

ARTISTS AND ATELIERS:  
KHMER DECORATIVE LINTELS OF THE NINTH AND TENTH CENTURIES<sup>1</sup>

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Early Cambodian temples look barren today compared to the time of their initial construction. For example, stucco moulding and paint covered the external surfaces of numerous buildings, and the *sanctum sanctorum* of many shrines was conceivably clad with combinations of metal and gilded wood. Blank surfaces marked artistic poverty and appear to have been avoided at all costs. The decorative ‘false’ lintel holds a special place in this schema. The true lintel consists of the higher part of the framework of door, which is usually formed of four independent sandstone blocks held together by mortise and tenon fittings.<sup>2</sup> The decorative lintel, to the contrary, is rarely load-bearing and is positioned in a principal position above the doorway lintel supported by two similarly decorated colonnettes. Decorative lintels occupy a pre-eminent privileged position in the Khmer temple, watching over all who cross the threshold, from the secular to the

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To maintain consistency, the naming and spelling of sites in this study follows the designation of Bruguier’s *Bibliographie du Cambodge ancien* (1998). In most cases sites are identified by the 1952 École Française d’Extrême-Orient Monuments historiques inventory enumeration [MH] (Anonymous, 1952). When not registered on this list, sites are alternatively labelled according to Lunet de Lajonquière’s inventory [LL] (Lunet de Lajonquière 1902, 1907, 1911; see also Parmentier 1913, 1927, 1935, 1939). This paper is based upon a ‘total dataset’ of approximately five hundred decorative lintels from nearly one hundred sites spanning the seventh to eleventh centuries primarily in the ‘greater’ Angkor region (see Polkinghorne 2007). Of interest in recognising the operation of specific workshops are decorative lintels from the late ninth and the mid-tenth centuries.

<sup>2</sup> The nature of door construction varies across time and sites, from the number of pieces (e.g. one huge monolithic piece of sandstone at Bakong to the numerous blocks of some thirteenth century temples), to the different kinds of mortise and tendon technologies of bonded jams.



Figure 1: Decorative lintel from Banteay Srei (north prasat, north façade)

divine. The forms and iconography often sought to preserve the temple in a state of everlasting festival. Often they represent ephemeral decorations of garlands and rinceaux that gave the imitation of a building active with religious revelry (Dagens 2003: 236, e.g. Figure 1). Decorative lintels were sculpted *in situ* and the numerous blank, partially carved, and occasionally re-used lintels suggest that their completion was expensive, time consuming and among the final tasks of temple construction and adornment. Furthermore, the exceptional sculptural execution, aesthetic quality, and positional pre-eminence, particularly in pre-eleventh-century temples suggest that decorative lintels were executed by specialised craftspeople.<sup>3</sup> Many scholars have dedicated pages to the decorative lintel, recognising its transformation as a worthwhile trend for evaluating temporal attribution of temples.

“On sait toute l’importance du linteau décoratif dans l’évolution de l’art khmer; la richesse et la précision de son ornementation apportent tout un éventail d’informations, que nos devanciers ont utilisées pour établir la suite des styles de cet art et qui nous ont permis déjà d’étayer des rapprochements avec l’art indien, de dégager des phase nouvelles (d’apparition, de transition, etc.) dans la transformation du premier art khmer, de proposer certaines identifications iconographiques, etc.”<sup>4</sup> (Bénisti 1974: 132).

<sup>3</sup> Specialisation of decorative lintels is particularly evident in pre-eleventh century temples where sandstone superstructures are absent and other decoration was rendered in carved brick and stucco. The aesthetic and sculptural calibre decorative lintels can be viewed as relatively modest in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries coinciding with the replacement of brick with sandstone as the principal temple construction material. Sculpting in sandstone was a completely different skill and a decrease in overall lintel quality would be expected if the existing specialists were now required to ply their trade over the entire exterior of the temple, and new or reappropriated artists were requisitioned to develop new skills in sandstone (see Polkinghorne 2007: 277 – 278).

<sup>4</sup> “One knows the whole importance of the decorative lintel in the evolution of Khmer art; the richness and precision of its ornamentation provide a whole array of information, that our predecessors have used to establish the suite of styles in this art and which enable us to draw comparisons with Indian art, demonstrate new phases (appearance, transition, etc.) in the transformation of early Khmer art, and propose certain iconographic identifications, etc.” (Bénisti 1974: 132).

As Bénisti astutely summarised, the decorative lintel remains a respected component of the chronological toolkit of a Khmer studies art historian and archaeologist. Yet, in the process of understanding the artistic chronology of the Khmer empire the artists and workshops that created the works have not been systematically considered. On the whole scholars have not analysed patterns of motif use in ancient Khmer decorative material to investigate the existence of workshops.<sup>5</sup> Stern's assessment that similarities in certain lintels of the Kulen should tentatively be delimited as "...plus ou moins divers «ateliers» de sculpteurs"<sup>6</sup> (Stern 1938a:130) was not developed beyond this observation. Characteristics of ateliers and artistic workshops and how they changed over time are difficult to detect in the archaeological and historical record. There is little information in epigraphy,<sup>7</sup> and as yet little direct archaeological data has been obtained to indicate what the organisation of these groups may have been like. The scarcity of relevant building debris, fabrication tools and technologies, or archaeological landscape signatures suggestive of artistic intensification means that to understand the ancient Khmer lintels and temples in terms of the workshops that created them, evidence must come from the material outcomes of the production.<sup>8</sup> When similarity and difference in motif combinations can be identified across the landscape it is possible to substantiate the prevalence of particular workgroups commissioned for different sites.

This paper proposes that the individuals and groups who built temples and crafted decorative lintels were part of a large-scale operation of full-time artisans working in the segregated, highly specific setting of the building site, usually on the order of the central political authority under the auspices of the monarch. Because the modes of temple construction and the composition of groups who manufactured them were inherently variable, studies ought to avoid descriptions that are exclusive and fixed. In reference

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<sup>5</sup> Although, see Pichard (1974: 121 – 130) for an insightful discussion of the operation of work teams at Phnom Rung and Phimai. Also see Groslier, B.-P. (1969: 29) for a brief examination of the highly specialised nature of sculptors at the Terrace of the Leper King.

<sup>6</sup> "more or less various 'workshops' of sculptors" (Stern 1938a:130). Specifically Stern refers to the Kulen lintels of Rup Arak (MH768) and Khting Slap (MH763) which both have architectural arches as their central bands and divergent *makaras*. Additionally the Kulen lintels of O-Pha-ong (MH448) and Koki (MH774) have certain affinities with those of Rup Arak (MH768), Andông E Thbong (MH451), and Chrei (MH765).

<sup>7</sup> See Polkinghorne (*in press* [b]).

<sup>8</sup> These matters have recently been given consideration by the MAFKATA project team of the EFEO and APSARA. In the excavation of Prei Khmeng and surrounds, little evidence of occupation was found in the vicinity of the modern village. Guérin (in Pottier *et al* 2000: 26 – 27) suggests that the abandonment of this zone close to the temple was made in order to install workshops for the craftspeople of the building site. However in the six surveys, no conclusive evidence of installations associated with finishing brick and stone were found. In the same excavation, Pottier *et al* (2000: 26 – 27) deliberate upon curious hearths with brick fragments, and occasional terracotta 'stoves' on a mound south of the Prasat. The configuration of these hearths and their non-correspondence with known rural modes of cooking suggests possible use by artisans. In the EFEO excavations at Oc Eo, Malleret (1960: 243) found hammers and tools presumably for bronze and goldsmithing. Additionally, at Phnom Dei I (MH498) the numerous unfinished twelfth century sculptures of Avalokitesvara indicate that this site may have been the location of a sculpture workshop.

to craft specialisation in India, Sinopoli (2003: 33 – 34) argued that craft production did not remain in an unchanging ‘state of being,’ and should be considered as specific, with often limited durations. Even in formal workshops, the kinds of relations that would have existed between producers and institutions varied considerably, and changed over time. Therefore conclusions must be made appropriate to specific historical situations, as changes in artistic material are often independent of changes in the societal and political milieu, and correspondences can be fortuitous. No doubt artistic production could occur outside the view or control of the state and according to individual requirements of a ‘patron’ (see Polkinghorne, *in press* [b]). With this in mind, the fabrication of decorative lintels as evidence of specialised ateliers in the ancient Khmer world is appraised as a matter of degrees. Specialised temple construction and decorative ateliers existed in ancient Cambodia before ‘Angkor’, however this study will appraise evidence from the late ninth to the mid-tenth centuries when increased artistic standardisation and output suggest the expansion and formalisation of these groups to be consistent with consolidation and centralisation of regional power at Angkor.<sup>9</sup>

### **A workshop at Hariharālaya**

During the mid- to late ninth century the culmination of political, economic and social change marking the transition from the pre-Angkorian to the Angkorian period<sup>10</sup> is similarly observed in the augmentation of the state building program at Hariharālaya. The production output of lintels is viewed as potentially informative about changes in the arrangement of temple production workshops.<sup>11</sup> The period between 875 C.E. and 900 C.E. sees a three-fold increase in the number of lintels carved from the preceding twenty-five years. The majority of these sculptures were from the ‘state’ monuments of Bakong and Preah Kô constructed primarily under Indravarman I (Polkinghorne 2007: 214). Additionally, the extraordinary chisel skill employed on decorative lintels during this period might indicate an increased concentration and enlargement of the workshops responsible for temple decoration, and by extension, the production units engaged in temple building. The creativity of Khmer artists during this period can be appraised in terms of the diversity of motifs and motif combinations dispersed across the site of the Angkorian period’s ‘first

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<sup>9</sup> Significant building program and anecdotal observations of lintel decoration suggest the existence of similar workshops at Sambor Prei Kuk in the seventh century C.E. It is hoped that future study will illuminate this matter further. For standardisation of decorative lintels associated with the transformation of artistic workshops (see Polkinghorne 2007: 209 – 216, 275 – 284).

<sup>10</sup> Primarily defined by the ‘gap’ in inscriptional evidence during the eighth and the first three quarters of the ninth century, the transition from pre-Angkor to Angkor also comprises the shift of political and economic focus from southern and central Cambodia to the north bank of the Tonle Sap, and substantial linguistic differences between the pre-Angkorian and Angkorian languages (e.g. see Vickery 1998: 33, 1999: 49, 72).

<sup>11</sup> Although, Costin (2001: 291) cautions against the singular use of output as an indicator of organisation particularly in the absence of detailed knowledge of technology, the degree to which specialists were engaged in producing goods, and approximations of the number of work groups.

capital.<sup>12</sup> The combination of increased lintel output and motif diversity suggests a large degree of workshop and individual creativity in the production units.

Evidence of the operation of a specific artist or small group of artists, presumably from the same workshop, is recognised in the near identical iconography and chisel aptitude of lintels from Preah Kô and a lintel fragment from O Ka-aek Temple (LL589,07). Whereas common motifs were used across sites, lintel design uniformity was generally confined to each temple complex. An exception is noted when comparing the lintels of Preah Kô and O Ka-aek and the occurrence of a distinctive iconographical motif of *asvins* riding *nāgas*. O Ka-aek temple was cleared and photographed by Trouvé between 1934 and 1935 (Trouvé 1934: 765; 1935: 479 – 480). The discovery of a smashed decorative lintel reveals a design and finish identical to four Preah Kô lintels (Figure 2). The bottom section of this lintel depicts *asvins* with weapons riding three-headed crowned *nāgas*. The position, pose, details and composition of these figures are so close to the design of the Preah Kô examples that it is possible to envisage the exact position of the fragment on the original lintel. The distinctiveness of this design indicates that the same artist from the same workshop who worked upon Preah Kô also fashioned the O Ka-aek lintel. Stern (1938b: 183 – 189) and Pottier (1999: 157) tentatively suggested that this site could have pre-dated Indravarman I, but based on this decorative analysis it appears to also be contemporary.<sup>13</sup> The distance from Preah Kô to O Ka-aek is less than two kilometres, so in this instance the artistic workshop did not have to move far for another commission.<sup>14</sup>

Because temple building and decoration was generally restricted to a small number of ‘central’ monuments at Hariharālaya it was likely that the workshop was similarly geographically concentrated. That is not to say that building and ateliers did not occur outside Hariharālaya, but that construction resources



Figure 2: ‘Celestial Beings’ with weapons on late ninth-century lintels at Hariharālaya

<sup>12</sup> For an assessment of standardisation and diversity in motif combinations of decorative lintels see Polkinghorne 2007: 209 – 216, *in press* [a]

<sup>13</sup> During the course of his 1958 – 1959 surveys of the southern part of Angkor, B.-P. Groslier comments upon a colonnette at the site of Kouk Kreu (Kok Kris) identical to those of O Ka-aek (B.-P. Groslier, 1959: 53). This is additional evidence of the same artistic workshop operating at Hariharālaya during the mid to late ninth century.

<sup>14</sup> It is likely that artists and workshops travelled further afield to complete artistic commissions during and before the ninth century. For example, the iconography and form of a *makara* from Neang Khmau (MH667) in Ta Keo province suggests a workshop or artist that travelled over 250 kilometres from Hariharālaya to complete a commission. Neang Khmau, a site famous for the frescos of its central tower, has usually been dated epigraphically by K. 35 on the door jamb of the ‘central tower’ to the early tenth century, however the two standing prasats were probably of different dates, with the north tower likely constructed in the mid-ninth century.

were generally concentrated to this location during this period. The high quality and diverse work suggests a production unit that was well provisioned in time and resources, sufficiently remunerated, and afforded considerable freedom for artistic creativity consistent with the period of economic and political consolidation. The lintels of the late ninth century demonstrate that output and motif uniformity were not inevitably correlated. In the mid-tenth century, however, a rise in production output is associated with design consistency. Additionally, the pervasiveness and frequency of certain motifs during the tenth century indicate that artists and workshops frequently travelled beyond Angkor to other regions of Kambuja to fulfil their professional obligations.

### A tenth-century workshop

During the early to mid-tenth century the number of monuments constructed in durable materials increased markedly and a proliferation of homogeneous lintel designs emerged identifying these foundations. Uniformity of motifs and composition are predominantly observed on the lintel friezes, a narrow decorative panel on the topmost border of decorative lintels. The restricted repetition of specific motif combinations and analogous carving proficiencies illustrate the implementation of a design repertoire that had likely been committed to memory in a workshop environment. Not confined to Angkor, evidence of this workshop begins in Koh Ker and is also witnessed in a re-used lintel from Wat Banon in Battambang.

From the combination of three or four distinctive motifs that characterise the work of this particular workshop, the ‘celestial being praying in a fleuron’ was perhaps the most idiosyncratic (Figures 3 and 4). The ‘beings’ appear on lintels from the seventh century, for instance on a ‘Sambor Prei Kuk style’ lintel from Kôk Svay Pream, and on friezes from the mid-ninth century. The first examples on friezes at Hariharālaya are seen at the sites of Olok, Bakong, Preah Kô, Trapeang Srangè, and also at O Ka-aek (LL589,07) (Figure 3). These figures, however, exhibit a significant degree of differentiation in terms of composition and sculptural finish, for instance the celestial beings of Preah Kô are sculpted in high relief with no accompanying borders,



Figure 3: ‘Celestial Beings Praying.’ This motif appears in numerous stylistic and motif incarnations from the early seventh century. In the figure above it is represented on lintel friezes as a discrete motif (Preah Kô, Trapeang Srangè, Prasat Kravanh), in an architectural arch (Phnom Bok), in an architectural arch with chakachan-shape flower (Bakong), and in an inverted polylobe arch with chakachan-shape flower (Olok). Definition and labelling of chakachan shape is after Chan Vitharin and Preap Chanmara (2005). The chakachan or ‘layered cake’ shape is a decorative diamond often in the form of a flower from the ‘Kbach Angkor,’ a set of ‘traditional’ ornamental designs used on Angkorian period buildings..

whereas examples from Olok are comparatively ‘flat’ but with many additional iconographical elements. Coral-Rémusat (1951: 46) commented that after the fantasies of the exceptional lintels of Lolei, the lintels of the early tenth century were more mundane, with the only variation occurring in the central motif. Rather than merely an artistic stasis, this instance of design formalisation and another significant increase in output suggests the expansion and possible reorganisation of artistic workshops.<sup>15</sup> The pervasiveness of the ‘celestial being praying in fleuron’ is representative of this transformation.

Uniformity of the lintel friezes is characterised by the emergence of the near identical ‘celestial beings praying in fleurons,’ a form that was repeated over the next fifty years (Figure 4). The particular celestial being makes its first appearance at Koh Ker (Chok Gargyar). Jayavarman IV reigned there between 928 C.E. and 941 C.E., but significant building had commenced as early as 921 C.E. (Cœdès 1931: 12 – 18). Situated some ninety kilometres northeast of Angkor, the construction program at Koh Ker required an enormous workforce, of which the lintel carvers would have formed one specialised division. The celestial beings in fleurons are seen at Dei Chnan (LL281), Chen (MH261), and Daung Kuk Temples (MH264).<sup>16</sup> Jayavarman IV died in 941 C.E. and was succeeded by his son Harṣavarman II, who only ruled for two or three years. It is unclear whether he died or was overthrown. Jacques (1997: 93) proposes that Harṣavarman II’s short reign was characterised by continual civil disputes, and there is every reason to suspect that he met a violent end. Rājendravarman II (r. 944 – 968 C.E.) seized the throne in 944 C.E. and mounted the triumphant return of the court to Yaśodharapura (Cœdès 1931, 1968: 115; Briggs 1951: 122 – 123). The lintels of this period show no interruption in the appearance of the ‘celestial being praying in fleurons.’ It would seem that the same artistic workshop that contributed to the foundations of Jayavarman IV followed the new sovereign back to Angkor. This is significant because despite political instability the artisans shadowed the centre of power, but were not tied to a particular administration. No doubt the temple builders and



*Figure 4: ‘Celestial Beings Praying in Fleurons.’ This discrete and recognisable form is repeated on lintel friezes over a fifty-year period. It suggests the consistent operation of the same production unit that trained its artisans in the application of this flexible decorative model.*

<sup>15</sup> For the increased lintel output during this period see Polkinghorne 2007: 214 – 216. The tenth century ‘state’ constructions of the East Mebon and Pre Rup, alone, contain 97 extant lintels.

<sup>16</sup> Recent de-mining at Koh Ker will allow a wider group of temples and lintels to be examined in the future.

artistic workshops well understood who their biggest employer was, and conversely the administration understood it must utilise the wealth of artistic skill and knowledge to maintain and symbolise its power.

At Angkor the ‘celestial being praying in fleuron’ motif appears at numerous sites spread across the landscape, including Prasat Bei, Phum Pô (MH463), Kutisvara, Prasat Kralanh (MH513), Kuk Trapeang Ropeou, Bat Chum, Leak Neang, Kôk Ta Ro (MH431), Kôk Kuk (MH492), and Banteay Srei. The workshops or artists were not just commissioned for the ‘state’ temples of Pre Rup and East Mebon, but also for smaller foundations established by private donors and officials connected to the court. During the reign of Rājendravarman II there were a greater number of inscriptions dealing with the foundation of temples by officials rather than kings. Cœdès (1968: 116) accounts for this development in contrast to previous reigns by proposing that officials and high-ranking Brahmins took advantage of the tender age of the king to assure themselves of privileged positions at the court. In any case, the significant increase in ‘private’ temples rendered in durable materials must have meant considerably more work for the artistic workshops that provided uniform, well executed decorative lintels.

As well as the recognisable praying celestial being, the artists of the tenth-century friezes utilised a wider corpus of motifs. Of highest frequency in the data set are fleurons and inverted fleurons, which occur independently, in combination, and with the praying celestial beings (Figures 5 and 6). Consideration

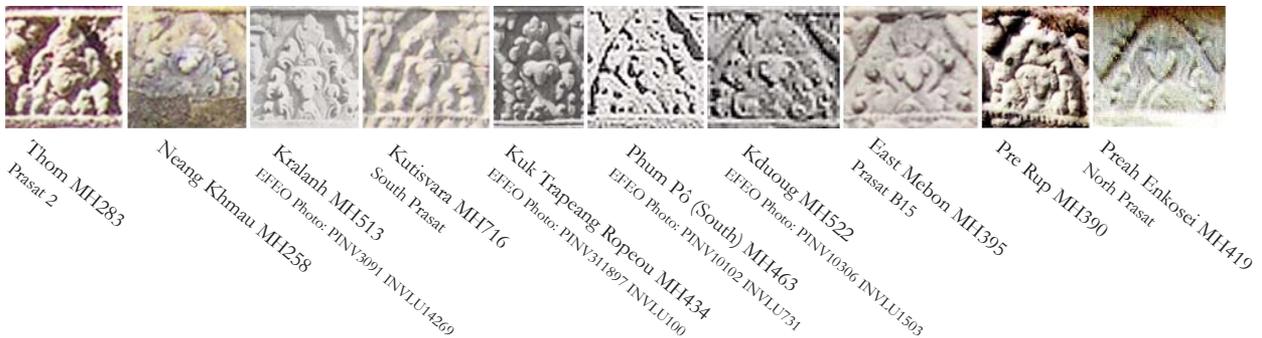


Figure 5: Fleurons were a common motif on tenth-century lintels indicative of a discrete production unit.

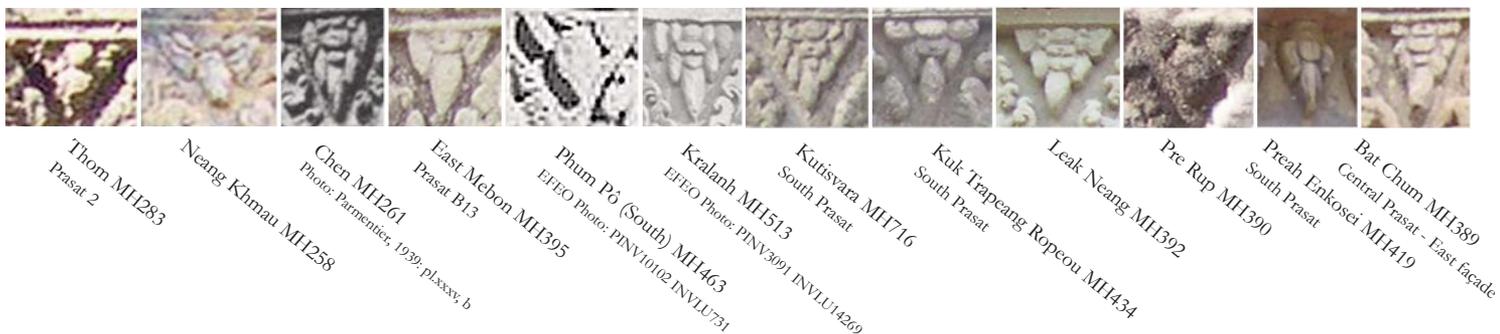
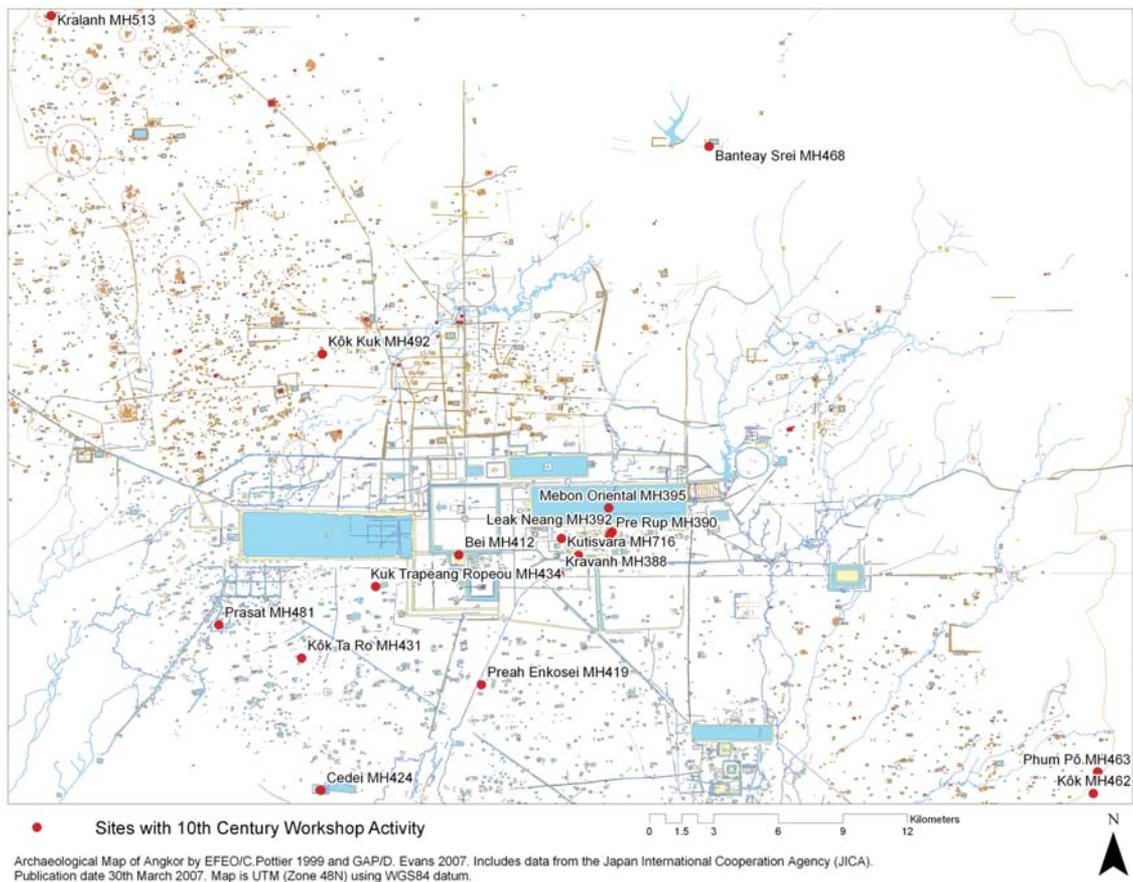


Figure 6: Inverted Fleurons. In combination with standard Fleuron and the ‘Celestial Beings Praying in Fleuron’ motif, the Inverted Fleurons are representative of a tenth-century workshop.

of the different combinations and permutations of these counterpart motifs suggests that this workshop was of particular importance (See Figure 7).<sup>17</sup> Both increased lintel standardisation and increased output during this period might suggest that more artisans were engaged, more divisions of labour were involved in carving lintels of different sizes, and a highly structured hierarchy of control was required to manage the work schedule. Whilst the artisans applied their craft with beauty and skill, increased standardisation was necessary to meet the output requirements of the large temple complexes. This level of production in the tenth century required the commitment of significant surplus resources and indicates considerable prosperity and confidence that the investment would continue to reap economic and spiritual wealth.

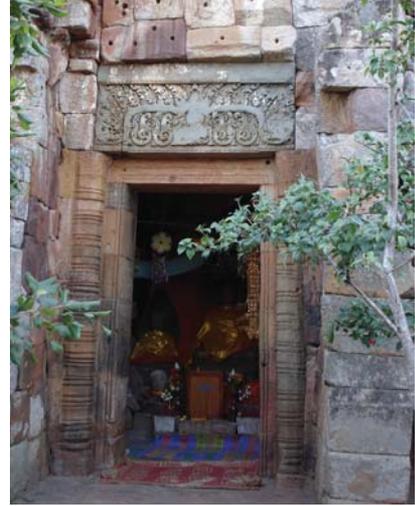


*Figure 7: Geographical distribution of tenth-century workshop activity in greater Angkor.*

<sup>17</sup> In total 24 sites have been identified in the dataset which belong to this tenth-century group. Additional sites not yet cited include Neang Khmau (MH258, Koh Ker), Damrei (MH260, Koh Ker), Prasat Thom (Koh Ker), Prasat Kraham (Koh Ker), Cedei (MH424), Kòk (MH462), Prasat (MH481), Preah Enkosei and Wat Banon.

## Workshops on the periphery

Studies of Khmer artistic culture have typically focused on developments at the capital.<sup>18</sup> Another avenue of potential research is to examine the transformation and nature of decorative material at ‘peripheral’ sites to administrative and symbolic centres. For example, a frieze from a reused tenth-century lintel from Wat Banon in Battambang (Figure 8) which incorporates the ‘celestial beings praying in fleuron’ motif provides some indication that the tenth-century workshop mentioned above was active outside Angkor and Koh Ker. During the building of large state foundations of substantial economic investment and ritual importance, the construction team and its executive were undoubtedly required to be grouped in the capital. But when building projects were located on the periphery of the city, and of the empire, was the same group or a section of that construction squad seconded to that area? Or were local specialists employed? Study of periphery traditions requires further investigation.



*Figure 8: Tenth-century lintel at Wat Banon, Battambang (Photo: Terry Lustig)*

The eleventh century in particular appears a period of substantial change in the scale of regional artistic development. Woodward (2003: 128) suggests that local officials had the authority to conscript the finest craftsmen in the kingdom, and that in the eleventh and early twelfth centuries the royal workshop travelled across the landscape completing several high profile works. After the completion of the Baphuon the royal workshop travelled over one hundred kilometres northeast to central modern day Preah Vihear province to construct the temple of Trapeang Khna Sen Keo. Following achievement of this work, some carvers possibly continued onto Phimai on the Khorat plateau, where the quality of work exhibits the same quality of execution (Woodward 2003: 128, 146). In the far northeast, a similar situation may have prevailed, for extensive work at Vat Phu, carried out under the auspices of Jayavarman VI in the late eleventh century, bears striking similarities to the workmanship at Phimai (Dumarçay and Royere 2001: 81).

Conventional studies consider that change in provincial art was associated with change in art at the capital. Innovation of iconography and form is thought to develop in the centre and through a process of diffusion is disseminated to the periphery. For example, every artistic ‘style,’ except for ‘Kompong Preah’

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<sup>18</sup> The focus on ‘lowland’ urban centres has also been a deficient approach of studies of Indianisation. Wolters (1982: 32) conceded that he had to “...remove vast territories from the historical map of earlier Southeast Asia.” Mabbett (1977b: 13) suggested that when the early centralised kingdoms of Cambodia flourished, the greater part of the population continued its way of life without change.

is eponymously named after sites at successive administrative, political, and symbolic Khmer capitals. Rather than deferring to a centre-out diffusionist model, the interaction between periphery sites and centres of political authority might be appraised as heterogeneous and contextual. Motifs and ‘styles’ could transform on the periphery, subsist there independently, and influence the cosmopolitan traditions. For instance, Boisselier (1955, v1: 120) and Woodward (1997: 80) observed that twelfth-century nāga-protected Buddhas from Lopburi wear a crown ornamented with a band of lozenges, whereas those produced at Angkor during the same period bear rosettes. Comparison of artistic trends between regional and cosmopolitan centres could appraise to what degree and at what rate these transformations travel along routes of communication and transportation (cf. Brown 1994: 12 – 13). Formalised regional road networks were active at least as early as the eleventh century,<sup>19</sup> and provided routes for the exchange of motifs, designs and styles and the travel of craftspeople and workshops.

Despite acknowledgement of a complex interaction between centre and periphery, preliminary research on a selection of pre-eleventh-century ‘peripheral’ sites suggests a general centre-out model for the appearance of motifs. Of the 23 discrete motifs that appear on the lintels of Neak Buos in Preah Vihear province dated no earlier than 900 C.E., 21 of these appear at Angkor earlier. Two motifs are peculiar to the lintels of Neak Buos (see Figure 9). At Phnom Chisor in Takeo province, of the 41 discrete motifs that appear on the lintels dated no earlier than 1005 C.E., all appear at Angkor earlier. Likewise, at Preah Vihear of the 36 motifs that appear on the lintels dated no earlier than 1005 C.E., all appear at Angkor earlier. At Vat Phu, all 27 motifs that appear on the lintels dated no earlier than 990 C.E. appear at Angkor earlier.



*Figure 9: Discrete motifs unique to Neak Buos MH597. On a lintel frieze, Viṣṇu (without his vehicle), and Ṛṣis praying in ‘architectural arches’ topped by chakachan shape flowers are motifs not seen at Angkor. (Photo: Mitch Hendrickson)*

This initial study suggests that although motifs are not rendered in the same way, in the Angkorian period they are largely instigated at central Angkor and appear in the provinces later. An increased data set of regional sites and earlier lintels is needed to successfully appraise the changing process of artistic transmission across the landscape. Issues of centre-periphery artistic transfer can be examined simply, as above, by charting the appearance or disappearance of single motifs, or the changing number of motifs between lintels and across time (also see Polkinghorne 2007: 145 – 186). But in order to compare the total combination of motifs on each lintel to every other lintel, more complex statistical measures that assess the degree of artistic standardisation can also be used. Appraising the degree of uniformity within a single provincial area may identify a ‘fall-off curve’, that is, where influence of the centre ends, and the specific

<sup>19</sup> For discussion of Angkorian road networks see Bruguier (2000), Hendrickson (2007), Im (1998, 2004), Ittaratana (1998) and Jacques and Lafond (2004).

region begins (cf. Costin 1991: 41 – 42).<sup>20</sup> By considering how decorative and artistic models are different between the centre and periphery it may be possible to assess elements of workshop organisation, including the extent to which provincial communities and artisans maintained or neglected ties with a central workshop, or the existence of a ‘travelling’ workshop. For example, Bénisti (2003 [1974]: 286) in her description of a lintel from Preah Theat Thom (MH148) equates rusticity with proof that this particular example was executed by a regional artisan far from the capital, where the plastic norms arrived only after a long propagation and presumably along established transportation networks. As a final comment on the potential of reviewing the relationships and traditions of ancient Khmer art on the periphery, it is useful to refer to Mary Helms (1988, 1993), who drew attention to the inherent power imbued in external traditions. In her view, skilled artisans from the centre who worked on the periphery were vehicles of technical knowledge and the symbol of central political authority. Moreover, through the act of skilled crafting, artisans and their patrons actively maintained the vital links connecting the centre of the polity and its people (Helms 1993: 17).

### **Organisation of the Workshop**

How the temple builders and decorators were organised is difficult to ascertain. The combination of fragmentary inscriptional information (see Polkinghorne *in press* [b]) and evidence from contemporary and ancient traditions in both Cambodia and other regions is potentially informative. In addition, analysis of decorative lintels on large temples suggests how skilled artisanal labour was divided at the scale of the worksite (see Polkinghorne 2007: 216 – 236, *in press* [b]; Pichard 1974: 121 – 130; and Groslier, B.-P. 1969: 29). It is possible that artisans were organised into professional collectives within the sphere of the court known as *varṇas* (see Mabbett, 1977a), although no inscription is unequivocal in attributing temple builders into these groupings. Artisans were almost certainly organised on the basis of a hierarchy, under a project superintendent. The eleventh-century inscription of Wat Baset records the honoured official Guṇapativarman as Viśvakarman, Brahmanical architect of the cosmos, and interpreted here as ‘chief of the artists.’<sup>21</sup> In an analysis of bas-reliefs, Jacq-Hergoualc’h (1979) observed that the Angkorian military was organised into units under the leadership of a principal figure. In the same way, it is probable that teams of artisans were arranged in groups based upon their specialisation, although it is unnecessary to defer to an Indian inspiration for these divisions (cf. Dagens 2003: 140), as such organisation was no doubt a pragmatic necessity of any large worksite. Analysis of the similarity and difference in decorative material of individual sites can also indicate how the artistic labour force was charged with the exercise of adorning a

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<sup>20</sup> For example, appraising artistic standardisation may be conducted through multivariate statistical analysis of motif combinations (see Polkinghorne 2007: 147 – 154; *in press* [a]).

<sup>21</sup> K. 205. See Dagens 2003: 140; Cœdès 1951: 3 – 24; Mabbett 1977a: 435; Dumarçay and Royere 2001: 6.

temple. Generally, the surfaces most visible to temple visitors were designated for the most sophisticated works, which were completed by the most accomplished artisans (see Groslier, G. 1921 – 23: 206 – 207). Among the major pre-11<sup>th</sup>-century sites, the comparative distinction of the more visible decorative façades is perceived at Preah Kô, East Mebon, and Pre Rup. At Bakong and Banteay Srei like designs and motif combinations suggest the ‘pairing’ of lintels on the opposing façades of individual edifices. At these monuments pairs of lintels were assigned to specific artisans who carved them *in situ* on either side of a *prasat* (see Polkinghorne 2007: 216 – 222; *in press* [b]).<sup>22</sup>

In addition to future studies which assess the similarity and difference of decorative lintels during other periods, appraisal of Khmer artists and ateliers will be advanced by considering other elements of diagnostic decorative material and incorporating complementary materials analyses. Consideration of colonnettes (ornamental columns which flank edifice doorways) and pedestals (sculpture bases), in particular, promises to yield significant information (see Figure 10). Colonnettes and pedestals are the most common pieces of diagnostic material on the majority of Khmer sites, and are often the only remnants of any surface material culture at all. By increasing the dataset and cross-referencing these elements, it will be possible to formulate an augmented picture of artistic transformation in terms of the creativity of the artisans who made them. Such a reference tool might also facilitate identification of cross-cultural links between artistic elements in ancient Southeast Asia. For instance, Brown’s (1996: 169 – 174) study on Dvāravatī *dharma-cakrastambhas* convincingly argued that motifs that adorn the ‘Wheels of Law’ have more in common with the different forms of Khmer Prei Khmeng ‘style’ decorative lintels than potential Indian sources of inspiration.

It is expected that petrographic analysis could also yield significant information about the organisation of temple production. The combination of sandstone characterisation methodologies,<sup>23</sup> provenance studies and analyses of decorative standardisation may allow us to trace the movement of building materials and workshops across the landscape and consider the provisioning and organisation of Angkorian production



*Figure 10: Common diagnostic remains of decorative material culture (colonnettes and pedestals) amenable to the further appraisal of the operation and distribution of artistic workshops*

<sup>22</sup> Also see Ly (2005: 151 – 185) who recognises an underlying visual narrative system of “picture-pairing” at Banteay Srei.

<sup>23</sup> See especially Baptiste *et al* 2001; Cunin 2004: 298 – 327; 2007: 176 – 180; Douglas 2004: 1 – 18; Douglas and Sorensen 2007: 115 – 124; Dumarçay 1971: 5; 1998: 99; Newman 1997: 261 – 265; Saurin 1952: 619 – 634; and Uchida *et al* 2003: 221 – 232.

units. Douglas and Sorensen (2007: 121) argue via the recognition of distinctive sandstone types, that numerous Bayon ‘style’ sculptures were likely the products of a royal workshop which sourced the same stone quarry. Applied to sites outside central and greater Angkor similar investigations would announce a new suite of questions regarding the character of specialised labour between the centre and periphery.<sup>24</sup>

### **Recognition of the Ateliers**

This paper has appraised the existence of decorative workshops specifically in the ninth and tenth centuries at the royal capitals of Hariharālaya, Chok Gargyar and Yaśodharapura.<sup>25</sup> These centuries were, on the whole, characterised by the expansion and agglomeration of the Angkorian economic base, which in turn required and resulted in the building of many temple foundations. Hence, the growth of the Khmer empire is associated with the establishment and extension of artistic workshops. Workshops are recognised here by the increase in the homogeneity of decorative design.<sup>26</sup>

Deciphering the sequence of building at mid-late ninth-century Hariharālaya through architectural decoration is a difficult task (see Coral-Rémusat 1940, 1951; Stern 1932, 1938a, 1938b, 1938c.) Recent archaeological research shows that the developments of the late eighth and ninth centuries are more complex than originally envisaged (Penny *et al* 2006; Pottier 1996, 1999; Pottier and Lujàn-Lunsford 2005; and Pottier *et al* 2005). In terms of artistic standardisation, there is an overall similarity in motifs and motif combinations at Hariharālaya (see Polkinghorne 2007: 167 – 186; *in press* [a]). In addition, the appointment of the same artist and workshop for more than one foundation is suggested by identical lintel fragments at the dispersed sites of Preah Kô and O Ka-aek. The phenomenon of different commissions for the same workgroup is also seen in the passage of power between Koh Ker and Angkor in the mid tenth century. In this example it is possible to track specific motif combinations, especially those attached to lintel friezes between the two capitals separated by ninety kilometres. Near identical ‘celestial beings praying in fleurons’ appear on structures at Koh Ker (Dei Chnan [LL281], Chen [MH261], and Daung Kuk [MH264]) and trail the focus of political and religious command back to Yaśodharapura with Rājendravarman II. The similarity of specific motifs and motif combinations suggest the existence of a specific workshop or workshops obliged to the court, irrespective of the monarch’s ‘claim’ to the throne, but dependent upon their ability to provision the construction of temples.

The act of establishing a temple foundation in the Angkorian world typically required a level of

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<sup>24</sup> For example see the studies of Douglas (1994 – 1995), Douglas and Sorensen (2007) and Woodward (1994 – 1995) whose petrographic analysis suggests that the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery’s Avalokiteśvara, stylistically linked to Khmer sculptures from Thailand, is perhaps one of the twenty-three Jayabuddhamahānāthas sent to the provinces by Jayavarman VII in 1191 C.E.

<sup>25</sup> Study of the earlier decorative material from Sambor Prei Kuk, and post-tenth-century material (also see Woodward 2003:128, 146, 159) will illuminate the workshop question further.

<sup>26</sup> And by the increased production of temples and architectural decoration (See also Polkinghorne 2007: 209 – 215).

wealth and influence beyond the reach of the ‘common’ individual. The inscriptions indicate that these foundations were not the products of community wealth or effort, but largely the result of personal ‘donations’ to obtain religious merit, to legitimise power, and to create and maintain centres of economic wealth. In order to create these structures the individuals who possessed sufficient wealth needed to employ groups of artisans who possessed the appropriate skills to fabricate satisfactory buildings. The craft of temple building and ornamentation was attached to the political authority because their products were habitually commissioned by the upper echelons of the political and administrative hierarchy.<sup>27</sup> By observing difference and similarity in the creative output of the Khmer artisans it is possible to consider how these specialist ateliers operated across the Khmer landscape.

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<sup>27</sup> The exclusive court monopoly of craft specialists must be considered with caution, and not regarded as absolute over time or space (see Polkinghorne 2007: 223 – 225, *in press* [b]).

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*Abbreviations*

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សង្ខេប

*Artists and Ateliers: Khmer Decorative Lintels of the Ninth and Tenth Centuries*

ចាប់ពីចុងស.វ.ទី៩មកយ៉ាងយូរ អ្នកដែលមានជំនាញក្នុងការសង់ប្រាសាទបានរៀបចំចាត់ចែងលំដាប់ថ្នាក់ ជាងព្រមទាំងការងាររួចរាល់អស់ហើយ។ ចម្លាក់ផ្តែរទ្វារមាននាទីពិសេស មិនថានៅក្នុងការដ្ឋានប្រាសាទតូចៗតាម ភូមិ ឬការដ្ឋានធំធេងនៅទីណាជ្រុងឡើយ។ ចម្លាក់ដ៏វិចិត្រទាំងនោះអាចឱ្យយើងគិតថា ដើម្បីឱ្យរោងជាងនីមួយៗ ទទួល ឱ្យធ្វើការ លុះត្រាតែជាងនោះមានចំណេះ, ទឹកដៃ, ហើយពុះពារនៅក្នុងការងារផង។ ព័ត៌មានដែលបានមកពីសិលាចារិក ឬពីបុរាណវិទ្យាមានស្តួចស្តើងណាស់ ពុំអាចឱ្យដឹងថាអ្នកសាងប្រាសាទចាត់ចែងការងារខ្លួនរៀបរៀងម៉េចទេ។ ប៉ុន្តែបើ ពិនិត្យឱ្យហ្មត់ចត់ទៅលើផ្តែរច្រើនបែបយ៉ាងដែលសម្បូរណិហូរហៀរហើយមាននៅគ្រប់សម័យកាលនោះ យើងអាច លើកចំណុចពិចារណាមួយចំនួន ដែលទាក់ទងទៅនឹងការរៀបចំក្រុមសិល្បករព្រមទាំងជំនាញអ្នកទាំងនោះ ហើយ ម្យ៉ាងទៀត ក្បួនក្បាច់ចម្លាក់ផ្តែរនោះ ក៏ជាតម្រុយឱ្យទៅរកថា គេរើសជាងឱ្យទៅបម្រើការដ្ឋាននានាដោយផ្អែកទៅលើអ្វី។

**Abstract**

*Artists and Ateliers: Khmer Decorative Lintels of the Ninth and Tenth Centuries*

By at least the late ninth century the makers of early Cambodian temples were part of a complex and organised hierarchy of artisans whose primary occupation was to construct temples. The carving of sandstone decorative lintels held a special place in the execution of small village shrines and enormous state temples alike. The exceptional quality of their craftsmanship suggests that the lintel manufacture required the skills and knowledge of dedicated craftspeople. There is modest information in the inscriptions, and to date little archaeological evidence to denote what the organisation of the temples' makers may have been like. The diversity and profusion of decorative lintels, among the most enduring elements of early Khmer artistic material culture, allow us to suggest a new suite of questions that address the creativity and the organisation of the artists themselves. By considering how decorative lintels changed over time it may be possible to appraise the nature of the work-teams that made them. Close scrutiny of lintel motif combinations indicates how artists and ateliers were allocated to sites throughout the Khmer landscape.

## **Résumé**

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A partir de la fin du 9<sup>ème</sup> s. au plus tard, une hiérarchie complexe et structurée d'artisans spécialisés dans la construction des temples khmers s'est constituée. La fabrication des linteaux sculptés tient d'une position particulière, tant pour les sanctuaires de village que pour les immenses temples d'Etat. Leur exceptionnelle qualité laisse penser que seuls les artisans dévoués, dotés de connaissance et d'habileté, sont recrutés dans ces ateliers. Les informations livrées par les inscriptions, tout comme les témoignages archéologiques, sont trop modestes pour nous donner quelque indication sur l'organisation de ces bâtisseurs de temples. La diversité et la profusion de linteaux décoratifs, éléments parmi les plus constants de la culture matérielle artistique khmère, nous autorisent à présenter une série de questions relatives à la créativité et à l'organisation des artistes. En examinant comment les linteaux décoratifs changent à travers le temps, on arriverait à se faire une idée de la nature des équipes qui les ont produits. L'examen minutieux des combinaisons des motifs des linteaux indique comment les artistes et les ateliers ont été affectés aux sites, à travers le pays khmer.