

THE *RĀMĀYAṆA* AND KHMER RELIEFS

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In April 2002, while revisiting the temple of Banteay Chhmar, I was able to interpret a relief that I had seen firsthand before as well as in several photographs in various publications where it remained un-decoded for several decades (Marchal, 1955: 123; Stern, 1965, Fig. 188).

This interesting relief is the first to be encountered on a low pediment over the eastern entrance door of the 'Hall of dancers' of Banteay Chhmar (figure 1), thus in a privileged location. Reading it from right to left, we see a man who has shot one arrow through the neck of two cranes. He wears a hat that has the mimetic hood in the shape of a crane, as tribal hunters used to wear.¹ At the centre of the relief is Brahma with four heads and four arms, seated in the yoga position. In old photographs it seems that he is offering with his upper right hand a stylus / pen to a bearded man, while the lower rests on his lap; his lower left arm is raised to his chest holding a rosary, but his upper arm is hidden. The bearded man to the left of Brahma seems to hold palm leaf sheets in his right arm. I believe he is Valmiki holding a page of his poem! His head has been defaced by time or vandals, but old photographs show his manly face respectfully turned towards Brahma (figure 2).² Further to the left there is a harp player, probably playing a piece of music to celebrate the event or to accompany the narration of the story.

This identification corresponds to the event narrated in Valmiki at the very beginning of the *Rāmāyaṇa* (Book I, *Balakāṇḍa*, chapter 2). In this sort of preamble, it is narrated how the sage Valmiki came to compose his epic poem. One day, immediately after having heard the bard Narada's short story of Rama's adventures, Valmiki was wandering with a disciple along a forested riverbank, looking for a place to bathe. While he was admiring a pair of mating *krauñca* birds (cranes), a tribal hunter suddenly emerged from the trees and killed the male with an arrow, causing the hen to cry desperately. The poet, filled with compassion, spontaneously cursed the hunter... in metrical form! This was his emotional experience converted into poetic art form. Valmiki then returned to his *āśrama* where he received the unexpected visit of Brahma. Although honouring the presence of the Grandfather of the World and venerating him appropriately, Valmiki's mind was still dwelling on the tragic killing of the cranes. Brahma, aware of Valmiki's poetic gift, expressed his wish that he should continue to write poetry and tell in full the story of Rama, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, for the pleasure of men. Having made this proclamation, the god vanished.

¹ At Angkor Vat, in the Historic Procession relief, soldiers are differentiated in platoons by the animal figure of their helmet's crest.

² I am very indebted to Claude Jacque for providing this photograph that he took in 1997, prior to the destruction of Valmiki's face.



Figure 1 : Pediment of Banteay Chhmar, present state.

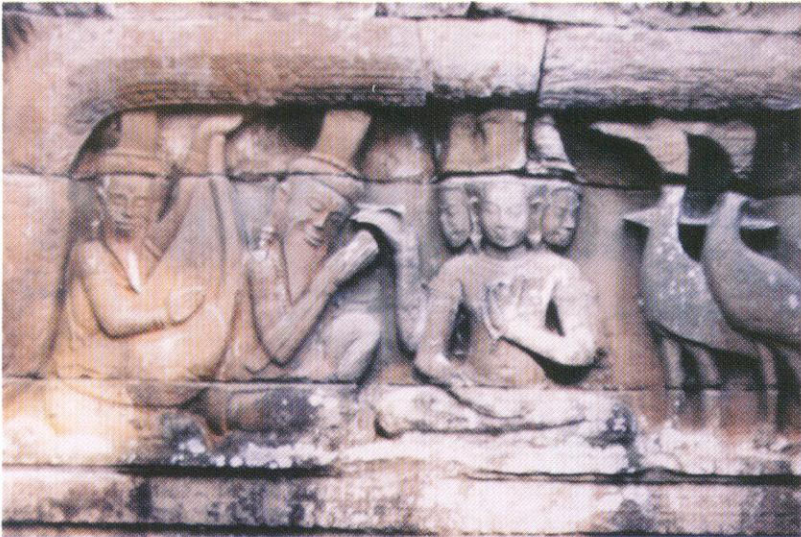


Figure : 2. Same pediment. Photograph taken in 1997.

The development of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in Cambodia

According to inscriptions, the *Rāmāyaṇa* was known in Cambodia from the 7th century when, contemporaneously, statues of Valmiki were erected at Sambor Prei Kuk (Īśānapura) and Phnom Bayang (Dagens 2003: 218). Within the visual narrative context, one may ask why *Rāmāyaṇa* scenes were not represented in reliefs before the 11th century. I believe that the main reason has to be found in the evolution of the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s perception and the exploitation of its symbolism. On the other hand, in terms of visual representations, it may be that initially the monuments did not have suitable architectural spaces for narrative scenes, or that the Khmers did not have an adequate knowledge of representational techniques.

The popularity of the *Rāmāyaṇa* was directly related – in Cambodia as in India – to the gradual identification of Rama as an avatar of Vishnu and of Sita with Lakshmi. This superseded Valmiki's figure of Rama as human hero subject to human emotions although gifted with superhuman powers, a perception briefly shared in the *Mahābhārata*. From the late 10th century in India, the couple Rama-Sita was identified as divine, following the model of the incarnation of Vishnu-Lakshmi in the couple Krishna-Radha. In Cambodia, Rama, known in literary and folk traditions from the 7th century, did not become object of cult till the arrival and absorption of the *Bhagavata Purāṇa*'s concepts around the 11th century. As a consequence, the *Rāmāyaṇa* became particularly revered at the Khmer royal courts and frequently represented in reliefs. In statuary, the trio Rama-Sita-Lakshmana was in great favor as a cult icon.

The earliest reliefs of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in Khmer art are those of the Baphuon, a temple possibly initiated by Suryavarman I and brought to near completion by Udayadityavarman I around 1060. According to historians, the 11th century corresponds to a period of assertion of royal power and of political stability. The elite at court may have enjoyed prosperity and encouraged cultural exchanges with India and the granting of more power to 'intellectuals' such as the royal gurus and chaplains who always favoured the transfer of Indian ideas into Khmer forms. At Phimai, a temple of a Khmer province (now in Thailand) in use in 1080, there is a variety of *Rāmāyaṇa*-inspired reliefs although mainly restricted to lintels. The first truly complete and complex representations of Ramayanic scenes occur at Angkor Vat, the colossal temple built under the reign of Suryavarman II (1113-c.1150). Here, galleries and large pediments were created with the specific objective of allowing space for the carving of complex visual representations of Rama's epic adventures.

From these reliefs and those that followed until the time of Jayavarman VII (1181-c.1220), it appears that it was Valmiki's version that continued to be used in Cambodian reliefs. Some scholars have objected that there was another version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and that this had been the model for the large panel of Angkor Vat showing the Churning of the Ocean of Milk, since some of the main protagonists do not appear in Valmiki's text, especially the monkey (Sugriva or Hanuman) pulling the tail of the snake Vasuki. I believe that this deviation is more likely due to local folklore perhaps influenced by the performing arts (see below) or by Tamil legends. Similarly, the anomalous target of Rama's archery test in the scene of Sita's *svayamvara* (Angkor Vat, NW corner pavilion; Roveda: 2002: 160, Fig. 143) may be due to the local introduction in Valmiki's basic plot of details from similar events narrated in the *Mahābhārata* and the *Purāṇas*.

However, in general, all other Ramayanic reliefs in Khmer temples are inspired by Valmiki's version and the discovery at Banteay Chhmar of a pediment showing the seminal encounter of Valmiki with Rama is a proof of the loyalty to Valmiki's version that continued till the early 13th century.

In popular and performing arts, it was the human character of Rama that called the attention of

the masses, with dancing and singing accompanying the progress of the narration. The *Rāmāyaṇa*'s structure is linear, easy to adapt to dramatic representations; many episodes are self contained and thus clearly understandable by the masses. In Cambodia, the *Rāmāyaṇa* was probably performed first in the shadow play, the oldest form of theatre, before man dared to impersonate divine beings. The shadow play was influenced by animistic concepts, thus performing practical functions such as to avert magical spells, cure diseases, procure rain, ensure fertility and reanimate the spirit of the deceased. Furthermore, it was a means to spread religious concepts, ethical and mortal codes, myths and legends, and to comment on society in a form that would entertain the viewer. In short, the shadow puppet theatre was for the Khmers the ideal form to convey the adventures and meanings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. It was followed by theatrical performances, mainly as dance-drama. Through this process of vulgarisation, the oral tradition was reworked giving rise to local folk versions.

It is likely that the *Rāmāyaṇa* appeared in Cambodia first in oral rather than written form, although there is no clarification on this in the inscriptions. I am prone to believe that there were two traditions at least till the end of the Angkorean period (14th century). The first (written and oral) was based on the Sanskrit text of Valmiki, known at the royal courts and used for the conception of the reliefs in temples. The other version was oral and tailored for theatrical performances. It is problematic to assert how much written or oral versions influenced visual representations, as can be seen the image of Rama shooting his lethal arrow at Valin carved in the relief of the SW Corner Pavilion of Angkor Vat, which appears formalised in a theatrical stereotype (Roveda, 2002: 117, Fig. 100).

The 'Buddhisiation' of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in Cambodia and Thailand

With the spreading of the Theravada in Southeast Asia, however, the *Rāmāyaṇa* assumed a Buddhist character and became the *Rāmakerti* (or *Reamker*)³ in Cambodia and the *Ramakien* in Thailand. Scholars have argued that in this transformation process, material was taken from the *Dasaratha Jātaka*, an ancient well known Indian story of Rama perceived as a Bodhisattva, and from the Laotian *Phra Lak / Phra Lam*, a narration of the events of Lakshmana and Rama as if it were a sermon preached by the Buddha.

Bizot (1989: 15) has suggested that the Theravada Buddhism adopted by the Mon people from the beginning of the second millennium was influential in the crystallisation of the *Rāmakerti* and *Ramakien*. It was Theravada Buddhism of the non-Mahavihara⁴ form which agreed with royal intervention in the affairs of the Sangha, accepted competition with other sects for obtaining the favours of the king, and that adopted Tantric and Brahmanic concepts and practices. The Mons had their ancient capital at Lopburi which became a major Khmer provincial centre during the first centuries of the second millennium.

The Buddhist core of Cambodian and Thai tellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is indubitable. The *Rāmakerti* rests on Rama's spiritual 'glory' and not on his heroic deeds and mortal love for Sita; it is symbolic of the spiritual love of Rama and Sita and the conquest of Sita is the achievement of the inner self through the initiation practices of Buddhist yoga. The Thai *Ramakien* sees Rama in the context of Buddhist attitudes

³ See, for instance, Pou 1977.

⁴ Mahavihara refers to the Shri Lanka Theravadin sect that rejected royal involvement in the affairs of the Sangha and avoided any competition with other sects for the favours of the king (Bechert & Gombrich 1984: 142).

towards life, the impermanence of things, retribution of deeds, etc. The account of Rama's story in both the *Rāmakerti* and *Ramakien* tends much more towards Buddhism than Hinduism and can be considered autonomous Buddhist tellings of the story, comparable to that of the *Dasaratha Jātaka* and the *Phra Lak / Phra Lam*.

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