnom Rung was enclosure by a rectangle of galleries, with *gopuras* in the middle of each four sides. The eastern *gopura* is the principal entrance, a succession of doorways lies ahead on the line of the temple's axis through the central sanctuary, and out again through the western *gopura*. The eastern *gopura* is an elaborate building in its own right, with diminishing chambers on either side. The main doorway has a double-sectioned projecting porch, with a double pediment at front, and a slightly higher one behind.

A short path leads to the main eastern entrance of Prasat Mueang Tam. The eastern *gopura* was decorated with lintel over the doorway and the pediment above is carved around a central *kala* face. The creature's

hands firmly grasps the garland issuing from its mouth. The *kala* plays a particularly important role in the decoration at Mueang Tam, and occurs frequently in the lintels and pediments.

The entrance to Prasat Phimai is the southern *gopura*, built of sandstone, is the largest of the four *gopuras*, which break the outer wall. The gate has three parts, the first marked by a pair of large square pillars flanked by balustrade windows. More pillars are seen in the second section, an imposing and monument feature. To the left and right are additional porches, each divided into three rooms. The *gopuras* have stairs to enter the gallery, which is raised almost a meter above ground level.

3.4 Main Tower

The tower is the predominant architectural feature of Angkor. Its form is derived from the south Indian temple. The base stands firm on a platform with symmetrical doorways on each façade. These doorways either open or are false, depending on the use of the tower. Above the cornice level, the tower begins to taper slowly as the base, but more pronounced towards the top creating a round effect. The tower is crowned with a lotus, which possibly served as the base for a gilded metal spire. The tower is constructed with cantilevered stones following the principles of vault corbelled construction with the exposed outer surface being elaborately carved.

Phimai main tower was constructed of sandstone and decorated with carved designs. There is no trace of the use of cement to join each block of stone, iron bars were used for process. An inscription, dated from 1105 to 1112, was found on the door frame of the south entrance.

Comparing this view of decorative details with the same at Phimai, Phnom Rung's tower built in the early 12th century, after that of Phimai, but still before Angkor Wat. The re-denting of Phimai's tower, with six interior angles at each corner, gives it a rounded section look and those at Angkor Wat even more so.

At Phnom Rung, however the corners have been re-dented to only four interior angles and the tower is distinctly pyramid. Phnom

Rung has its own unique character unlike any other Khmer temple.

In the central area of Prasat Mueang Tam are five brick prangs, these probably symbolized the five-peaked Mount Meru, home of the gods. Construction no doubt began in brick which was an easily available material, and then later sandstone would have brought to complete the buildings. Both the inner and outer enclosures are paved with laterite throughout; further evidence of the importance accorded to this site.

3.5 Lintels and Pediments or Frontons

Lintels in Khmer architecture are highly decorated rectangular sandstone blocks spanning over a doorway and window and often support the fronton. A typical decorative on lintel includes for example Vishnu on his mount, surmounting the head of a monster; a pattern of foliage surrounds this central scene and fill out the lintel.

Fronton is more commonly used in Khmer style to describe the pediment or triangular motif above a lintel normally located over a portico or door. A fronton is the source of rich decoration with mainly narrative scenes and draw inspiration from Hindu mythology, particularly the *Ramayana*.

From the scenes on the lintels and pediment carving at Phimai, much information has been gleaned about Phimai society and traditions during the 11th - 13th centuries for example, various types of utensils and vessel, drama and musical instruments, style of dress and jewelry.

Phanom Rung has a total of eight entrances in the sanctuary, each of them give the opportunity for placing a lintel and pediment. These locations, together with the interior lintels, give Phanom Rung a wealth of imagery, all of it Hindu. Enter the main doorway to the *gopura*, the pediment and lintel of *mandapa* are the first things that you can see, and both are masterpieces. The pediment depicts a ten armed dancing Shiva - *Shiva Nataraj*; this god has a more benign expression, and there is great suppleness to the posture. Below the pediment is the lintel, which in recent years has become the most

famous in Thailand. In counterpoint to the dancing Shiva, the image here is of Vishnu reclining (*Vishnu Anantasayin*). Vishnu is reclining on his right side on the back of the *naga*, the world-serpent Ananta. Brahma rises from Vishnu on a lotus flower, while Lakshmi as usual cradles Vishnu's legs; the tail plumage of two *hamsa* makes an arch for the scene. The lintel over the west door of the sanctuary carries the scene of Rama and Lakshman caught the coils of serpent. The pediment is related to it, and shows Sita being taken under Ravana's order, most of the pediment is in the scene from the *Ramayana*.

At Prasat Mueang Tam the lintels are of high quality, the main east-facing lintel of the northern tower on the front row is in the Baphuon style, it shows Shiva with Uma riding the bull Nandi. Another good example of provincial folk art is the treatment of the lintel on the tower directly behind; this features a small scene of Krishna lifting Mount Govardhana, Krishna stands above a *kala* which appears on the entire tower lintel. The inner eastern *gopura* that leads to the central tower has the lintel in a scene from the life of Krishna, in which he battles the *naga* Kaliya, and wins. The pediment above features a *singha* above the ubiquitous *kala*.

4. Conclusion

To appreciate the ruin of Khmer temples that remain today, the contemporary history and religion of the Khmer require introduction. However, this paper is a first step to walking along. They have also made provoking and interesting suggestions on Art History and Architecture of Khmer art in Isan. They are link between past and present, and they are the ones who must see Angkor and Isan through the 21st century and beyond.

Regardless of the co-operation between the Fine Arts Department and the UNESCO, the preservation of the monuments ultimately emerged as a symbol of a culture heritage that the people can recognize as their own. Khmer temple in Isan is still a cultural masterpiece and it deserves to be saved.

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PLANS OF THE TEMPLES

Prasat Pimai

Prasat Phanom Rung

Prasat Mueang Tam