

Two notes on Vat Phou

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On the Vat Phou sanctuary

The site of Vat Phou, one of ancient Cambodia's best known pilgrimage places, was amongst the earliest to be described by various authors; its sanctuary had to wait till 1939 and *l'Art khmer classique* by Henri Parmentier to be accurately described. It is true that this 10th century ruined brick tower to which had been attached a building transformed by the neighbouring pagoda into a Buddhist sanctuary was not particularly attractive. It had been visited and briefly described by the first French explorers, Francis Garnier and others; Aymonier¹ must have visited the site under adverse conditions – his plan is certainly erroneous – and gives only a few lines to the sanctuary. Subsequently, reliance was on Lunet de Lajonquière², who was the best in spite of being mistaken about the dimensions, writing that the sanctuary was on a square plan when it is clearly rectangular.

Despite the relative profusion of inscriptions found on the site, there was no epigraphic point of reference to it; it was only through art history that this temple could be situated in time as it is not mentioned specifically in any document. Even though no formal proof exists, the sanctuary must certainly be that of the god Bhadreśvara, a name of Śiva, mentioned as such in numerous inscriptions.

A recently discovered stele, K. 1297³, of unfortunately unknown origin, has contributed to research on Vat Phou. In the passage on King Sūryavarman II, it gives in fact various insights, starting with the date, 1149, on which his successor, Tribhuvanādityavarman, came to power from which may be deduced the hitherto unknown date of the death of Sūryavarman II, who must have preceded him very closely. The stele also mentions two important achievements of this king: the first is the temple of Cāmpēśvara and his “very high golden temple” (*svarṇaprāsādamuttamam*), a name under which there was little difficulty in identifying Angkor Vat. The other deity who has benefited from the generosity of this same king is that of Liṅgapura, that is, Vat Phou:

liṅgapuramahāśambhau

[ū]rdhvaliṅgādriṣaṃskāram

suvarṇavalabhikṛtam

yo data śivabhaktitaḥ

“To the great Śambhu of Liṅgapura, he gave, out of devotion to Śiva, an embellishment of the mountain of the *liṅga* at the summit, of a *valabhi* in gold.”⁴

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1. *Cambodge*, t. II, pp. 158-165; sanctuary, p. 161.

2. *Inventaire descriptif des monuments du Cambodge*, t. 2, pp. 75 to 88; sanctuary, p. 77.

3. An edition of the stele is currently being prepared by Arlo Griffiths, who has presented his first reading in the seminar of the CIK project (“Corpus des inscriptions khmères”) at the EPHE in Paris.”

4. K. 1297, stance XXVII.

This stanza does not mention the particular name of the god honoured here, Bhadreśvara, but it is certainly he who is recognisable in this “great Śambhu of Liṅgapura” (at least if this is not taken to mean the “Śambhu of the great Liṅgapura”). And the “*valabhi* in gold” constructed here is according to all the evidence the edifice called “nave” by Lunet de Lajonquière and “anterior hall” by Henri Parmentier.

The term *valabhi* in Sanskrit may mean a “monopitch roof” or a barrel-vaulted roof containing an upper storey; in consequence, it may also refer to a building with such a mono-pitched roof or a building with such a barrel-vaulted upper storey. This word is rare in Cambodian epigraphy: aside from this stanza XXVII, it is not used to my knowledge except in the steles K. 283 and 908 of Ta Prohm and Praḥ Khan of Angkor, almost contemporaneous, which give details of the buildings these ensembles comprise. In these two steles, *valabhi* appears to be contrasted with *prāsāda*, an edifice surmounted by a tower, and designates an edifice without a tower: this is probably what this is, except for the detail that the *valabhi* is much wider here than the *prāsāda*.

A small problem then arises: this anterior hall, the quality of whose decor is much admired, has generally been dated from the very beginning of the Angkor Vat style. “One may admit that the style of Angkor Vat begins with the front façade of the sanctuary of Vat Phou, certain aspects of which still hark back to the transition, but which exhibits the use of all the decorative formulae of the style”, writes Jean Boisselier, who considers the temple of Phimai to be “appreciably of the same period”, while Thommanon and Chau Say Tevoda are slightly later⁵.

It may be imagined that the architects of Vat Phou would have been a little behind those active at Angkor, and also that the very construction of the sanctuary was decreed by some great lord and begun under the reign of Sūryavarman II. It is for example known that the celebrated general Saṅgrāma, loyal to King Udayādityavarman II, laid the foundations at Vat Phou (at least of two *āśrama*)⁶. The builder of Angkor Vat would thus have had nothing to do but arrange the gilding of the edifice.

Inscription K. 1297 speaks on the one hand of a *svaṅṅāprāsāda* about Angkor Vat (st. XXVI) and on the other (st. XXVII) of a *suvarnavalabhi*: this gilding seems to have been authentic; in any case, George Groslier’s evidence on Angkor Vat is significant; he wrote: “I consider it certain that the friezes, lintels and mouldings of the doors, *Apsaras*, sculptures of the columns and door-jambes of the main gallery of Angkor Vat and the bas-reliefs of this monument were gold plated on the site on a resin base, sometimes black and sometimes red”.⁷ It is known that the central sanctuaries of the temples of Ta Prohm and Praḥ Khan were caparisoned with gilded bronze plaques; the rare fragments of these that have been found confirm what the steles say. At Vat Phou as at Angkor Vat, time must have rubbed out almost every trace of this gilding.

I was, on the other hand, struck by a remark by Lunet de Lajonquière regarding the roofs, written while speaking of what he calls the nave: “It must have been covered with a brick vault which may never have been finished, since no trace of the debris is to be found”,⁸ while Henri Marchal wrote: “The sandstone vaults which covered the halls have disappeared”.⁹ Henri Parmentier, for his part, without mentioning the disappearance of the materials possibly used for the roof, writes: “This hall, like the palace, was in fact sheltered by brick section walls of considerable thickness, which seems to indicate that of the wall above the architraves, doubtless allowing for the support of the walls that was necessary in building G of the Praḥ Vihār 398 [...] to be avoided. The existence of these masonry walls is confirmed by the two points indicated here by the indentations, in the rock wall intended to receive the bricks where a binder could hold them firmly”.

5. “Beng Mealea et la chronologie des monuments du style d’Angkor Vat”, *BEFEO* XLVI, fasc. 1, 1952, p. 222.

6. Cf. K. 289, face D, st. 18 : A. Barth, *Inscriptions sanscrites du Cambodge*, XVII, Prea Ngouk, pp. 140-172 (st. D, 18, sk. p. 156, trans. p. 171).

7. *Recherches sur les Cambodgiens*, Paris, 1921, p. 168.

8. *Inventaire descriptif des monuments du Cambodge*, t. I, p. 77.

9. *Le temple de Vat Phou, province de Champassak*, p. 9.

The disappearance of debris noted by Lunet de Lajonquière may have resulted partly from what neighbouring monks had had to remove in taking possession of this hall to make a sanctuary of it. The covering envisaged by Parmentier seems, however, never to have been completed; at the same time, it is unlikely that the gilding of the roof was started before the completion of the masonry work. If this anterior hall had actually been gilded, then the roof, perhaps supported by a fairly light framework covered by plated tiles, may perhaps have been made simply of a gold-plated material.¹⁰

Parmentier, a worthy expert in ancient Khmer construction, was not perhaps entirely wrong: it is easy to understand that a golden roof might have excited the envy of certain people. Once the protection of this distant site of pilgrimage by the great kings of Angkor became less certain it may be imagined that some powerful person of the region appropriated it, possibly to replace it by a brick covering, work that would never have been completed.

The gold may have come from the environs of Vat Phou. On this subject, stele K. 1320, appearing in December 2016 in *Aséanie*,¹¹ tells us that the annual tribute of the “province” of Liṅgapura, given up to the temple of Bhadreśvara by Īśānavarman II was 600 *pala*, being, if my hypothesis that *pala* = *tael* is correct, about: $600 \times 37,5 = 22.500$ grams, amounting to 22 kgs per year. Such a tribute implies a more substantial production, difficult to estimate.

On stele K. 1320

Stele K. 1320 was discovered at the foot of the “north palace” on 8th January 2013.¹² It is known that it was found under conditions that indicated that it had been “buried”, perhaps ritually, and certainly soon after the death of King Īśānavarman II who it celebrates.

It may be worth mentioning that this “burial” is not the only one noticed at Vat Phou. The great stele of Jayavarman I had already been discovered in 1901 on the expansive terrace which opens onto the Vat Phou site, and had led Henri Parmentier, following a detour in an article, to remark: “That terrace was never finished; it is at its centre, in the earthworks from which it was constructed, that one finds, amongst the much older debris, the beautiful stele C which seems to have been deliberately hidden”.¹³ Unfortunately he does not explain why he has this feeling.

That “stele C” is the great stele K. 367, issuing from King Jayavarman I, conserved today at the National Museum of Cambodia in Phnom Penh. This is a significant Sanskrit text, ensuring thieves immunity on the site. It is not, however, obvious why, at that certainly early time, it would have been desirable to hide such a text...

Concealing objects in case of danger is obviously not an unusual thing to do: it is something that is often done in the world when grave danger is spotted on the horizon. During the shifting of the Siem-Reap airport in the late 1960s, the bulldozers discovered large jars containing bronze Buddhist statues, perhaps hidden at the time of the violent Hindu reaction at Angkor. More recently, it is also known that the mine detectors of the Cambodian army discovered a great number of jewels hidden on the site of the town of Banteay Chhmar, in an undetermined era but definitely in the face of danger.

It would appear that life around the Vat Phou site must have been at times more tumultuous than might be expected of a place of pilgrimage sheltering numerous hermits.

10. On the problem of coverings in ancient Cambodia, cf. Christophe Pottier, “Nouvelles données sur les couvertures en plomb à Angkor” *BEFEO* 84, 1997, pp. 183-220.

11. D. Goodall and C. Jacques, “Nouvelle inscription de Vat Phu (K. 1320)”, *Aséanie*, 33, June 2014, pp. 395-454.

12. C. Hawixbrock, “La stèle inscrite K. 1320. Note sur une nouvelle découverte archéologique à Vat Phu”, *Aséanie*, 30, December 2012, pp. 103-119.

13. “Complément à l’inventaire descriptif des monuments du Cambodge”, *BEFEO* 13 (1), p. 54.