EMBEDDING MEANINGS IN TEXT, IMAGE AND CONTEXT: THE RECLINING VIṢṆU AND LAKṢMĪ CARVINGS AT PHNOM KULEN

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Abstract

Angkor's extensive water management network originated at the sacred Mount Kulen, where the kingdom was reputedly founded. This paper posits that the 11th century reclining Viṣṇu carvings on the Kulen, conjoined with the irrigation system, functioned as nodes in Angkor's genealogical map. These carvings are literally infused into the water through erosion, thereby endowing greater significance to the water's fecundity and embedding the religious experience in materiality. Based on extant sources, this paper suggests that the carvings of the reclining Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī on the Kulen and the Churning of the Sea of Milk images on the Angkor temples aesthetically mirrored the prosperity engendered by the irrigation system, and articulated the interconnected functional and allegorical links between the two locations. Furthermore, this paper proposes that the Churning myth and the multiple citations of Śrī/śrī in particular were emblematic of the prosperity engendered by the water network system.

Introduction

The sandstone massif of Phnom Kulen[1] rises several hundred meters above the lush, broad plains of the present town of Siem Reap in northern Cambodia. Thick, humid jungle sparsely punctuated by human presence, lightens into scrub vegetation as the slopes of the Kulen descend to meet the level plains and open skies. Rivers and tributaries originating on the Kulen wind past

[1] The terms 'Phnom Kulen' and 'the Kulen' will be used interchangeably in this article, since they both refer to the same geographical entity. 'Phnom' translates to 'Mountain' in the Khmer language.

rice fields, temples and human habitation and empty into the vast Tonle Sap lake lying to its south. The hill range, waterways, plains and the lake thus form a seamlessly connected landscape. This article examines the intertwined economic, political and religious significance of Phnom Kulen during the Angkor period with particular reference to a set of reclining Viṣṇu images at a site on the Kulen called Kbal Spean.[2] Through a declaration in the 11th-century Sdok Kak Thom inscription, Phnom Kulen was proclaimed as the site where the first king of Angkor founded the kingdom. This affirmation of ancestral activity likely imbued the Kulen with great historical importance and additional religious significance for the Khmers, given that it was already marked as a sacred site.[3] Much like its status as the origin of Angkor's royal genealogy, Phnom Kulen was also positioned at the head of Angkor's expansive water network system from where water was collected and distributed throughout the Angkor plains.

Phnom Kulen: Geography and History

Phnom Kulen ("Mountain of Lychees" in Khmer) is located about 25 miles northeast of the Angkor World Heritage Site and the town of Siem Reap in northwestern Cambodia (Figure 1). The Kulen comprise a chain of low hills and plateaus ranging between 985 and 1600 feet in height and covering an area of 15 miles by 6 miles. The Siem Reap river and its tributaries flow down from the Kulen onto the plains below where the core of the Angkor kingdom was located, before draining into the Tonle Sap lake.[4]

Phnom Kulen is significant to Khmer history because it was the location of the first capital of the Angkor kingdom. According to the Sdok Kak Thom inscription (dated to 1052 C.E.) King Jayavarman II founded the Angkor kingdom on the Kulen after freeing Kambujadesa, or 'the land of the descendants of Kambu', from the clutches of 'Javā', and was crowned as *cakravartin* ("the ideal universal ruler").[5] Jayavarman II later shifted back to the plains to the southwest of Phnom

[2] The core of the Angkor kingdom was located in and around the present town of Siem Reap in northwest Cambodia. The initiation of king Jayavarman II in 802 C.E. is generally accepted as marking the beginning of the Angkor period that lasted until the 15th century.

[3] The Bat Chum inscription (K. 266, verse 21) stated that "May no one bathe here, in the water from *tirtha*, sourced at the top of the holy Mahendra Mountain, other than the (*vinaiva*) brahmin (*dvijavareṇa*) priests (*hotra*)". See Finot, "Sur Quelques Traditions Indochinoises." 20–37, 23-25; Chevance, Baty, and Seng, "The Sources of the Khmer Empire.", 258. My thanks to the anonymous peer reviewer for pointing out the full translation of the line from the Bat Chum inscription.

[4] The Tonle Sap is the largest freshwater lake in Southeast Asia that flows into the Mekong river. During the wet season, the mean surface area of the lake swells from 1351 miles square to 5598 miles square. Differences in the level of water in the Mekong and the Tonle Sap during the wet season causes the water from the Mekong to flow back into the lake thus causing the increase in volume. This annual phenomenon critically contributed to centuries of successful rice cultivation in the plains. See Cogels, "Mekong River Commission 2005. Overview of the Mekong Basin."

[5] See See Cœdès, *The Indianized States of South-East Asia*, 99-100 and Sak-Humphry and Jenner, *The Sdok Kak Thom Inscription (K. 235): With a Grammatical Analysis of the Old Khmer Text*, 37. The inventory number for this inscription is K. 235, as noted in Cœdès, *Inscriptions Du Cambodge VIII*. Inscription K. 956 likely from the first half of the 10th century, also refers to this independence from 'Javā', and the Sab Bak inscription dated to 1066 C.E. from Khorat in present-day Thailand refers to nine statues erected on a mountain by an official to protect Khmer lands from Java. See Cœdès, *Inscriptions Du Cambodge VII*, 130, 133, and Prapandvidya, "The Sab Bāk Inscription: Evidence of an Early Vajrayana Buddhist Presence in Thailand.", 11-14, 13. There has been much discussion on the identity of 'Javā'.

Kulen (central Angkor) where the core of the kingdom was located until the 15th century.[6] The capital city founded by Jayavarman II on the Kulen was called Mahendraparvata ("Mountain of the great Indra").

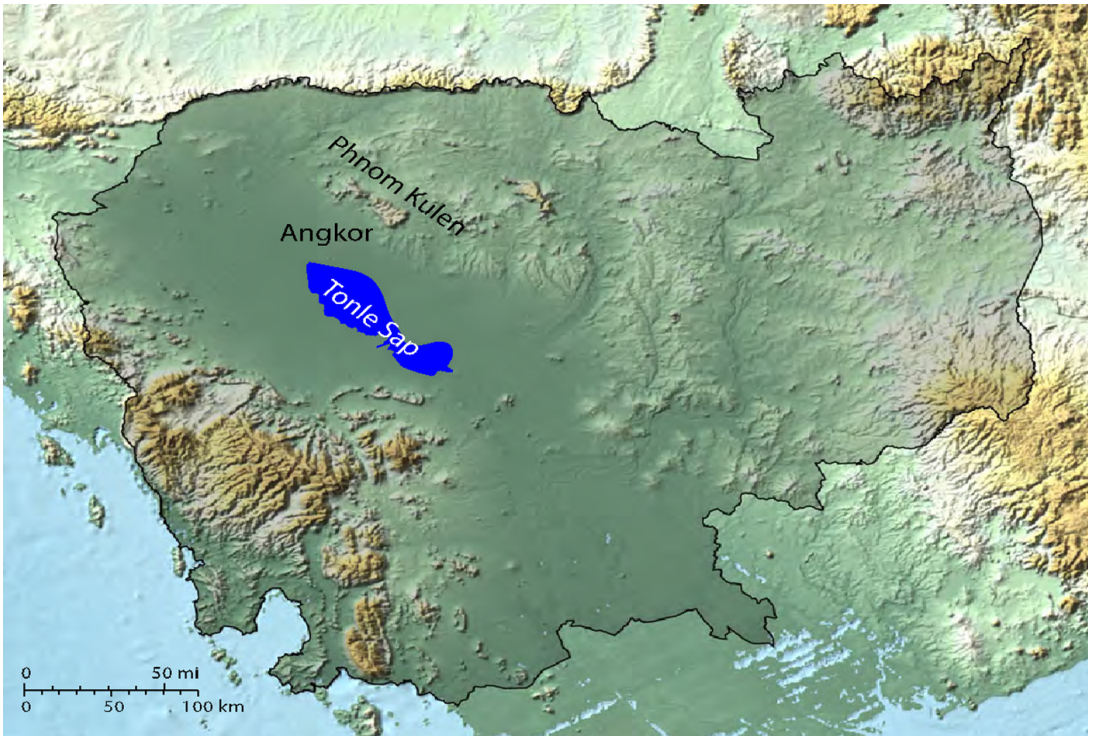

Figure 1: The core of the Angkor kingdom encompassed the geographical area between the Phnom Kulen hills and the Tonle Sap lake. Map composed by author.

Cœdès (*The Indianized States of South-East Asia,* 92-93) had suggested that this might be a reference to Sumatra, where the Sailendra kings of Java likely achieved fame. Michael Vickery argued that 'Javā' may have referred to Champa, the Hindu state in southern Vietnam and not any part of Indonesia. He suggests that 'Javā' may have actually meant 'Chvea' as the Cham or some groups of Cham are still referred to by the Cambodians. See Vickery, *Society, Economics, and Politics in Pre-Angkor Cambodia: The 7th-8th Centuries*, 385-388. Following a critical examination of the discussion on 'Javā' in several publications and a careful analysis of endonyms and exonyms and other historical references in wide-ranging epigraphical data from Cambodia, Campā and Java, as well as other literary sources, Arlo Griffiths suggests that 'Javā' likely referred to the island of Java. See Griffiths, "The Problem of the Ancient Name Java and the Role of Satyavarman in Southeast Asian International Relations around the Turn of the Ninth Century CE", 43-81.

[6] Jayavarman II was probably first based in the Roluos (or Hariharālaya) area (presently about 13 miles east of the Angkor Archaeological Park, Siem Reap), and then moved to the Kulen. A few years after his coronation, he shifted back to Roluos and died around 835 C.E. Yaśovarman "who came to the throne in the late 9th century" moved the capital to Yaśodharapura, building his temple-mountain on Phnom Bakheng (presently located southwest of Angkor Wat). The alluvial plain was more conducive to rice cultivation and urban expansion, and nearly all Angkorian kings appeared to have preferred the area around Phnom Bakheng as their base which became the political and cultural core of the kingdom. See Sak-Humphry and Jenner, *The Sdok Kak Thom Inscription (K. 235): With a Grammatical Analysis of the Old Khmer Text*, 46, Pottier, "Le Territoire d'Angkor: Site Des Capitales Khmères", 9 and Jacques, "History of the Phnom Bakheng Monument", 23.

Jayavarman II and Phnom Kulen

The historical significance of Phnom Kulen is closely linked to the status accorded to Jayavarman II in Khmer history.[7] According to the Sdok Kak Thom inscription, Jayavarman II invited the Brahmin Hiraṇyadāma, who came from Janapada to the Kulen on the king's request. Hiraṇyadāma revealed magic powers ("possessed by no other") which were the four Tantric texts, the *Vīṇāśikha*, *Nayottara*, *Sammoha* and *Śiraścheda*.[8] The king then instructed the Brahmin to impart this knowledge to the royal priest Śivakaivalya, who initiated the king as the "cakravartin"[9] through rites that involved the use of the texts.[10]

Inscriptions and archeological remains depict Jayavarman II as a somewhat mysterious but important historical figure. Dominic Goodall examined a brief inscription, K. 1060, that is located neat Wat Phu in present-day Laos. Based on a careful paleographic and historical study of the inscription, Goodall suggests that it could date to the reign of Jayavarman II, which would make it the only extant inscription linked to that king's tenure.[11] After the reign of Jayavarman II, some thirty inscriptions refer to this king.[12] Despite the relative lack of contemporary inscriptions later epigraphic evidence thus confers great importance to Jayavarman II who was identified by his descendants as the true founder of the kingdom.[13] Jayavarman II's ascension was portrayed as both a rupture from the land's past political history as well as a new beginning. The king was

[7] Archeological evidence suggests that the Kulen were occupied even before Jayavarman II shifted his capital to the hilly location. In fact, none of the inscriptions that mention his coronation in 802 C.E. specifically confirm that he established Mahendraparvata. The influence of Cham architectural styles on the Kulen temples is suggestive of movement of information and peoples, perhaps facilitated by commercial activity. The diversity of styles is also indicative of a longer occupation of the site than previously documented (i.e. prior to 802 C.E.). See Vickery, *Society, Economics, and Politics in Pre-Angkor Cambodia: The 7th-8th Centuries*, 383-388, Chevance, Baty, and Seng, "The Sources of the Khmer Empire", 259 and Polkinghorne, "Decorative Lintels and Ateliers at Mahendraparvata and Hariharālaya". Indeed, the fact that Jayavarman II chose the Kulen as the location for his initiation ceremony even though he had earlier founded a new city Amarendrapura and reigned later at Hariharālaya strongly suggests that Phnom Kulen was acknowledged as a place of some importance. The reverence for mountains as numinous sites, a belief that seemed to have been prevalent in other cultures of Southeast Asia, could certainly have been a factor in its choice for the significant event.

[8] See Sak-Humphry and Jenner, *The Sdok Kak Thom Inscription (K. 235): With a Grammatical Analysis of the Old Khmer Text*, 37. Of these four texts, only the *Viṇāśikha* has been discovered and translated by Teun Goudriaan. See Goudriaan, *The Viṇāśikhatantra: A Saiva Tantra of the Left Current*. For a broader context on how the texts were possibly used by the priest for the inauguration of the king, see Sanderson, "The Śaiva Religion among the Khmers (Part I)", 355-358.

[9] The concept of *cakravartin* or world-king dates back to the Mauryan empire and king Aśoka (3rd century B.C.E.) in Indian history. This concept places the king at the center of his kingdom with his power extending over the four or eight directions of the universe. See note 3 in Meister, "Mountain Temples and Temple-Mountains: Masrur", 46. The king is at the center of the society and the rest of the world moves around him, while he himself is immovable. The term *cakravartin*, literally "turner of the wheel", implies that the emperor by his *karma*, sets the world in motion. See Mabbett, "The Symbolism of Mount Meru", 79-80.

[10] See verses 51-58 of K. 235 in Sak-Humphry and Jenner, *The Sdok Kak Thom Inscription (K. 235): With a Grammatical Analysis of the Old Khmer Text*, 37, 46-47.

[11] See Goodall, "Two Inscriptions from Liṅgaparvata (Vat Phu), One Dating to Jayavarman I's Reign (K. 1059) and the Other to Jayavarman II's (K. 1060), along with a Re-Edition of K. 762", 3-38.

12 See Choulean, "Collective Memory in Ancient Cambodia with Reference to Jayavarman II", 117.

[13] See Dupont, "Les Débuts de La Royauté Angkorienne", 169.

described as a "great lotus that, although lacking in stem rises like a new florescence", referring to the birth of Brahmā who emerges on a lotus that is not rooted in the mud but originates from Viṣṇu's navel.[14] Dupont also noted that *Parameśvara*, the posthumous name of Jayavarman II, was typologically different from those of earlier pre-Angkorian and Cham kings. These factors, according to him, were suggestive of Jayavarman's status of a chieftain (like many who ruled parts of Cambodia at the time) rather than the "universal ruler" of a vast kingdom as later inscriptions claimed. Nevertheless, Oliver Wolters has suggested that Jayavarman II was a powerful military leader who was able to summon substantial support for several successful campaigns, which would have justified his claim to his contemporaries to be their overlord and protector.[15]

Early research on Phnom Kulen: 1900-1979

French colonial scholars began to systematically study, document and restore the Angkor monuments and sites from the late 19th century. When they first came across epigraphic references to a 'Mahendraparvata' they sought to confirm its exact location.[16] Interpreting the inscription from Poeng Keng Kang (K. 176), Etienne Aymonier identified Mahendraparvata or Mahendrādri as Phnom Kulen.[17] Based on a reference that the waters of Mahendraparvata were feeding the "lake of Angkor Thom" Aymonier suggested that this referred to the river that flowed down from the Kulen.[18] Subsequently the work of Louis Finot, Victor Goloubew, Philippe Stern and George Cœdès helped establish that the capital of Jayavarman II had indeed been located on Phnom Kulen and that several of the temples found on the Kulen were of a style that could be placed between the pre-Angkor (7th - 8th century) and Roluos (late 9th century) styles. Termed as the 'Kulen style' these temples were likely built at the time of Jayavarman II.[19] Using topographical studies, aerial maps and field study, Bernard-Philippe Groslier advanced the theory of Angkor as a "hydraulic city" where a combination of rivers, canals and the natural geographical features of the

[14] See the Phnom Sandak inscription (K. 190) in Bergaigne and Barth, *Inscriptions Sanscrites de Campā et Du Cambodge Vol 1*, 345.

[15] See Wolters, "Jayavarman II's Military Power: The Territorial Foundation of the Angkor Empire", 21-24.

[16] A summary of the development of research on Phnom Kulen can be found in Chevance, Baty, and Seng, "The Sources of the Khmer Empire", 257-259.

[17] Aymonier, *Le Cambodge Volume 1*, 425.

[18] See Aymonier, *Le Cambodge Volume 3*, 470-471. The lake is likely a reference to Yaśodharatatāka an artificial reservoir built by the king Yaśovarman I in the late 9th century and located just east of the walled city of Angkor Thom.

[19] Finot, "Sur Quelques Traditions Indochinoises", 20-37; Goloubew, "Le Phnom Kulen",8 ; Stern, *Le Bayon d'Angkor et l'evolution de l'art Khmer: Étude et Discussion de La Chronologie Des Monuments* ; Cœdès, "La Date Du Bayon", 81-112. In the 1936 survey, more than a dozen temples, 7 archeological sites of interest, 4 statues, 16 lintels, 18 pairs or fragments of various types of colonettes and other decorative and sculptural fragments were discovered. Out of these, an assortment of 19 temples and archeological sites were dated to the time of Jayavarman II. Philippe Stern, who led the survey also documented the unique challenges posed by the landscape of the Kulen that made field study difficult. He noted that aerial photography surveys would be inadequate, as the area was covered by thick forest. See Stern, "II. Le Style Du Kulên (Décor Architectural et Statuaire)", 115 and Stern, "III. Travaux Exécutés Au Phnom Kulên (15 Avril-20 Mai 1936)", 151-174, 156-157.

landscape were used to design a large-scale water management system during the Angkor period.[20] Nevertheless, the focus of this work remained on the central and southern parts of Angkor. The adverse political situation in Cambodia from the 1970s until the 1990s prevented further research into these and other aspects of Angkor's cultural history.

Mahendraparvata uncovered: subsequent archeological studies on Phnom Kulen

Research on the Kulen resumed in the 1990s and has led to some startling discoveries about the urban landscape of Angkor, Phnom Kulen and the links between them. The new details came about from the use of LiDAR, a remote sensing technology that uses airborne laser to create three-dimensional topographic models of the ground obscured under dense vegetation. The Archaeology and Development Foundation (ADF), a British charity created in 2008 by the archeologist Jean-Baptiste Chevance, was the primary organization instrumental in the recent discoveries on Phnom Kulen.[21] The LiDAR study revealed hundreds of potential ancient archeological sites on the Kulen[22] and a ground survey confirmed the existence of an extensively engineered and previously undocumented cityscape that included temples, highways and other urban forms on the Kulen. These appear to correspond to the 8th-9th century city of Mahendraparvata.[23] This recent discovery propels Phnom Kulen to the forefront, urging the exploration of its myriad connections to the cultural, economic and political matrix of central Angkor. Consequently, the lesser-known site of Kbal Spean on Phnom Kulen with its collection of reclining Viṣṇu carvings requires renewed attention.

[20] See Groslier, "Agriculture et Religion Dans l'Empire Angkorien", 95-117; Groslier, "VII. La Cité Hydraulique Angkorienne: Exploitation Ou Surexploitation Du Sol?", 161-202 and Groslier, *Angkor and Cambodia in the Sixteenth Century: According to Portuguese and Spanish Sources*.

[21] Along with the Authority for the Protection and Management of Angkor and the Region of Siem Reap (APSARA), the ADF conducts archeological surveys, excavations and research on Phnom Kulen and also on the protection of archaeological sites, among other activities. In late 2011, the ADF joined a consortium of seven other organizations—APSARA, EFEO Siem Reap, University of Sydney, Robert Christie Research Centre (USYD), Société Concessionnaire d'Aéroport (SCA), Hungarian Indochina Company (HUNINCO), Japan-APSARA Safeguarding Angkor (JASA) and World Monuments Fund (WMF)—led by Damian Evans of the University of Sydney and carried out a survey using LiDAR. See Archaeology and Development Foundation, "On the Discovery of Mahendraparvata, the 'Lost City' of Phnom Kulen." Accessed October 31, 2016. http://www. angkorlidar.org/documents/ADF_Press_Release_18June2013.pdf; Evans et al., "Uncovering Archaeological Landscapes at Angkor Using Lidar", 12595–12600.

[22] With an area covering more than 1000 km square, the Angkor complex appears to be the largest engineered landscape in the pre-industrial world. The discoveries at the Kulen are a part of the larger archeological finds at Angkor and Koh Ker, which is located about 75 miles northeast of the town of Siem Reap. Additionally, the data suggested that a particular type of settlement pattern—local temples, occupation mounds, ponds and the "durable and highly structured agricultural space" that connects them—extended well into north-western (which includes the Phnom Kulen area) and south-eastern parts of the Angkor region. The later most significant result was the magnitude of anthropogenic modifications to the landscape. The extent and intensity of land use in the Angkor region had been widely underestimated until this study. See Evans et al., "A Comprehensive Archaeological Map of the World's Largest Preindustrial Settlement Complex at Angkor, Cambodia", 14277–14282 and Evans et al., "Uncovering Archaeological Landscapes at Angkor Using Lidar".

[23] Evans et al., "Uncovering Archaeological Landscapes at Angkor Using Lidar", 12597.

Kbal Spean: Geography

Kbal Spean is located on the north-west part of the Kulen, the highest peak that dominates that part of the range. The Siem Reap river, along with its tributaries the Kbal Spean and the Stung Russei originate on Phnom Kulen. The archeological site of Kbal Spean measures about 200m in length. The site has numerous carvings of *liṅga* and *yoni*, the abstract embodiments of Śiva and Pārvatī, as well as their anthropomorphic forms, Nandin the bull, the reclining Viṣṇu with Lakṣmī and other divinities carved directly in the riverbed and rocky outcroppings. The inscriptions found at the site date to the 11th century C.E., and the reclining Viṣṇu carvings are considered contemporaneous to the inscriptions. Kbal Spean is the modern name given to the site. An *in situ* inscription (K. 1011, 3) mentions a name 'Vraḥ Vila' which may or may not refer to this site and therefore its original appellation is uncertain.[24] Kbal Spean owes its prominence to the numerous carvings on site as well as inscriptions. There are at least 15 carvings of the reclining Viṣṇu, the most numerous at any one Angkor period site. By contrast, Anglong Pong Tai (also referred to as Anlong Phkay) to the southeast and downstream of Kbal Spean also has carvings of the reclining Viṣṇu but far fewer in number and with no inscriptions located at the site to date.[25] Moreover, none of the carvings are as prominently visible or with the complexity of composition as the one at Kbal Spean on the upright rock with the three temple towers next to the reposing figures. Epigraphic records that mark events and details directly relevant to the site obviously add to its importance. Some of the inscriptions at Kbal Spean directly comment on the carvings while others commemorate significant events and ritual acts, indicating the prominence of the site. Other *in situ* inscriptions that do not appear to be related to the carvings indicate that the site was nevertheless important to solicit the recording of information.[26]

Since the focus of the paper is to examine how the links between images at Kbal Spean and Angkor frame the eco-political relationship between the Kulen and Angkor, the noteworthiness of Kbal Spean is placed in the broader geographical, ritual and eco-political context of Phnom Kulen. Kbal Spean can be viewed as a "site", a more specifically defined criterion as opposed

[24] This inscription is located on the nearly horizontal summit of a mushroom-shaped rock. A carving of Śiva and Pārvatī seated on Nandin is found at the bottom of this rock. The inscription also details a donation made by the king Udayādityavarman II. See Jacques, "Les Inscriptions Du Phnom Kbal Spean (K 1011, 1012, 1015 et 1016)", 357–374, 358, 360.

[25] Henri Parmentier, who visited Anlong Pong Tai and described it in his book *L'Art Khmer Primitif* mentioned that there were 5 reclining Viṣṇu carvings at the site. I counted 8 during a visit in 2013, including a large carving in the middle of the riverbed. Like Kbal Spean, there are several *liṅga* and *yoni* carvings on the riverbed set in rows and in floral arrangements. See Parmentier, *L'Art Khmer Primitif*, 140–43 and Boulbet and Dagens, "Les Sites Archéologiques de La Région Du Bhnam Gūlen (Phnom Kulen)", 3–130, especially 13, 38.

[26] The combination of inscriptions and images sometimes augmented the significance of certain sites and temples, for example at Preah Ko and Lolei. Both temples were built by Khmer kings in memory of their deceased ancestors. *In situ* inscriptions mention images that were dedicated to the temple in memory of specific ancestors. In addition to the foundational inscriptions, certain temples continued to be a site for later epigraphic record-keeping, for example, K. 717 (early 11th century) and K. 713 (893 C.E.) at the Preah Ko temple. See Cœdès, *Inscriptions Du Cambodge I*, 16–18, 189–190.

to the "location" that is the Kulen.[27] Furthermore, the extant evidence, for example the *in situ* inscriptions, do not appear to characterize Kbal Spean as distinct from the Kulen. On the other hand, there are contemporaneous elements that draw a distinction between the Kulen and Angkor. For instance, archeological evidence indicates that the urban settlement features on Phnom Kulen were markedly different from those dated post-9th century on the Angkor plain. Further, the Sdok Kak Thom inscription notes that after his coronation on the Kulen, Jayavarman II shifted back to Hariharālaya which was located on the Angkor plain, once again marking the two locations as distinct. This distinction is preserved in later Khmer inscriptions as well.[28]

Kbal Spean came to scholarly attention relatively recently when a local hermit named Tep Mei took Jean Boulbet, a French researcher and cartographer to the site in 1968. Boulbet compiled a detailed cartographic survey of the region that contained information not only about the images and inscriptions but also about the canals and waterways leading out into the Angkor plains.[29] He wrote that the valley of Stung Russei closed Phnom Kulen to the west, and thus created a "separate world"; this separation was formed by the valley in which three rivers converged.[30] One of the rivers was the perennial Stung Russei (a tributary of the Siem Reap river), whose upper course is called Kbal Spean.[31] This river flows over a plateau-like formation, also called Kbal Spean, framed by rocky fringes. Horizontal stone slabs lie across the riverbed, oriented in an east-west direction, and perpendicular stone slabs channel the water flowing towards the north. The name 'Kbal Spean' means 'head bridge' and refers to a natural raised stone formation in the river over which the water flows. At a short distance from this feature, the river descends as a waterfall, and the waters that wind through the hilly and forested area flow onto the plains below, where the core of the Angkor kingdom was located. Over the course of the Angkor period, this river, and other streams and tributaries originating from the Kulen were regularly and systematically incorporated into the expanding water management network that fed the rice fields, temple moats, reservoirs and ponds. Additionally, sandstone quarried from locations in and around the Kulen supplied raw material that were used to build the numerous monuments of Angkor. Thus Phnom Kulen provided two vital materials for Angkor—nutrient-rich waters to fulfill the corporeal needs of the population, and stones for the temples that articulated their spiritual aspirations and beliefs.

[27] I use the definitions of "site" and "location" specified in the Oxford English Dictionary to highlight the differentiation between the two terms. See "site, n.2 (def. 3a)." 2018. In "Site, n.2 (Def. 3a)", accessed January 1, 2018, and "location, n. (def. 5a)." "Location, n. (Def. 5a)", accessed January 1, 2018,

[28] See Evans et al., "Uncovering Archaeological Landscapes at Angkor Using Lidar",12597, Sak-Humphry and Jenner, *The Sdok Kak Thom Inscription (K. 235): With a Grammatical Analysis of the Old Khmer Text*, 47, Bergaigne, *Inscriptions Sanscrites de Campā et Du Cambodge Vol 27*, 334, verses IX, XVIII, LIV in K. 806 and verse XXX in K. 809, in Cœdès, *Inscriptions Du Cambodge I*,106, 108, 113, 44.

[29] Boulbet, "Kbal Spean, La Riviere Aux Mille Linga"; Boulbet and Dagens, "Les Sites Archéologiques de La Région Du Bhnam Gūlen (Phnom Kulen)" ; Boulbet, "Phnom Kulen, Paysage Rural Particulier Au Cambodge", 193–205; Boulbet, *Le Phnom Kulen et Sa Region: Carte et Commentaire*.

[30] Boulbet, "Kbal Spean, La Riviere Aux Mille Linga", 4.

[31] See map 3 in Boulbet and Dagens, "Les Sites Archéologiques de La Région Du Bhnam Gūlen (Phnom Kulen)."

Reclining Viṣṇu images at Kbal Spean

Kbal Spean is most famous today for the images of deities carved in and around the riverbed. The most numerous images at the site include the *liṅga* and *yoni* and the reclining Viṣṇu. These are sculpted out of embedded rock and thus are fused and inseparable from the landscape. This paper considers the significance of the site as a whole, particularly with respect to its place within the water network system but also highlights the iconological import of specific carvings in the context of mythological and inscriptional references. One particular carving of the reclining Viṣṇu is displayed prominently at the site. This carving (Figure 2) is sculpted in low relief on the north face of a large and conspicuous horizontal rock. A four-armed Viṣṇu reclines on the body of the multi-headed snake Ananta who forms his bed and canopy. Six heads of Ananta are turned towards the seventh in the center, which is positioned above Viṣṇu and looks directly at the viewer. Seated at Viṣṇu's feet is his wife Lakṣmī, portrayed in the act of massaging his legs. With his rear right hand, Viṣṇu supports his head while the lower right holds a sphere that represents the earth. In his rear left hand he holds a lotus bud. The lower left hand is damaged but it is likely that he held a sword, as in other Angkorian representations of Viṣṇu, including others at Kbal Spean. The original sculpture of Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī on the upright rock (the former from the waist up and the latter's head) were hacked away by looters in the early 2000s (Figure 4). Some of the damaged parts were replaced more recently. Based on stylistic features that confirm with Khmer statuary of

*Figure 2: The reclining Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī carving at Kbal Spean. The deities repose on Ananta the multi-headed serpent and are flanked by the god Brahmā seated on a lotus (*R*) and three temple-like forms (*L*). Based on stylistic considerations the carving has been dated to the 11th century C.E. The upper torso of Viṣṇu and head of Lakṣmī were hacked away by looters. As of 2011 (when this photo was taken) only Viṣṇu's torso had been replaced by a new carving. Photo by author.*

this date, the original carving may be dated to the 11th century. The nearly hemispherical gathering of hair encircled at the base by a row of beads or pearls, the slender waist and elongated almost sinuous torso are cited as some of the distinguishing characteristics of the Baphuon style. The design of the *sampot* exposes a larger section of the abdomen. These features can also be observed on the Viṣṇu of the large Kbal Spean relief.[32]

Behind Viṣṇu rises a lotus stem culminating in a blossom at the top. In it sits, Brahmā, the god of creation. According to Brahmanical mythology, the lotus stem originates from Viṣṇu's navel. In the original carving (Figure 4), the stem emerges from Viṣṇu's navel and disappears under him to emerge again from the back. However, in the restored portion (Figure 2), the lotus is depicted as emerging independently from behind Viṣṇu. A half-opened lotus bud crowns the top of Lakṣmī's head (the stem would be located behind her) while she is surrounded by other lotus blooms and leaves. Ananta's head and rearing tail frame this representation of Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī, and the entire group is bordered by an undulating double line with two rows of leaf-like projections all around. To Lakṣmī's left is a badly eroded image that is most likely a four-armed Brahmā, seated on a lotus. To Viṣṇu's right are three sanctuaries, each enshrining an object of worship.[33] While the effects of erosion have affected these three forms, I would tentatively suggest that the middle sanctuary contains a *liṅga* and *yoni* while the two smaller flanking ones appear to have anthropomorphic images set on pedestals. Between Viṣṇu and the *gopura* closest to him is a faint depiction of a tree with leaves on its branches.

A few feet away, separated by a rocky projection carved with numerous *liṅga* forms and facing the carving described above is a large and more disparate composition, also of the reclining Viṣṇu and other personages (Figure 3). To proceed from left to right when facing these representations, the carving on the far left is close to a cleft in the riverbed. During the monsoons and soon after, this particular part of the carving is often completely obscured by the rushing waters. In the dry season it is easy to spot the double row of *liṅga* that form the base of this Viṣṇu relief. The carving to the right of this reclining Viṣṇu (also partially damaged) is more visible even during the wet season and is almost identical to the other two representations of the deity. The third component on this rock face is Nandin, with Śiva and Pārvatī seated on top. A kneeling figure in front of the bull appears to hold a chain or rope tied to the animal's neck. Behind the bull are seated figures, possibly ascetics or sages holding fly whisks. The top surface of the riverbed (behind the row of carvings just discussed) is covered with flattened *liṅga*-like forms, many of them in floral arrangements. These flattened forms are portrayed with an elasticity to their solid form, as though

[32] See Boulbet and Dagens, "Les Sites Archéologiques de La Région Du Bhnam Gūlen (Phnom Kulen),", 11), Jacques, *Angkor*, 11, Jacques and Lafond, *The Khmer Empire: Cities and Sanctuaries from the 5th to the 13th Century*, 23 and Freeman and Jacques, *Ancient Angkor*, 271. The hairstyle and lower garment (*sampot*) design of Viṣṇu in this particular carving adhere to Jean Boisselier's iconographic analysis of 11th century Khmer statuary. An example of this style is the standing male image in the Oriental Art Museum in Venice that Boisselier dated to the early Baphuon period. See Boisselier, *La Statuaire Khmère et Son Évolution*, 46–52, 114–117, Boisselier, "Un Torse Khmèr Du Musée Oriental de Venise", 233–238 and Boisselier, *Trends in Khmer Art*, 67–68.

[33] The depiction of the three sanctuaries closely resemble the architectural plan of the Phnom Bok temple built by Yaśovarman in the late 9th/ early 10th century. There too, the sanctuary in the middle is taller than the two flanking ones.

Figure 3: A broader panel of carvings that includes two pairs of reclining Viṣṇu depictions, and Śiva and Pārvatī seated on Nandin the bull followed by a couple of seated worshipers. During monsoons the rushing waters nearly obscure the reclining Viṣṇu carving furthest from the bank, while also evoking the imagery of Gaṅga originating from Viṣṇu's toe. Photo by author. 2011.

Figure 4: The original 11th century carving, before the upper torso of Viṣṇu and head of Lakṣmī were removed. Image courtesy: Andy Brouwer. 2000.

pulled along the flow of the water (Figure 5).[34]

The local population living around Kbal Spean have interpreted the carvings in both Buddhist and Śaivite terms. For example, Tep Mei explained that the Viṣṇu image at the site was a form of Buddha (as one who is 'interpreting the law') and the birth of Brahmā was also a representation of the Buddha as a mahāyogi or a great hermit (*moha eisei*) who had achieved mastery over his breath. Reclining on a multi-headed snake, with his breath held at the top of his head the 'Buddha' is able to project his spirit out of himself in the form of Brahmā, the ideal state which Tep Mei and his students strived to achieve. Furthermore, Mei said that each *liṅga* represented a male hermit and the encircling *yoni* a female hermit, carved by the hermits of ancient times attesting to their retreat to Kbal Spean. According to another version, each of the *liṅga* were carved by a pilgrim in lieu of a fulfilled vow.[35] Kbal Spean is also associated with the legend of the 'leper

Figure 5: Rows of liṅga carved on the riverbed appearing to mimic the flow of water. Photo: Andy Brouwer. 2000.

[34] There are additional images of the reclining Viṣṇu in other locations including directly in the riverbed, as well as *liṅga* and *yoni* arrangements in several assorted patterns. One such arrangement is found further downstream, in the form of a quincunx with one central *liṅga* and four other *liṅga* in four corners, all five enclosed within a square *yoni*. This particular arrangement is evocative of the Angkorian temple-mountain format. This quincunx is in turn surrounded by 8 *liṅga* set in the cardinal and mid-cardinal positions, framed by a larger square, which in turn is encompassed by an even larger square containing several rows of *liṅga*.

[35] See Boulbet, "Kbal Spean, La Riviere Aux Mille Linga", 1,2:2–17, 14–17.

king' of Angkor, whom the locals believed had bathed at the site.[36] Villagers living close to the site described the legend of the deluge and the giant white rat connected to Kbal Spean. They believed that the site marked the compassion of the Buddha when he saved the country from being submerged under water and dispatched the rat that caused the catastrophe.[37] Progressive and layered interpretations reveal that Kbal Spean, and by extension, Phnom Kulen has continued to be spiritually significant to Cambodians, and that the importance accorded to natural resources like rivers and mountains had its roots in antiquity.

Drawing the ancestral map at Kbal Spean

It was during the reign of king Udayādityavarman in the 11th century that the reclining Viṣṇu images as well as the important Sdok Kak Thom inscription came into existence. I argue that these two seemingly disconnected elements contributed to the significance of the Kulen, as an historical and religious bedrock in relation to the rest of the Angkor kingdom. The Sdok Kak Thom inscription established a definitive genealogical table for the kings of Angkor, commencing with Jayavarman II in the early 9th century (crowned on the Kulen, then called Mahendraparvata) until Udayādityavarman in the mid 11th century. In other words, the ancestry of Udayādityavarman was traced back to the king who founded the kingdom, supposedly following an act of political liberation deemed important enough to be noted in the inscription. Although the inscription does not give a reason for the choice of location, it was most likely already a site of considerable religious significance[38], and retained that status several centuries later. An inscription from the 11th century found at Kbal Spean appears to describe the mountain as a place where "good men practiced good asceticism".[39] The same inscription also mentions that the king installed a golden *liṅga* at the summit of the mountain, "the ornament of the three worlds".[40]

[36] See Chandler, *Facing the Cambodian Past: Selected Essays, 1971-1994*, 7–8.

[37] The myth describes a deluge that invaded the land of the Khmers until only the peaks of Phnom Kulen were visible. The giant rat then broke the mountain into two and then proceeded to furiously burrow into it. Soon there was a danger that the entire land would be inundated once the peaks disappeared. At this opportune moment, the Buddha came to Cambodia, and the site where he placed his foot to cross the river and then over the breach in the mountain came to be known as Kbal Spean. Filled with compassion for the land that was about to be inundated, the Buddha dispatches Ta Prohm to kill the rat, which he does by shooting an arrow at it. The mountains were no longer under the threat of being inundated, the oceans receded to their current position and order was restored. See Boulbet, "Kbal Spean, La Riviere Aux Mille Linga",15. This particular interpretation could also be read as a commentary on environmental degradation. It is tempting to think that perhaps the myth refers to the ecological damage that resulted after years of over-use of natural resources. Evans' LiDAR study appears to confirm earlier postulations that a combination of hydraulic infrastructure failings, deforestation and decadal-scale megadroughts might have contributed to the decline and eventual abandonment of Angkor. See Evans et al., "Uncovering Archaeological Landscapes at Angkor Using Lidar", 12598.

[38] Chevance, Baty, and Seng, "The Sources of the Khmer Empire", 259. Some of the monuments on the Kulen display an eclectic style, indicating that Kulen was a cultural intersection of some importance. See Stern, "II. Le Style Du Kulên (Décor Architectural et Statuaire" and Stern, "III. Travaux Exécutés Au Phnom Kulên (15 Avril-20 Mai 1936)",151–174.

[39] Jacques, "Les Inscriptions Du Phnom Kbal Spean (K 1011, 1012, 1015 et 1016)", 361. This inscription is located below K. 1101, 3.

[40] Jacques, "Les Inscriptions Du Phnom Kbal Spean (K 1011, 1012, 1015 et 1016)", 360–361. A partially destroyed

The belief in the sanctity of natural formations like mountains has pre-Indic roots in Cambodia and likely resonated with elements of Brahmanical religion.[41] These beliefs might have been rooted within a wider Southeast Asian cultural context. For example, before the introduction of Brahmanical religion, people in Indonesia revered the spirits of ancestors thought to reside in hidden sources of rivers on mountains.[42] These spirits generated all life—human, plant and animal. The fertility of the soil and consequently the growth of rice was especially linked to the power of these ancestors. Veneration of trees and stones have been documented in Khmer inscriptions, as noted earlier. For the Khmers, mountains such as the Kulen and Wat Phu in present day Laos have been considered sacred since antiquity. The Angkorian kings sometimes built temples on hills, or sanctuaries that simulated the form of Mount Meru. Many of these temples were dedicated to royal ancestors believed to have been divinized after their demise. Therefore, the reverence for natural elements, real or simulated, appears to have existed in pre-Angkor and Angkorian times.

Multiple epigraphic records and references, both at Kbal Spean and afar, accorded the Kulen a special status. The installation of a golden *liṅga* also indicates that the Kulen was considered

inscription K. 1016, located in a cave about 60 meters southeast of the carving of "Śiva and the crocodile" refers to water that flows from the summit of the mountain that is likely Mahendraparvata. The verse mentions "Mahendra" which Jacques suggests is possibly a reference to Mahendraparvata. See Jacques, "Les Inscriptions Du Phnom Kbal Spean (K 1011, 1012, 1015 et 1016)," 363.

[41] Indian religions appear to have been introduced into Cambodia in the early centuries of the Common Era. Inscriptions and sacred carvings from pre-Angkor through Angkorian times reveal a complex combination of autochthonous beliefs (which included animism and ancestral worship) as well as South Asian elements, much like other parts of Southeast Asia. See Guy, "Introducing Early Southeast Asia", 2–4; Mabbett and Chandler, *The Khmers*, 107–124; Vickery, *Society, Economics, and Politics in Pre-Angkor Cambodia: The 7th-8th Centuries*, 51–60, 140–149; Wolters, *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*, 16–26, 41–67. The oldest Cambodian inscriptions dated from the 5th century C.E. are written in Sanskrit while Khmer inscriptions appear from the 7th century. See Le Bonheur, "Ancient Cambodia: A Historical Glimpse," 13, Mabbett and Chandler, *The Khmers*, 79 and Bhattacharya, "The Religions of Ancient Cambodia", 35. An inscription from 611 C.E. mentions the merging of a god whose name ends in *-īśvara* with another called *Vraḥ Kamratāṅ Añ Kamratāṅ Teṃ Kroṃ*, which Cœdès indicated was a tree-god. There are indications that some local gods were also given a Sanskritized name, for example, Vakakāḳeśvara, mentioned in the Basak stele. See Cœdès, *Inscriptions Du Cambodge II*, 21–23, 58. The term *-īśvara* is not necessarily Saivite, as Vickery points out, but may have been employed in the sense of 'lord' rather than 'the god Śiva'. Moreover, the term *īśvara* itself was applied to forms of Viṣṇu as well thus indicating a broader and non-sectarian usage. Vickery had suggested that the names *aśmasaronātha* or *śīlāsaronātha* could be Sanskritized names denoting a non-Indic deity *kaṃsteṅ jagat piṅ thmo* or 'god of the stone pond', installed alongside a Viṣṇu image. Sanderson, however, argues that the evidence cited does not suggest the installation of two different types of deities but that the Sanskritized names referred only to a Viṣṇu image. See Sanderson, "The Śaiva Religion among the Khmers (Part I)," 377-390 and Griffiths, "La Stèle d'installation de Śrī Tribhuvaneśvara: Une Nouvelle Inscription Du Musée National de Phnom Penh (K. 1214)", 11–43, especially pp. 20-21, note 34. Some inscriptional references also indicate that the titles did not clearly differentiate between Saivite, Vaishnavite, Buddhist or local gods. See Vickery, *Society, Economics, and Politics in Pre-Angkor Cambodia: The 7th-8th Centuries*, 142, 146–147. *Kpon* which were female local deities were also given Indic names, some of them representing Durgā and Sarasvatī. Hindu and Buddhist imagery are preponderant and identifiable through iconographic markers or mythological references. Unambiguous references to local gods and deities, though present as the above examples reveal, are few and not always easy to identify. Nevertheless, one could argue that the images that were 'Hindu' (or 'Buddhist') also incorporated chthonic divinities into their form and identity. Vickery argues that that in the pre-Angkor period, local deities (male and female) were accorded Indic names, indicating that Hinduism was in the process of being adapted to fit autochthonous concepts, but that the pre-Angkorian population did not see themselves as 'Hindu'. See Vickery, *Society, Economics, and Politics in Pre-Angkor Cambodia: The 7th-8th Centuries*, 139–171.

[42] See Stutterheim, "The Meaning of the Hindu-Javanese Caṇḍi", 12–15 and Aeusrivongse, "The Devaraja Cult and Khmer Kingship at Angkor", 107–48, 111–112.

an important site for such a noteworthy dedication. The consecration of an icon made of valuable material appears to have been relatively rare.[43] Places themselves are invested with power because they are associated with notable events, as Shampa and Sanjoy Mazumdar remarked.[44] The Sdok Kak Thom inscription mentions the secret rituals performed for the ceremony by a specially trained priest, which accords the event and location even more potency. Moreover, the inscription states that Jayavarman II also proclaimed himself as the "cakravartin" elevating the Kulen as the ritual center of the world. More than anything, the Sdok Kak Thom inscription cemented the identity of the Kulen as the site that Jayavarman II as Udayādityavarman's *ancestor* had made distinct through specific ritual and political acts. By recalling and recording in stone those very acts, the Sdok Kak Thom inscription not only commemorated Jayavarman II's status as the progenitor of the Angkor royal line but also validated Udayādityavarman's political pedigree. Regardless of Jayavarman II's actual status when he was king, the 11th-century inscription certainly accorded a distinguished status to him.

Specific details in the inscriptions found at Kbal Spean draw further attention to Udayādityavarman's ancestry. K. 1011, no. 4 mentions that Udayādityavarman was the son of Sūryavarman I and his chief wife Vīralakṣmī. Jacques points out that this is the only known record that mentions the parentage of Udayādityavarman.[45] Why was Kbal Spean, far from the site where earlier kings had built their monumental temples, chosen as the spot to place this detail? This paper suggests that the choice was deliberate in order to invest Udayādityavarman and his reign with the ritual and historical preeminence of the Kulen. Through that choice and act, Udayādityavarman physically inscribed his lineage onto the genealogical tree of Angkorian kings that begins with Jayavarman II at the Kulen. Indeed, the territorial expanse of Angkor, dotted with its many temples, icons enshrined within them, and public works is in itself a physical composition of a genealogical map. Temples in honor of royal ancestors, state temples marking royal status as well as various public works such as reservoirs, water canals and hospitals essentially were both metaphorical and physical links that connected each king and queen to those who ruled before them, who had been elevated to the rank of deified ancestors. Human enterprise that surrounds these material manifestations—everyday ambulatory paths, ritual activities, maintenance and repairs that continually involve interaction with these sites reinforced the connections between the people

[43] For example, the Baksei Chamkrong inscription records the dedication of a golden image of Śiva to the eponymous temple by king Rājendravarman. The inscription K. 276 (Ta Kev) also mentions that a processional image was made of gold. See Cœdès, *Inscriptions Du Cambodge IV*, 88–101, 153–154. The pre-Angkorian inscription K. 1254 also mentions the installation of a metal image of Viṣṇu (possibly of silver) named Śrī Tribhuvanañjaya by a king named Jayavarman (bis?). See Gerschheimer and Goodall, "«Que Cette Demeure de Śrīpati Dure Sur Terre...»: L'inscription Préangkorienne K. 1254 Du Musée d'Angkor Borei", 128 – 130. K. 1236 dated to the 8th century mentions the installation of a Śiva icon in gold. See Goodall, "Les Influences Littéraires Indiennes Dans Les Inscriptions Du Cambodge: L'exemple d'un Chef-d'œuvre Inédit Du VIIIe Siècle (K. 1236)", 348, 353. An inscription from the late 10th century notes the installation of an image of Hari (Viṣṇu) in gold. See Goodall, "Kālidāsa's Kingship among the Khmers", 56.

[44] Mazumdar and Mazumdar, "Religion and Place Attachment: A Study of Sacred Places", 387.

[45] Jacques, "Les Inscriptions Du Phnom Kbal Spean (K 1011, 1012, 1015 et 1016)", 361.

and their ancestors. In this way, the ancestral map is physically re-traced and re-activated every day. The Kulen was invested with even more potency because of the religious and historical significance accorded to it. Jayavarman's founding location with its temples was defined as the inception point of Angkor's history. Udayādityavarman chose the same location (though not the identical site) to imprint his own ancestry onto the living mountain.

It is tempting to consider Kbal Spean as an ancestral commemoration site as well. Images of Hindu gods and goddesses were often dedicated to temples in memory of royal ancestors.[46] Moreover, inscriptions repeatedly compared kings to gods, in particular Viṣṇu. The king's qualities such as his physical beauty, military accomplishments, compassion and sexual prowess were praised as equal to or even surpassing those of the god's.[47] Similarly, queens were compared to Śrī (Lakṣmī) who was also the personification of wealth and embodied the earth itself.[48] Myths from Indonesia also link Dewi Sri and Viṣṇu, or Sedana, who is a manifestation of the latter, to royalty. The wives of Javanese princes were believed to be incarnations of Śrī. Stutterheim suggests that in premodern times, Śrī was associated with death and the afterlife, particularly with the notion of deliverance.[49] Moreover, as a ruler who was invested with the divine energy of both the male and the female aspects (Śiva and Śakti or Viṣṇu and Śrī) he could ensure the wealth and fertility of the land.[50] Were the carvings of the reclining Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī at Kbal Spean meant to commemorate Udayādityavarman's human ancestors now deified as divine beings? Was the prominent carving of the reclining Viṣṇu meant to evoke Sūryavarman I who was described in an inscription as the "moon of this ocean of milk"[51] and his wife whose name Vīralakṣmī evoked the goddess portrayed in the relief? Moreover, the three temple towers sculpted in low relief, next to the reclining Viṣṇu (Figure 2) are strongly reminiscent of sanctuaries built by earlier Angkorian kings, particularly Phnom Bok built by Yaśovarman in the early 10th century.[52] The inscriptions at the site in their current state do not reveal any specific references to these enigmatic towers nor do they mention that the reclining Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī images commemorate royal ancestors. Nevertheless, it is worth

[46] For example, see K. 826 verse XXX and XXXII in Cœdès, *Inscriptions Du Cambodge*, I, 35, and K. 286 verse XXXII in Cœdès, *Inscriptions Du Cambodge IV*,1952, 99.

[47] See for example K. 263 verses XIII and XVIII in Cœdès, *Inscriptions Du Cambodge*, IV, 133–134. In verse XVIII Lakṣmī deserts the "lotus of Hari", which can be taken as an allusion to Hari (Viṣṇu) himself, and chooses to reside with the Khmer king whose excellent glory is the blossomed lotus, whose smile is honey and whose charm is the pollen. See also K. 288 verse XXXII in Cœdès, *Inscriptions Du Cambodge* IV, 222.

[48] For example, see K. 806 verses XI and XVI in Cœdès, *Inscriptions Du Cambodge* I, 107.

[49] An inscription on a cinerary urn at the Jakarta History Museum (also known as the Batavia Museum) reads "śrīgata" which Stutterheim translates to "absorbed by the goddess Śrī" or "Salvation attained". Stutterheim clarifies that the goddess should not be regarded as representing death, but rather regeneration or resurrection. See Stutterheim, "Some Remarks on Pre-Hinduistic Burial Customs on Java",79–80.

[50] See Stutterheim, "Some Remarks on Pre-Hinduistic Burial Customs on Java", 79, Wessing, "Sri and Sedana and Sita and Rama: Myths of Fertility and Generation", especially pages 241–243 and Wessing, "A Tiger in the Heart: The Javanese Rampok Macan", 148, 296–297.

[51] See n. 64 in Vickery, "The Reign of Sūryavarman I and Royal Factionalism at Angkor", 226–244, 240.

[52] The three towers of Phnom Bok were dedicated to Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva, the same three male gods depicted on the Kbal Spean relief.

noting that the Kulen and Kbal Spean were both sites that were marked with multiple references to ancestors.

Images and temples created to honor ancestors may have been conceptualized as bridges or conduits that connected the past with the present. Cœdès unpacks the complex use of the term "*dharma*" from the Pre Rup inscription, but one that recurs in several other inscriptions of the Angkor period.[53] The term appears to encompass at least two meanings: The abstract meaning of moral order, and an idol. In the Pre Rup inscription, Cœdès suggests that the king Rājendravarman was greatly concerned that his royal essence or his "subtle self" should not perish with him and that his *dharma* must survive in an image that materialized his glory. Moreover, the prosperity of his *dharma* (which could mean his religion or his temple, or, most likely both) ensured the king's aspiration to immortality, i.e. to dwell among his ancestors. Supplicatory verses in several inscriptions could thus be requests or contracts for the maintenance of the cult. Through the acts of temple maintenance and continued worship, the ancestors would become accessible to the living population and grant the community continued prosperity and well-being. The kings also assured their successors that whoever protected their foundations (*dharma*) would inherit the merit themselves, as Yaśovarman proclaimed in the Lolei inscription: "Preserve this work (*dharma*) O you who are rich in *dharma*".[54] In another inscription also from Lolei, Yaśovarman adds: "Protect this work *dharma* which is a bridge for me/you".[55] Auguste Barth, and later Cœdès , pointed out that the last word *sva* is ambiguous and could mean either 'you' or 'me'.[56] The use of the term *dharma* in Javanese sources suggest that there were some parallels between Khmer and Javanese beliefs surrounding ancestor worship. This is not to say that religious practices and beliefs in premodern Cambodia and Java mirrored each other, but to gesture towards a possible commonality surrounding particular thoughts about death (at least of the elite) and its continued political significance afterward. For example, *caṇḍis* in Java were also called *dharma* or *sudharma*, terms that were used to designate temples where images that commemorated kings were installed. Archeological data, literary references as well as art historical studies suggest that after the death of the ruler, images of gods modeled after these deceased rulers were installed in Javanese temples. These images only represented a part of the king and not the whole, and also appear to be emblematic of the king's unity with the god after death.[57]

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[53] Cœdès, "Études Cambodgiennes: La Destination Funéraire Des Grands Monuments Khmers", 315–349. See verses CCXCII, CCXCIII and CCXCVIII in the Pre Rup inscription (K. 806) and verses CLXXIII and CLXXV of the Preah Khan inscription in Cœdès, *Inscriptions Du Cambodge* I, 142; Cœdès, "La Stèle Du Preah Khan d'Angkor", 300–301. See also Thompson, "Angkor Revisited: The State of Statuary", 179–213.

[54] See verse 90 in Bergaigne, *Inscriptions Sanscrites de Campā et Du Cambodge*, Vol. 27, 402.

[55] See verse 2 in Bergaigne, *Inscriptions Sanscrites de Campā et Du Cambodge*, Vol. 27, 325.

[56] In a footnote Auguste Barth, adding to Bergaigne's translation, suggests that the phrase could also be read as "which is also a bridge of salvation for you". See Bergaigne and Barth, *Inscriptions Sanscrites de Campā et Du Cambodge* Vol 1, note 1, p. 326. The inventory number for the inscription is K. 324. See also Cœdès, "Études Cambodgiennes: La Destination Funéraire Des Grands Monuments Khmers", 328.

[57] The terms *aṅgśa* or *aṅgśavatāra* mentioned in texts such as the *Nāgarakṛtāgama* suggests this notion. See Soekmono, *The Javanese Candi: Function and Meaning*, 21 and note 18 in Stutterheim, "Some Remarks on Pre-Hinduistic Burial Customs on Java", 71.

The installation of the icon in the image of a ruler can also be interpreted as an act to link the past with the present, as Cœdès and Thompson have argued in the case of Angkor. Cœdès suggests that *dharma* also functions like a bridge through which the donor links themselves on the one hand to their ancestors in whose memory the images were erected, and on the other to the donor's descendants to whom is entrusted the duty of protecting and maintaining the foundations and the cult of statues: *dharma* (or rather the act of *dharma*), is what assures the transmission of legitimate authority, whether it is the continuance of royal power or passage of religious traditions.[58] Stutterheim also notes that in Java, recording the instructions for the upkeep of worship were engraved in stone or metal for longevity and to ensure the maintenance of the promised provisions.[59] The particular references in the inscriptions that mention Udayādityavarman's parents, the choice of specific images of Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī that traditionally evoked royalty and royal power and the attestation of a definitive genealogical map marking the Kulen as its inception point all suggest attempts to highlight lines of authority and legitimacy. But if there were indeed such motivations, why are there no grand monuments at Kbal Spean, that is, monumental structures that typically elucidated ancestral connections and claims to political legitimacy? Was the mountainous landscape better suited for ascetic withdrawal or did the terrain present challenges for large-scale construction? Or did the combination of water flowing over rocks present an opportunity to put together novel compositions?

The dissolution and dispersion of sacred essences

While stone as a medium for the inscriptions and images at Kbal Spean was likely chosen for the purpose of longevity (like other instances at Angkor), the dissolution of those carvings could have simultaneously been an objective as well, thus differing qualitatively from other Angkorian examples. It is almost an obvious certainty that both the patrons and the builders of sacred monuments in Angkor knew about the effects of water erosion. By the 11th century, numerous stone monuments embellished with sculptural details had already been in existence and functional. The copious amounts of rainfall during the annual monsoons would have slowly but inevitably worn down the meticulously rendered carvings on the walls of the temples. While the monsoons would have resulted in a floodplain spreading out from the Tonle Sap lake the capital itself was likely not expected to be inundated under normal circumstances. Archeological findings about the water network system suggests a pattern of water flow that was designed so that the excess water from the yearly rainfall drained into the floodplain located to the south of the capital.[60] Moreover, with several of the temples built with surrounding moats or on hilltops, the rainwater would have collected around the temples with the main consecrated images protected within the confines of the sanctuaries. By contrast, at Kbal Spean the sacred images are unprotected and constantly exposed to the elements. The interaction between the water and the carved images was continuous,

[58] See Cœdès, "Études Cambodgiennes: La Destination Funéraire Des Grands Monuments Khmers", 328-329.

[59] See Stutterheim, "Some Remarks on Pre-Hinduistic Burial Customs on Java, " 68.

[60] See Fletcher et al., "The Water Management Network of Angkor, Cambodia".

particularly during and just after the monsoons. Therefore, the rate of erosion would have been far greater at Kbal Spean because the carvings are either partly or wholly inundated by flowing water.

Why then would numerous carefully detailed reliefs be carved directly into the riverbed and outcroppings at Kbal Spean, where they were certain to be eroded even more quickly and consistently than other protected locations? In addition to the symbolic value acquired by the water flowing over the images, it can be argued that the dissolution of the sacred carvings was partly intentional, inspired by the notion that the material grains from the divine images would infuse the water with added potency. Just as water flowing out of a *praṇāla* in a temple would be considered sacred because it is suffused with the essences of the *liṅga* and *yoni*, so too could the waters washing over and around the Kbal Spean images be regarded as *prasāda* or "edible grace".[61] These fluvial embodiments of the divinities (and perhaps in this case divine ancestors) could be seen as contributing to or indeed precipitating the fecundity of the kingdom.

The symbolism was no doubt important and constituent in the significance accorded to the interaction between the images and the water. Nevertheless, the materiality or physicality of that exchange was likely a valued component as well. Tactile communication with sacred entities, for example, rubbing parts of an image or its accouterments, in current religious practice is an essential component of the religious experience or an additional means by which the participant engages with the divine. In other words, carvings and other sacred material objects should be considered as "immediate presence of the holy" rather than solely as symbols or icons that allude to something.[62] Sacred objects can call attention to their "thingness"or more importantly, the specificity of that

[61] David Gordon White describes *prasāda* as the fluid offerings poured over the *liṅga* and *yoni* set in temples, which flow out through a channel in the northern wall of the shrine, indicating that in a metaphorical sense, these are sexual fluids of the male and female entities. See White, *Kiss of the Yogini: "Tantric Sex" in Its South Asian Contexts*, 101. Substances poured over the *liṅga* were once considered to be imbued with the dangerous potency of the god's power. These dangerous leftovers could only be received and neutralized by the deity Caṇḍeśa, who was a manifestation of Śiva's anger. See Goodall, "Who Is Caṇḍeśa?", 351-423, especially pages 357-358. Two temples at Angkor, Neak Pean (12th century) and the West Mebon temple (11-12th century) incorporated the functional and cosmological importance of water into the structure's iconology. Sacred water descending from the Kulen fed canals and the expansive West Baray in the center of which was built a temple that housed an enormous bronze statue of the reclining Viṣṇu. See Feneley, *Reconstructing God: Style, Hydraulics, Political Power and Angkor's West Mebon Viṣṇu*. Neak Pean consists of five pools that feed into each other, with a lotus-shaped temple in the middle of the central pool. It represents Lake Anavatpa and the four sacred rivers including the Ganges. An inscription claimed that bathing in the fountains issuing from the pool cleansed the sins of the believers. See Dumarçay and Royère, *Cambodian Architecture, Eighth to Thirteenth Centuries*, 94-95. Some Javanese *caṇḍis* appear to have designed a linkage between lustral water and sacred images that might have also represented deceased royal ancestors. At Caṇḍi Merak and Caṇḍi Muncul, pipes and other water flow systems channeled water to flow over the installed images and into the depository urn inside the temples. The 10th century Jolotundo temple in Java is another example where landscape, built form and hydraulic engineering were combined to construct a site of religious significance. See Bosch and De Haan, "The OldJavanese Bathing Place Jalatunda," and Soekmono, *The Javanese Candi: Function and Meaning*, 10–11. In her dissertation, Judith Patt discusses in great detail the significance of water in premodern Indonesian religious architecture, including at Jolotundo. She suggests that the sites memorialized kings (but not as burial sites), illustrated legends and commemorated certain political events. See Patt, "The Use and Symbolism of Water in Ancient Indonesian Art and Architecture".

[62] See Bynum, "Notes from the Field: Materiality", 12. Caroline Walker Bynum discusses materiality in the context of Christian reliquary in Middle Age Europe. My intention is not to make a case for cross-cultural generalities but to employ Bynum's call to attention to the materiality of religion to elucidate my argument concerning the physical significance sacred objects, to their inherent "stuffness" (as she terms it) and the value of that materiality.

material, about what it can do through its materiality in addition to the idea that it conveys.[63] The carvings of Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī referred to what the deities represented but it can also be viewed as self-contained objects of potency. The diffusion of the sacred entities that permeate the kingdom precipitate growth—of plants, of great temples that will exemplify the well-being of the kingdom. In this way an "image of" becomes a thing in itself.[64] In the case of the Kbal Spean carvings set in its particular context, it is the predisposition of those stone carvings to be eroded by water and its fragments conveyed and dispersed through the kingdom that lends them additional significance.

It could be argued that the mechanisms of engagement with the material dimensions of the sacred was a core component of Angkorian culture.[65] The ever-increasing complexity of architectural constructions and variety of imagery at Angkor suggest the importance of physical articulation of the religious as well as the ordering and control of the environment. This evolutionary process was in some ways analogous to the intricately planned and constructed water management system which was also a system of control and management, progressively developed over centuries with increasing intricacy and interwoven with the religious fabric of the kingdom.

The water management network of Angkor

Archeological discoveries from the more recent past that were discussed earlier have revealed a landscape on which both religio-political aspirations as well as economic motivations of the Angkor period have left their indelible marks, and Phnom Kulen is a vital element in this interconnected network. Angkor had a tripartite water management system where water flowing down from the Kulen rivers (such as the upper Roluos and the Siem Reap) was directed to flow along channels and embankments into central Angkor (Figure 6).[66] Aerial photographs, remote

[63] See Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe*, 29, 58 and note 32 on 294.

[64] See Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe*, 29.

[65] Writing about visual perceptions of the sacred in India, Diana Eck suggests that the contact between the deity and the devotee is "exchanged through the eyes. The gaze of the deity, considered powerful even before physical images were made, gained more efficacy when the anthropomorphic forms were created". Eck notes that the power of the gaze was believed to be such that it sometimes had a physical effect on the human. See Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 6–7. Nevertheless, a reciprocal relationship between a sacred entity (be it an idol, temple or a site) and those who engage with it begins even before its consecration and extends beyond the visual to a physical engagement. From construction to daily maintenance and worship, sacred structures and objects constitute a substantive part of the devotee's lived environment.

[66] Fletcher et al., "The Water Management Network of Angkor, Cambodia", 658–670. Groslier and later Joanna Williams suggested that the hydraulic system developed for agriculture in the Angkor period had an Indian origin, possibly from the Pallavas of South India. Nevertheless, the size and scale of the Angkorian system is unprecedented in both South and Southeast Asia. As Williams also points out the system was influenced by local environmental factors and therefore despite possible Indian influences, it was likely adapted to suit uniquely local conditions. Additionally, Groslier pointed out that the Khmers probably used their prior experience and knowledge of managing water in the valleys with terraced rice cultivation in their early settlements in current day Northeast Thailand. In the region named as 'Funan', located in the vicinity of southern Cambodia and Vietnam, material evidence indicates some form of water management and control techniques, some of them possibly dating back to the pre-Angkor period (6th–8th centuries C.E.) See Groslier, "Agriculture et Religion Dans l'Empire Angkorien", 96; Groslier, "VII. La Cité Hydraulique Angkorienne: Exploitation Ou Surexploitation Du Sol?", 173; Williams, "The Churning of the

sensing and field surveys collected after the 1990s to the present revealed a complex topography where local and monumental temples, water bodies like *barays*[67], human-made canals and rice fields were constructed in relation to one another.[68] Small water bodies appeared to have been used for cultivation while also functioning as temple ponds or *trapeang*. The moats and *barays* stored water which was available to be dispersed into rice fields and the excess was carried across the plains via channels and drained into the lake.[69] Unlike the later sites situated on the Angkor plain, Phnom

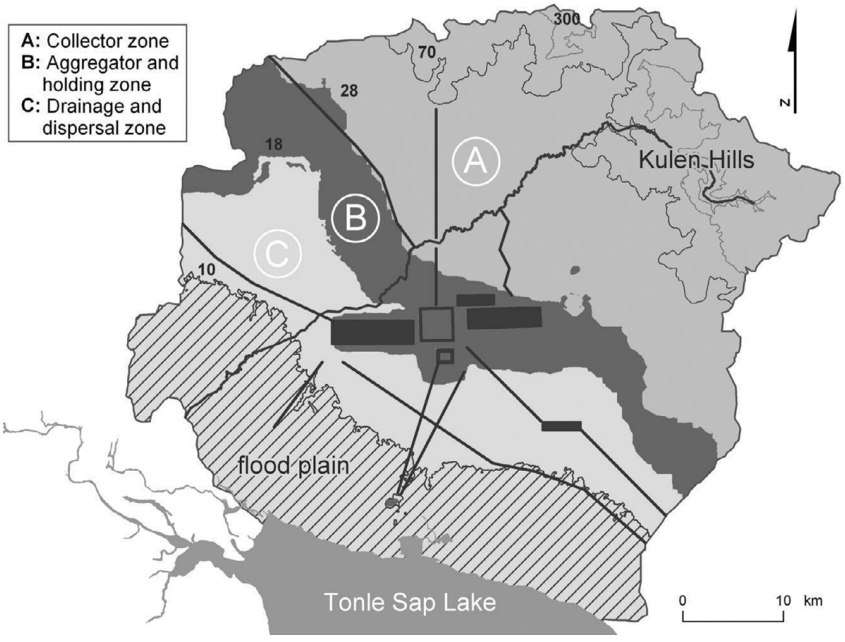

Figure 6 : This map shows the tripartite water management system that was developed during a span of five hundred years, between the 9th and 13th centuries. In Zone A, water was collected and made to flow along channels commencing from the Kulen Hills. Flowing into Zone B, the water filled the reservoirs, tanks and temple moats and fed the rice-fields spread over the plains. The long rectangular shapes denote the barays and temple moats, and the squares the large temple complexes. Zone C functioned as the dispersal area through which the water eventually made its way to the Tonle Sap lake. The straight lines denote the long channels that distributed water several miles in distance. Image courtesy: R. Fletcher et al. 2008. "The water management network of Angkor, Cambodia." Antiquity 82 (317): 658–670.

Ocean of Milk: Myth, Image and Ecology", 229–235, 231; Higham, *The Archaeology of Mainland Southeast Asia: From 10,000 BC to the Fall of Angkor*; Fox and Ledgerwood, "Dry-Season Flood-Recession Rice in the Mekong Delta: Two Thousand Years of Sustainable Agriculture?"; Stark and Sovath, "Recent Research on Emergent Complexity in Cambodia's Mekong"; Bishop et al., "A 3.5 Ka Record of Paleoenvironments and Human Occupation at Angkor Borei, Mekong Delta, Southern Cambodia". For a detailed discussion on Groslier's hypothesis of the "hydraulic city", see Bourdonneau, "Pour En Finir Avec La 'Cité Hydraulique'? Note de Lecture de l'ouvrage de Didier Pillot, Jardins et Rizières Du Cambodge. Les Enjeux Du Développement Agricole.".

[67] *Barays* are human-made reservoirs or lakes constructed near temples, suggesting religious as well as economic functions.

[68] See Pottier, "Some Evidence of an Inter-Relationship between Hydraulic Features and Rice Field Patterns at Angkor during Ancient Times".

[69] Fletcher et al., "The Water Management Network of Angkor, Cambodia" especially pages 661-669.

Kulen was an "open city" that did not have a clearly defined enclosure wall. Importantly, there is evidence of hydraulic engineering on the Kulen that dates to the Angkor period, comparable in scale to Angkor itself.[70] This indicates that a dependence on water management systems to ameliorate variation in monsoon rainfall and to ensure food security was not confined to just the plains but was present in upland sites as well.[71] The regulation of water directed down the slopes of the Kulen that was channeled throughout the plains, vitally influenced the economic prosperity of the Angkor kingdom. The entire network stretching from the Kulen hills to the lake with additions and modifications was constructed over 500 years, from the 9th to the 13th centuries.[72]

Religion and functionality at Angkor

The construction of public works and temples were often linked ventures. One of the earliest examples can be observed at Hariharālaya or Roluos as it is now known. Here, archeological evidence indicates that the building of temples to commemorate ancestors, public works and the king's own temple-mountain were commenced simultaneously.[73] For example, Stern suggested that Preah Ko, the ancestral temple built by Indravarman (Jayavarman II's successor), the reservoir called Indratatāka and Bakong the royal temple-mountain were undoubtedly begun simultaneously but inaugurated at different times, a hypothesis that appears to be confirmed by archeological research in the Bakong area.[74] Subsequent kings such as Yaśovarman, Rājendravarman and Udayādityavarman built both temples and public infrastructure like reservoirs during their reigns. By the 11th century, the plains of Angkor and the Kulen were linked and crisscrossed with an elaborate network of canals, carrying water that descended from the Kulen filling the reservoirs and moats which in turn fed the rice-fields. The reservoirs in particular appear to have functioned as a sort of "insurance policy" against years of deficit rainfall.[75] The West Baray which surrounds the West Mebon temple built in the 11th century fulfilled both the economic function of a reservoir that fed rice fields through canals but also brought to mind the mythological ocean encircling Mount Meru, represented by the temple at its center and the large reclining Viṣṇu image that was its residing deity. The now dry East Baray encompassing the East Mebon temple may have fulfilled

[70] Evans et al., "Uncovering Archaeological Landscapes at Angkor Using Lidar", 12597.

[71] Evans et al., "Uncovering Archaeological Landscapes at Angkor Using Lidar."

[72] Fletcher et al., "The Water Management Network of Angkor, Cambodia", 662.

[73] More recent archeological findings indicate an infrastructural pattern where shrines, occupation mounds and water tanks or ponds formed interconnected units. See Fletcher et al., "The Water Management Network of Angkor, Cambodia", 661 and Evans et al., "Uncovering Archaeological Landscapes at Angkor Using Lidar", 12597-12599. Arguing that there was a critical link between religion and functionality at Angkor, Pottier points out that rice fields were oriented towards a small temple that was a village shrine or the shrine of a village chief. See Pottier, "Some Evidence of an Inter-Relationship between Hydraulic Features and Rice Field Patterns at Angkor during Ancient Times", 103.

[74] See Stern, "Diversité et Rythme Des Fondations Royales Khmères", 664-665 and Pottier, "Notes Sur Le Bakong et Son Implantation", 318–326.

[75] Evans and Traviglia, "Uncovering Angkor: Integrated Remote Sensing Applications in the Archaeology of Early Cambodia", 227.

ritual and agricultural purposes as well. On the Kulen, the Kbal Spean river which was an important component in the water network system, was compared to the sacred river Ganges. The water tumbles down a cleft in the riverbed brushing past the toe of Viṣṇu (Figure 3), summoning to mind the myth of the creation of Gaṅga. Reinforcing this imagery, an inscription carved below the overhang of the waterfall, a few meters away from the reclining Viṣṇu image, describes the Kbal Spean river as the visible manifestation of "the celestial river, this Gaṅga of Śiva, that washes away the sins of the world".[76]

Yet another mythological event sourced from Indian epic and *purāṇic* literature but perhaps more prominently articulated at Angkor embodied the coupling of the metaphysical and the temporal, and in particular illustrated the vital link between the Kulen and Angkor. This was the Churning of the Sea of Milk, whose sculptural depiction was becoming increasingly visible on the temples of Angkor from the 10th century. The reclining Viṣṇu carvings at the Kulen present the inception point of this mythological story, their link to the Churning myth inscribed by the logic of the natural and engineered landscape.

Linking the Kulen and the plains of Angkor through the Churning myth

The myth of the churning of the sea of milk describes how the *devas* and *dānavas* (sometimes also described as *asuras*, or anti-gods) worked together to extract the elixir of immortality from the depths of the sea.[77] Viṣṇu plays a dominant and decisive role in several of the descriptions.[78] When the gods despair about their helpless situation against the *dānavas*, they seek help from Viṣṇu. Brahmā, leading the gods to the edge of the ocean of milk, praises Viṣṇu as "he from whose navel the lotus grows, which is the support of all the worlds", and the source of all life.[79] Viṣṇu advises them to cooperate with the *dānavas* in churning the ocean but also ensures them exclusive access to the elixir.[80]

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[76] See Jacques, "Les Inscriptions Du Phnom Kbal Spean (K 1011, 1012, 1015 et 1016)", 361.

[77] This event has been described in the Indian epic and *purāṇic* literature. V.M Bedekar distinguished six main stages in the myth, namely: The occasion for the story, the motive, preparations, the churning of the ocean, emergence of the elixir and other entities, and Viṣṇu's intervention in the fight for the elixir. See Bedekar, "The Legend of the Churning of the Ocean in the Epics and the Puranas: A Comparative Study", 7–61, 8–9. For descriptions of the myth see *Mahābhārata* 1.17.1-13, 1.18.4-14, 1.18.29-31, 1.18.34-41, 1.18.39 and 1.18.46-47 in Dutt (translator), *Mahabharata*, 38–41, *Rāmāyaṇa*, 1.44.8-27 in Goldman (translator), *The Ramayana of Valmiki - an Epic of Ancient India*, 209–211, *Matsya Purāṇa* 249.1-70, 250.2-4, 251.6-36 in Joshi (editor), *Matsya Mahapurana*, 349–353, 355, 359–362, *Viṣṇu Puraṇa*, in Dutt (translator), *Visnu Mahapuranam*, 37–46, *Srimad Bhagavatam* 8.5.9-25, 8.6.26-8.7.18, 8.8.36-8.11.48 in Bhanu Swami (translator), *Srimad Bhagavatam*, 62–63, 91–131 and *Agni Purāṇa* 3-3.12.16 in Dutt (translator), *Agni Puraṇam*, 13–18.

[78] Unlike other versions, in the *Matsya Purāṇa*, it is Brahmā who suggests to the gods to make peace with the *dānavas* and churn the ocean for the elixir. He also recommends that they use Mount Meru as the churning stick and Śeṣa the snake as the rope. Nevertheless, he urges the gods to ask Viṣṇu for his help in the task. See Joshi (editor), *Matsya Mahapurana*, 350.

[79] Bhanu Swami (translator), *Srimad Bhagavatam*, 493.

[80] Viṣṇu also helps transport Mandara to the ocean. In the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* he takes the form of a tortoise, on whose back the mountain is placed. In some versions the gods find Viṣṇu reclining on his left hand in the ocean of milk, attended

The *devas* and the *dānavas* churn the ocean using Vāsuki, the king of the snakes as the rope coiled around Mount Mandara, which acts as the churning stick. Many riches emerge from the depths, including the wish-granting tree Kalpavṛkṣa, Viṣṇu's gem the Kaustubha, Surya's horse Uccaiśravas, Indra's three-headed elephant Airāvateśvara, Lakṣmī, Viṣṇu's wife, celestial nymphs called Apsaras (abundantly featured on the walls in the Angkor Wat relief), and eventually, Dhanavantri carrying the vessel with *amṛta*, the elixir of immortality. With Viṣṇu's help, the gods partake of the elixir, defeat the *dānavas* and thus order is restored.

The reclining Viṣṇu images that are inscribed on the rocky surfaces at Kbal Spean ingeniously evoke the mythological narratives in which they are embedded. The carving that includes the three temple towers rests in a location where the water flows under the reposing god and the seated goddess, thus vividly recreating the mythological imagery of the deities floating on the sea of milk. Additionally, this carving set in the water also infuses the river with special meaning, prompting the viewer to envision it as the sacred ocean of milk. As the mythology illustrates, following the occurrence of a great deluge, Viṣṇu was reposing on the snake Ananta, floating on the primordial ocean. As the god plunged into a deep slumber, the world entered into a state of perfect equilibrium. When he awoke, he contemplated creation, and out of his navel, emerged a lotus on which appeared Brahmā, the god of creation.[81] It was in this state as Anantaśayana ("reposing on Ananta") that the gods found Viṣṇu when they approached him for help in the battle against the *dānavas*. Therefore, the reclining Viṣṇu component is in this context, the initial precondition of the Churning myth. The advice that Viṣṇu offered to the distraught gods set in motion the events that led to the emergence of the elixir and restoration of peace and order. A pediment carving at the 11th century temple Preah Vihear juxtaposes these two events drawing our attention to the link between them (Figure 7). On the lintel, Viṣṇu reclines on Ananta with Lakṣmī seated at his feet, and Brahmā on the lotus that has sprung from Viṣṇu's navel. On the pediment directly above this depiction, is the scene of the churning where the *devas* and *dānavas* hold the multi-headed Vāsuki who is wrapped around a pole resting on the back of a tortoise. Emerging from the base of the pole (and out of the waters) are Lakṣmī and Uccaiśravas. The positioning of the two depictions highlights the link between the two events and suggests the logical progression from one to the other.

The reclining Viṣṇu images at Kbal Spean and the Churning images at Angkor reflect a similar connectivity in both abstract and material forms. Two factors that need to be considered are the relative physical locations of Kbal Spean and the Angkor plains, and the directionality of the flow of the water from the Kulen area down to the plains. Both the reclining and Churning depictions were popular at Angkor and represented on numerous temples in varying sizes and scales. The bas-relief at Angkor Wat and the three-dimensional version at Angkor Thom are the

by Lakṣmī when they go to him for help. In other texts, the goddess is mentioned as one of the treasures that emerge from the churning ocean (a later stage in the story) and only then proceeds to choose Viṣṇu as her consort. See Joshi (editor), *Matsya Mahapurana*, 351, Dutt (translator), *Visnu Mahapuranam*, 39 and Dutt (translator), *Agni Purāṇam*, 13.

[81] See Menon (translator), *Bhagavata Purana*, 80–81.

Figure 7: On the 11th-century temple Preah Vihear, the reclining Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī are depicted on the lintel (below) while the Churning scene is portrayed directly above it on the pediment, highlighting the narrative link between the two motifs. Image courtesy: K. Samnang. 2023.

largest and most spectacular renderings (Figures 8 and 9).[82] There are abundant references to the Churning myth in the Khmer inscriptions, more often as a metaphor than a direct reference to the story itself.[83] Several of the important elements of the myth function as tropes for the king, for example, describing the king's ability to extract treasure from the earth, a possible reference to public works initiated by kings to increase agronomic productivity. The king is also likened to Vāsuki the churning rope in the myth, the firm and grand Mandara as also the ocean, the receptacle

[82] Angkor Wat itself has three reliefs of the Churning apart from the large bas-relief—on the pilaster of the cruciform platform, pediment of the north face of enclosure tower 1 and on the western *gopura* 4. See Roveda, *Images of the Gods: Khmer Mythology in Cambodia, Laos & Thailand*, 62, 63, 66. See also Narayanan, "The Monument 'visnuite' at the Musée Guimet and the Luminous Pillar", 257.

[83] See K. 713 (verse XIII), K. 809 (verse XVI), K. 806 (verses XVI, XXXII, XCVIII, CLXXII, CLXXXI and CCXLIII) in Cœdès, *Inscriptions Du Cambodge* I, 25, 43, 107, 119, 128, 129, 135, K. 35 (verse VII) in Cœdès, *Inscriptions Du Cambodge* Vol II, 34, K. 205 (verse XVII), K. 250 (verse VII), K. 445 (verse XIV, XVI) in Cœdès, *Inscriptions Du Cambodge* Vol III, 11, 101, 108, K. 905 (verse XX-XXI), K. 263 face C (verse XIX, XVIII), K. 288 (verse L, CIII), K. 289 (verse XCVI) in Cœdès, *Inscriptions Du Cambodge* Vol IV, 79, 134, 224, 229, 230, and K. 872 (verse IX), K. 834 (verse XLIX) in Cœdès, *Inscriptions Du Cambodge* Vol V, 102, 262. For an analysis of the historical connection between the Churning myth and the Teanh Prot, a tug-of-war game linked to rituals of rice cultivation in Cambodia see Sophearith, "Signficance of the Teanh Prot, Cambodian Tug of War", 6.

of riches. In addition, the king is compared to Viṣṇu, the central deity in the myth, with whom Śri chooses to reside permanently. There are allusions to "ocean of riches" and "ocean of ambrosia", with battles compared to the agitated ocean and the victories in the battlefield to the ambrosia. Indeed, when pieced together, Angkorian kingship itself emerges as an illustration of the myth.[84] The king who is successful in battle, steadfast in resolve, engenders and ensures the well-being of the state and who is perpetually blessed by the eternal presence of *Śrī*. In these ways, the king in turn is a personification of his kingdom.

The connective tissue between the reclining Viṣṇu and the Churning representations (at Kbal Spean and the Angkor plains respectively) is the flow of water that articulates the logical progression from one to the other. The movement of water acts like the directional arrows in a modern-day flowchart, signaling the reclining Viṣṇu as the source for the Churning and the riches that it produced. The elevation of the massif helped to situate the Kulen as the natural cascade point of the water distribution system. Flowing down from the sacred Kulen mountain and past

Figure 8 : The bas-relief depicting the churning of the sea of milk. Located in the southern wing of the eastern gallery, it extends 48.45 meters in length. As the gods and anti-gods vigorously churn the sea of milk, several treasures emerge from the depths including a host of divine beings called apsara. They are depicted in the relief as the dynamic dancing figures that float above the heads of the gods. Photo by author. 2005.

[84] Williams considers the popularity of this myth and its visual representations in the context of irrigation technologies and the use of natural resources, in South and Southeast Asia. Noting the prominence of the Churning images at Angkor she suggested that the Churning myth and its visual depictions functioned as a metaphor as well but one that referred in particular to the Tonle Sap lake as the source of Angkor's economic prosperity. See Williams, "The Churning of the Ocean of Milk: Myth, Image and Ecology", 231–233.

Figure 9: The largest depiction of the churning of the sea of milk is the three-dimensional representation flanking the gates of the city of Angkor Thom. The city was established in the late 12th century by King Jayavarman VII. These large sculptures of the gods and anti-gods radiate outwards from the city, portraying the temple of Bayon located at the center as the churning stick and the city itself as the emergent treasure. Photo courtesy: Robert Demming. 2001. "Angkor Thom South Gate - 54 demons and 54 gods depicting the "Churning of the Ocean of Milk"." Accessed February 7, 2025. https://rdemming.home.xs4all.nl/Travel/Cambodia/

the Viṣṇu carvings, the streams and rivers, swollen by the monsoon rains, makes its way down into the Angkor plains, filling the moats and reservoirs that encircle and flank the temples. There, on the walls of these temples, animated depictions of the Churning of the Sea of Milk erupt, capturing for posterity the moment when the treasures emerge from the turbulent sea. By committing the Churning images to stone, the imagery of longevity and good fortune (and indeed the longevity *of* good fortune) assumes permanent form.

The depiction of good fortune itself *is* good fortune, rising from the walls of exquisite temples, that in turn rise from the land punctuated by the flow of the river. In Angkorian art, the reclining Viṣṇu is most often depicted with Lakṣmī (or *Śrī* as she is also referred to in Khmer inscriptions) in the act of massaging his feet. In South Asia, the goddess Lakṣmī was known in the Brahmanical tradition since pre-Buddhist times.[85] The Śatapatha brāḥmaṇa (dated to roughly between the 7th–6th century BCE) contains the earliest myth that refers to Śrī as a goddess.[86] The meanings associated with the term *śrī* that appear in early Vedic literature namely well-being,

[85] Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Traditions*, 19.

[86] See Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Traditions*. 20. For the dating of the Śatapatha Braḥmaṇa see Witzel, "Early Indian History: Linguistic and Textual Parametres", note 13 on page 91 and 106.

prosperity, royal power and illustriousness were later related to the goddess Lakṣmī.[87] She is also associated with food, growth and fecundity. Further, Śrī is linked to the sap that generates plant growth, or more generally "the nectar (*rasa*) of creation".[88] On lintel carvings of certain Angkorian temples such as Banteay Srei and Prasat Kravan, the goddess is depicted seated on a lotus and being lustrated with water by elephants. The lotus flower in relation to the goddess is connected with creation, distilling "life-giving powers of the waters into embodied life".[89] In Khmer inscriptions that span nearly the entirety of the Angkor period, the word *Śrī*, sometimes explicitly called Lakṣmī, embodied all of these qualities in addition to temporal power, territorial expanse, military fortune of the king, and his ability to attract fortune and success.[90] Indeed, at times *Śrī* even deserts Viṣṇu, choosing to be with the Khmer king instead, in a way exemplifying her fickle nature for which she is known, but in this case as an illustration of the king's power and prestige.[91]

By the 5th century, Lakṣmī in South Asia was particularly linked with Viṣṇu, assuming the role of his consort or wife. In the description of the Churning myth in the *Rāmāyaṇa* there is no mention of Lakṣmī but according to several other versions of the myth, Lakṣmī emerges out of the ocean as one of the treasures. She then chooses Viṣṇu as her husband, with whom she resides permanently. Several sculptural depictions of the myth in Angkorian art include the figure of the goddess rising out of the ocean, often at the foot of Mandara, suggesting that the Khmer artists were aware of the later versions of the narrative. David Kinsley suggests that the Churning myth illustrates the process of refining the primordial waters in order to elicit the "essence of creative power".[92] Although this materializes as the elixir of immortality, he suggests that the goddess Lakṣmī is a metaphor for the elixir itself as she is linked with the essence that permeates all life, representing the "miraculous transformation of the formless waters into organic life".[93] Therefore the presence of Lakṣmī with Viṣṇu at Kbal Spean further highlights the narrative connection to the Churning depictions on the Angkorian temples located on the plains below. Moreover, her presence in the carving is emblematic of the very prosperity engendered by the water network

[87] Dhal, *Goddess Laksmī: Origin and Development*, 2–46 and Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Traditions*, 20.

[88] Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Traditions*, 21-22.

[89] Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Traditions*, 20–21).

[90] See for example K. 725 (verse IV), K. 713 (verse XIV), K. 809 (verse XXVI), K. 806 verses XXXIV, XXXVI, XLIII, L, LI, LIV, LIX, LXXII,-III, LXXIX, LXXXVIII, XC, CLXXVI–III, CLXXXI and CCXXXIV among many others), K. 669 (verse X, XXXVIII), K. 661 (verses XXIV and XL) and K. 692 (verses XXIV and XL) in Cœdès, *Inscriptions Du Cambodge* Vol I, 15, 26, 44, 110–113, 116–118, 128–129, 134, 175, 178, 210–211, 242, 245; K. 35 (verses IV, VII) in Cœdès, *Inscriptions Du Cambodge* Vol II, 33–34: K. 445 (verse IX) in Cœdès, *Inscriptions Du Cambodge* Vol III, 108; K. 905 (verses VIII-IX), K. 286 (verses XXII, XXXV, XXXIX), K. 263 face A (verse IX), face C (verse XVIII), K. 288 (verse XLIX), K. 287 (verses XLIX, LXVIII and XXI) in Cœdès, *Inscriptions Du Cambodge* Vol IV, 79, 97-100, 130, 134, 224, 242, 249, 252; K. 832 (verse IV), K. 339 (verses V, VII, XII), K. 702 (verse VII), K. 834 (verse LXXI) in Cœdès, *Inscriptions Du Cambodge* Vol V, 94, 168, 226, 265; K. 198 (verse I) and K. 191 (verse XV) in Cœdès, *Inscriptions Du Cambodge* Vol VI,149, 307.

[91] See K. 263 (verse XVIII) in Cœdès, *Inscriptions Du Cambodge* Vol IV, 134.

[92] Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Traditions*, 26–27).

[93] Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Traditions*, 27.

system spreading down from the Kulen to the Angkorian plains. The riches of the land—temples, palaces, rice-fields and all forms of life—are produced and reproduced by a complex system that coalesced economics, politics and theology. The mythological vocabulary encapsulated within the Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī carvings at the Kulen and the dynamic Churning images on the temples articulated and reinforced these intricate links.

Embedding meaning into materiality

Phnom Kulen was imbued with powerful memories that seeped into the materiality of the site itself. As Franciscus Verellen wrote in reference to the creation of sacred geography in the Taoist tradition in China, sacred sites are marked and conferred with sanctity "by recognizable objects, structures, activities and sensations".[94] The signification of a site can be marked by the accretion of myths and legends, as also physical phenomena such as inscriptions, architecture, or specific topographic features such as mountains and water bodies. Paul Mus noted that the belief in the spirits of the soil occupied a significant place within the animistic culture of Asia.[95] These impalpable energies were not just gods of a locality but were the locality itself. They were manifested in natural forms like a tree or a stone embodying the microcosmic territory and provided the worshipers a material focal point for rituals. These organic forms, believed to incorporate divine energies of the soil, were not just 'seats' of gods but the god itself. Mus notes that when people gave form to the soil divinity (even in subsequent icons that preserved these forms) "it was surely to the soil itself that they were trying to gain access", and divinized ancestors were the link between the community and the soil.[96]

The memories of important events and individuals were layered onto the natural form of the sacred mountains of the Kulen themselves, just as Mus argued with regard to the embodiment of spirits of the soil in trees, stones and other natural phenomena, with the abstract and the concrete becoming non-isolable. Even though Jayavarman II had moved back to the plains of Angkor in the 9th century, temples and infrastructure for the water network system continued to be built on the Kulen over the following centuries, repeatedly marking them as a locus of religious, political and economic importance within the Angkorian empire. The source of the entire water network in the Kulen was literally spilling over with meaning incorporated within intertwined abstract and

[94] Verellen, "The Twenty-Four Dioceses and Zhang Daoling: The Spatio-Liturgical Organization of Early Heavenly Master Taoism", 34–35.

[95] Mus, *India Seen from the East: Indian and Indigenous Cults in Champa*, 24–28, 38.

[96] In premodern times, images consecrated in Javanese and Balinese temples could also represent deceased ancestors. In Java, the remains of the body (bones) were stored in urns and small houses, and statues of the deceased that were erected became objects of worship. Willem Stutterheim argues that these were likely autochthonous observations, associated with ancestor worship that were separate from Hindu traditions. Inscriptional references from the 11th century as well as from the 14th century text *Nagarakertagama* seem to also suggest that elements of Hinduism and Buddhism were selectively adapted to address these beliefs in ancestral worship. See Stutterheim, "The Meaning of the Hindu-Javanese Caṇḍi", Stutterheim, "Some Remarks on Pre-Hinduistic Burial Customs on Java" , 79–88 and Soekmono, *The Javanese Candi: Function and Meaning*, 9–10.

substantive forms. For centuries, the Kulen remained an integral component of the extensive water distribution structure, and a site permeated with religious potency.[97]

Rather than operating as an inert canvas onto which objects are appended, the building of sacred structures and the insertion of memories invests landscape with meaning and purpose. In these ways landscape is comparable in form and function to an image or a text. The fact that the carvings are intimately cohered to the landscape itself, in some instances indivisible from it, calls attention to the idea of the part being indissolubly linked to the whole. The river springing forth from the depths of the massif also exemplifies this connection. The swirling water flowing over the carvings at Kbal Spean illustrate the relationship between the mountain and river, creating the impression that those images are both separate from and *in* the water, intrinsically and indivisibly melded together. The waters churn over the sacred images, carrying not only their metaphorical essences but also the entropic material grains and fragments of these icons down into the valley, feeding the moats of holy temples and the rice fields. Therefore, objects embedded into the landscape need to be understood as intrinsically connected to the landscape and not separate from it. Through its choice of location and selection of carvings, Kbal Spean on the Kulen embodies these complex combinations of autochthonous and localized beliefs: The belief in the veneration of royal ancestors and spirits empowered to bestow life and influence the prosperity of the land and its inhabitants. The invocation of ancestors by the Khmer kings, whether implicitly or overtly, either through visual or written forms, revealed particular political or social aspirations of those living sovereigns.

Phnom Kulen also supplied material to build the temples of Angkor. Stones quarried at the foothills of the Kulen, and possibly sent down waterways to the plains, were extensively used to construct several of the monuments of Angkor.[98] Given its physical proximity, the Kulen were an obvious source of raw material for the building projects, and the waterways a convenient means of transportation.[99] Nevertheless, the use of stones from a sacred site to construct sanctuaries for gods would likely have been viewed as an act of spiritual significance. Skilled artisans transformed the stone blocks from the Kulen into majestic temples. Gifted artists drew out the shapes of deities and skein of myths and legends from the raw surfaces. Through the act of consecration, the potency of the 'raw' material was further accentuated, new life invigorating its body. Several of the icons of gods and deities that were enshrined in these temples were also sculpted from stones quarried from the Kulen.[100] Even if unaware of the subtle networks of meaning, a devotee would likely have responded to the temple in ways that acknowledge and activate these interconnections; touching

[97] As it was evident from Tep Mei's and other contemporaneous descriptions in the 1960s, the Kulen continued to hold divine meaning for the local inhabitants.

[98] See Uchida, Ogawa, and Nakagawa, "The Stone Materials of the Angkor Monuments, Cambodia: The Magnetic Susceptibility and the Orientation of the Bedding Plane of the Sandstone", 411–426, Uchida and Shimoda, "Quarries and Transportation Routes of Angkor Monument Sandstone Blocks", 1158–1164, and Carò and Sokrithy, "Khmer Sandstone Quarries of Kulen Mountain and Koh Ker: A Petrographic and Geochemical Study", 1455–1466.

[99] Bas-reliefs on the 12th century Bayon temple appear to depict the quarrying and transportation of stone blocks.

[100] See Carò, "From Quarry to Sculpture: Understanding Provenance, Typologies, and Uses of Khmer Stones."

certain images or sacred accouterments, and physically perceiving to partake in that potency.

Not only were the Kulen positioned as the location from where the life-giving waters flowed into the rest of the kingdom, additionally, they were also marked as the site on which the Angkor royal genealogy was initiated. Years after he was consecrated, inscriptions cast Jayavarman II as the celebrated founder of the Khmer empire, and the event was decisively inserted into the ancestral pedigree of the Khmer kings. Phnom Kulen, already a sacred site, assumed additional importance because of its association with the imperial and spiritually potent acts accorded to Udayādityavarman's royal ancestor. By recording the names of his deceased parents in the Kbal Spean inscription, yet another ancestral memory and physical trace of Udayādityavarman was embedded onto the Kulen. Moreover, through the acts of recording both the Sdok Kak Thom and the Kbal Spean inscriptions, Udayādityavarman inserted his own presence onto the Kulen as well. Phnom Kulen thus rose to the status as the home of ancestors, including the forebear of the royal line. The enduring economic prosperity of Angkor could thus be given a religious exegesis: That the ancestors and sacred powers permeating the Kulen were the wellspring of life at Angkor. Through their divine intervention, the spiritual and corporeal needs of Angkor could be assured. The interconnected carvings of the reclining Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī and the Churning of the Sea of Milk, linked through the extensive water network system provided the vocabulary to express these religious beliefs and eco-political realities.

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