One innovation of his rule was his populist attempt to close the distance between king and subject that had existed before.

The Savior King: Buddhist Self-Representation in Angkorian Cambodia
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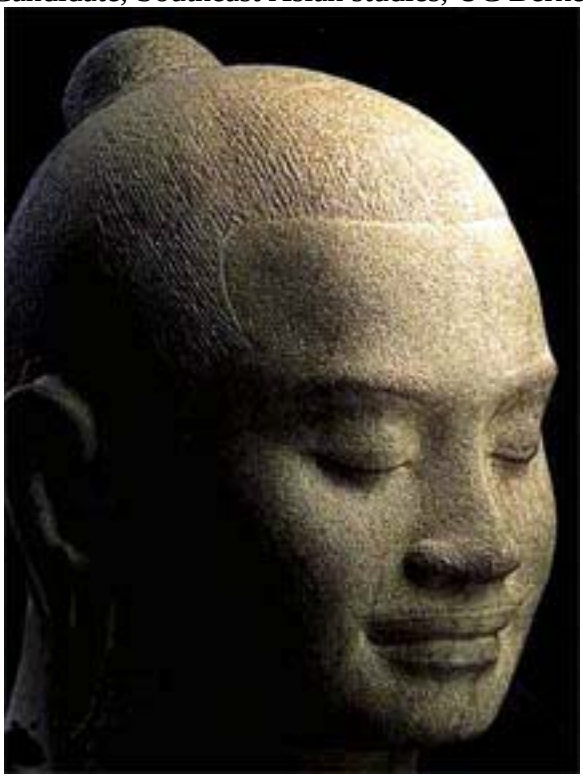

Jayavarman VII

Mr. Lowman is concerned with the manner in which Jayavarman VII, king of Angkorian Cambodia, used the imagery of Buddhism to represent the face he wished the public, and other elites, to see.

The majority of structures at Angkor were produced by one king, Jayavarman VII, who reigned in the late 12th through 13th century. This moment in Cambodian history was a high point in art production: Jayavarman had these examples of Buddhist imagery created in 50 years or less. Exploring his self-representation in art can help us understand the innovative reign of this king who united Hindu Khmer clans, and why he converted to Buddhism.

(Here, Cambodia refers to the territory, polity, and essentially the country. Khmer refers to the ethnic group and language of the country. Angkor is the capital, coming from Sanskrit *nugera* meaning city or capital.)

Jayavarman is a source of myth and debate now. Was he actually even a Khmer? His reign was certainly revolutionary, and appears at first glance to have come out of nowhere. His cult is of Mahayana Buddhism. In many different ways he presents himself as a Boddhisatva, a Buddha-to-be – as an Alokiteshrva as the Dalai Lama is.

His reign brought a period of iconoclasm after his death. It took scholars several decades to realize that he was in fact Buddhist: most traces of Buddhism had been erased at Angkor. He

reminds us of other radical and revolutionary kings such as Akhenaten, associated with a new religious cult and royal kingly image, and the attempt to completely erase his memory from Egyptian history. Perhaps the Buddhism of Jayavarman VII did have a lasting effect on Cambodia, unlike the religious reform of Akhenaten, monotheism or henotheism.

Cambodia was fairly small in this period. In previous time periods it encompassed northeast and central Thailand. We know about the extent of Angkor's empire from archaeological remains including temple bas reliefs, fairly late from the 11th and 12th centuries. We have inscriptions composed in two languages: first, the vernacular which we call Old Khmer (*figure 1*), placed at temple sites to enumerate the various gifts that officials gave to temples. Some of them are written legibly, some not. Other inscriptions are written in Sanskrit. In India, Sanskrit was the language of the gods, used to write poetry. In Cambodia's case, it was used for writing long eulogies for praising the king: this example is a long, bombastic praise poem. In all the different countries that used the Sanskrit languages, they used their own script to write the Sanskrit language.

Figure 1 - Old Khmer

Cambodian history begins around the 6th century in the pre-Angkor period, a country the Chinese at the time called Fu-Nan. It was a maritime polity in the swampy area of the Mekong Delta. By the 7th century, Chinese sources refer to a new polity called Chen La. This polity was defined by Hindu kingship. It was far less centralized. There was one "king of kings" but also various smaller kings scattered around the country, and there was little administrative structure. The capital of this country slowly inched its way northwards. The South was where most of the rice growing occurred. The Angkor period begins in 9th century and lasts until the 14th-15th century (*figure 2*). At the height of Angkor's empire, much of Southeast Asia was included.

Figure 2 - Angkor Period (9th-14th Centuries)

In this time period, the country had a name: Kambuja, which we call Kampuchea or Cambodia. The multiple chieftains of the region began to become incorporated. Unlike the nicely-watered southern regions, major irrigation works were necessary, and were built in the north of the country. A vast network of canals was constructed at Angkor, and this is the largest urban water complex in history of the pre-industrial world. The North Canal is particularly big and impressive. As one might guess, the purpose of hydraulic system was to keep region from drying out. In fact, Angkor was able to sustain up to 3 harvests per years as opposed to 1 or 2 in present-day Cambodia.

The kings also constructed stepped or tiered mountains. These tiered temple mountains were often topped with large lingas. The great object of devotion in Cambodian religion is a fertility symbol, the linga, a phallic symbol of the Hindu god Shiva (*figure 3*). The step mountains are pretty unique in the Hindu world, and should be counted as a Cambodian innovation. A royal obsession with these structures resulted in some of the world's most impressive religious monuments such as the temple mountain of Angkor Wat (*figure 4*).

Figure 3 – shivalinga at center

Figure 4 – Temple-mountain

However, Cambodia was beset by numerous divisions. The clans had their own local deities. Cambodian kingship was inherently unstable, unlike aristocracies in China and Europe, for there was no straightforward patrilineal succession. Succession traveled through both lines: bilateral succession, resulting in any number of claims to a throne: a son of the king, or a nephew (the king's sister's daughter). When a king died, there was inevitably a civil war, and so this happened every 15 – 20 years. From the 9th until the 11th century, there was one dynasty with internal feuds, but in 11th and 12th centuries we see further contenders for the throne. Another source of potential fragmentation appears when the Buddhist community develops in Cambodia from the 10th century onwards and seeks to assert its autonomy thereafter.

The king's political mission was to quell all of these different divisions in Cambodian society. Jayavarman VII tried to make a grand synthesis by pointing to claims from various different dynasties. He created a pan-Khmer ethnic movement to fight against the Chams, who today are related more to the Malaysians and Indonesians, but who at that time lived on the east coast of the peninsula. His grand synthesis prominently featured his adoption of Buddhism. It reflected the Buddhism of peripheral generals but also featured Mayayana Buddhism which is devoted to the boddhisattvas.

In the official art created under Jayavarman's regime, Shiva was replaced by Buddha. The Hindu trinity normally consists of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, but Buddha was drawn into the middle instead of Shiva. However, iconoclasm has occurred: many of the monuments made under Jayavarman that featured this new synthetic trinity have been defaced (*figure 5*).

Figure 5 – Right to Left: Brahma, Buddha?, Vishnu

The topic of temple mountains also illustrates the synthesis Jayavarman attempted. Temple mountains represent the cosmological center of the Hindu universe. Jayavarman's temple mountain, however, was also shaped like a mandala, like the Buddhist stupa. Making the king seem like Buddha was a major element in the inscriptions. Bhaisajyaguru was the boddhisattva of medicine, and Jayavarman associated himself with this figure in his royal propaganda as we see in inscriptions. He presents himself as a guardian deity and as boddhisattva. He had statue portraits made of himself and placed around the empire. They represent the king in the humble aspect of meditation. They appear to highlight the king's devotion to the Buddha. The "face towers," which have a face facing each compass direction, have enigmatic smiles and a third eye associated with Shiva typically, a sign of enlightenment (*figure 6*). The eyes are wide open, rather than closed. At this site, someone came later on and closed several of the eyes.

Figure 6

Another temple is Banteay Chhmar, which features particularly interesting examples of the king comparing himself, or assimilating himself, to the boddhisatva. This is an extensive site. Much has been destroyed by looters. Fortunately enough is left so art historians can read a few of the bas reliefs, notably those on the west wall of the temple.

Figure 7 - Avalokitesavra

A multi-armed image of Avalokitesvara surrounded by adoring worshippers is worthy of note (*figure 7*). Some similar images are in national museum in Phnomh Penh. This image, formerly on the temple's western wall, seemed to be dedicated to depictions of the boddhisatva of Avalokitesvara. In the relief illustration, a multitude of commoners seems to be petitioning for rice to be put in flat trays or baskets (*figure 8*). Some people are walking away with smiling faces. On the left is a commotion. In the scene there is a high-ranking individual directing people to give food to ascetics, which may be key to entire scene. Cake-like tiered objects on the bottom of the composition, under the ascetics, may be a ritual item (*figure 9*). In Buddhism of Tibet today, one sees similar items called mandala offerings, typically made of grains of rice or sand. They represent Mount Meru, the cosmological center of the universe (*figure 10*). This panel in its entirety is an elaborate presentation of handing out food to subjects and saving them from starvation.

Figure 8

Figure 9

Figure 10

Another interesting bas-relief panel shows perhaps a king or prince in his palace and to his left is a princess or queen attended by temple servants. Below these ladies we see workers bringing goods and slaves, led toward a cart pulled by two cattle. An image of a merchant caravan? To the left there is a large figure with a crown, possibly a prince. Further to the left is the same prince figure again. This prince is traveling on his chariot through the forest. Previous scholars looking at this image think it is a cake, but perhaps it is the mandala offering (*figure 11*).

Figure 11

Next, an intriguing scene unfolds. A monster wearing armor attacks the aforementioned cart. He is swallowing the cattle. Above the scene is a prince in combat with another such monster, or perhaps the same monster, and it appears to show the monster in defeat. The prince is riding the chariot here, and is defending the merchant caravan from attack by either monsters or armed robbers. Who is this prince? Here is a figure on a chariot again. This should depict the same individual who has a crown and is carrying a sword. The prince who saved the merchant caravan has now become a king. A large figure on the far left is offered a lotus flower by a lady. This figure has a top knot and a protruding belly – thus is recognizable as Jayavarman VII. We thus see progression of king from young prince to warrior king. This is a time-lapse illustration series of the king's life.

This interpretation helps us interpret this scene. Jayavarman is presented as completing a heroic deed, defeating a monster. The presence of the merchant caravan is clearly related to Buddhism and related to the boddhisatva of Alokitasvra who helps people escape from demons and robbers. Jayavarman VII appears as a petitioner.

The bas-reliefs reflect a common theme of the king becoming the boddhisatva of Alokitasvra. Rather than being shown as a normal crowned king, he is instead portrayed as an enlightened Buddhist king. And his images were regularly defaced after his reign. No other king was subject to systematic destruction. What about Jayavarman stirred up such a response? Buddhist images have been chiseled out, including one in which the Buddha was replaced by the linga, and then the linga was also chiseled out.

Several reasons can be given for the iconoclasm. We cannot be sure about these, but they are interesting possibilities.

1.) We know Jayavarman VII kept copies of statues of the deities of various scattered localities: many deities were worshipped around the edges of the empire. The central temple at Angkor was used as a repository of divine images. The iconoclasm could reflect anger at his attempt to monopolize the deities.

2.) Some think he was a foreigner, not ethnically Khmer.

3.) Some think he disrupted the power structure of the Hindu priesthood elite. Pushing this priesthood aside, Jayavarman may have made room in the government and religious positions for his own trusted family and friends.

4.) Finally, the king presented himself as Buddhist king and savior of the people. In a sense he took on himself role of sole mediator between the people and the sacred realm. The linga was no longer the venerated thing; rather, the body of the king fulfilled this role. Cynicism toward his perverse Buddhist populism may explain some of the unpopularity he faced during and after his reign.

(Many fine images can easily be found at Google Images if you type in "banteay chhmar.")

Yet Mr. Lowman notes that it is important to keep in mind that there is no evidence that the memory of Jayavarman VII's reign was being deliberately erased, or even that it had anything to do with this king's reign; Jayavarman VII's inscriptions at Angkor remained mostly

untouched. It's quite possible that the destruction of Buddhist images took place a century later, in the 14th century, during a tense transition from Hinduism to Theravada Buddhism. In short, there are many questions surrounding the iconoclasm and few answers. It is tempting to draw big conclusions, like connecting the iconoclasm to Jayavarman VII's "perverse populism." But, cautions Mr. Lowman, one may not wish to overreach there for the sake of a satisfying conclusion. The "populism" was real and likely grounded in multiple factors, mostly religious and partly political, but to what extent it irked his rivals and successors and led to the destruction of his Buddhist images is, in fact, unknown.

Note: National Geographic hosts an interactive Khmer Empire Website at http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2009/07/angkor/angkor-animation

Summarized by Timothy Doran