

References

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Early Theravādin Cambodia: Perspectives from Art and Archaeology

ASHLEY THOMPSON, ed.

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Theravāda Buddhism is a branch of Buddhism that has been practiced in mainland Southeast Asia from as early as the thirteenth century. Scholars in Buddhist studies, however, have raised questions on the definition and usage of the term “Theravāda.” Two important publications in Buddhist studies, *The Ascendancy of Theravāda Buddhism in Southeast Asia* (Prapod 2010) and *How Theravāda Is Theravāda? Exploring Buddhist Identities* (Skilling *et al.* 2012), brought significant attention to this Buddhist lineage. These two books trace how and where the term was derived and how it spread from Sri Lanka to Southeast Asia. The former, written by the Thai scholar Prapod Assavavirulhakarn, raises questions on the usage of the term and its historical and conceptual contexts. The latter is an anthology edited by a group of Buddhist scholars (Peter Skilling, Jason A. Carbine, Claudio Cicuzza, and Santi Pakdeekham). It covers the transformation of texts, literature, and religious practices from Sri Lanka to Southeast Asia. In the introduction, Peter Skilling questions the use of the word “Theravāda”: “Might it have simply been that South and Southeast Asians did not choose to identify themselves as Theravadin—that the term was not part of their everyday vocabulary?” (Skilling *et al.* 2012, xix).

A new anthology, *Early Theravādin Cambodia: Perspectives from Art and Archaeology*, edited by the Khmer art specialist Ashley Thompson, focuses on Khmer Buddhist material culture between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries. It consists of eight chapters written by art historians, archeologists, and cultural anthropologists in the field of Khmer and Southeast Asian art and architecture. Cognizant of the two books mentioned earlier, in the introduction Thompson carefully defines “Theravāda.” She compares and contrasts the practices of Mahayana, Vajrayana (Tantric), Tantric Theravāda, and Theravāda Buddhism in Cambodia. She also addresses the use of Sanskrit and Pali in inscriptions and in different canonical sources and liturgical verses. Thompson traces the development of Buddhist imagery and styles loosely into two periods: the early Middle Period (thirteenth and fourteenth centuries) and post-Angkor period (fifteenth to eighteenth century). She also thoroughly reviews each chapter of the volume in her own “Chapters” section.

Six chapters of the book (1–4 and 7–8) are written by art historians and anthropologists in the

field of mainland Southeast Asian studies. These chapters focus on stylistic analysis and iconography of Buddhist images and religious architecture. They utilize written textual sources, including inscriptions, manuscripts, and chronicles, to help identify the specific types of Buddhist traditions (i.e., Mahayana, Tantra, and Theravāda) that the temples and images belonged to. These materials span the end of the Angkor period (ninth to fifteenth century) to the occupation of Angkor by the Thai kingdom of Ayutthaya in the mid-fifteenth century. Each chapter links the development of prominent temple compounds (e.g., Angkor Wat and Bayon) and/or Buddhist images to other styles in places such as Ayutthaya (c. 1350–1767, Thailand), Pagan (849–1297, Burma), and Lan Xang (1354–1707, Laos).

In Chapter 2, “Angkor and Theravāda Buddhism: Some Considerations,” Hiram Woodward notes that the thirteenth century was a time of cultural shifts, reinvigoration, and reformation. The first part of the chapter focuses on the stylistic development and iconography of Buddha images dating to the seventh to twelfth century. The second part concentrates on temples in Lopburi (e.g., Prasat-hin Phimai and Mahathat). The author compares Khmer temples in Lopburi to those of King Jayavarman VII (r. 1182–1218) in Cambodia (e.g., Bayon). Woodward uses the term “Ariya,” which was inscribed in a fifteenth-century Kalyani inscription of King Dhammaceti (r. 1471–92) of Pegu (Burma), to identify a type of pre-reform Pali Singhalese Theravāda Buddhism in the northeastern region of present-day Thailand.

In his comprehensive chapter, “Reading and Interpreting *Jātaka* Tales during the Angkorian Period” (Chapter 3), Tuy Danel focuses on the representation of *jātaka* stories, particularly the Vessantara *jātaka*, during the Angkor period. He discusses whether *jātaka* were an expression of Theravāda Buddhist practices during the Angkor period. Danel first traces the representations of *jātaka* on terracotta reliefs and *simā* stones from the Dvāravati culture (sixth to eleventh century). He investigates the development and representations of *jātaka* on Khmer monuments and points out that *jātaka* first appeared on a relief on the north pediment of the eastern *gopura* at a Vishnu temple, Thammanon, dating to the reign of Suryavarman II (r. 1113–c. 1150). Two episodes of the Vessantara *jātaka*, which focus on the act of generosity, are adorned on two separate registers. In order to explain a Buddhist story being depicted in a Hindu temple, Danel suggests that the Dvāravati culture might have penetrated Khmer religious thought (p. 123). He compares and contrasts depictions of different *jātaka* in four other temples constructed in the Angkor Wat style. The latter part of the chapter examines the depictions of *jātaka* in temples in Burma, such as the Hpet-leik pagodas and the Ananda temple (134 terracotta plaques are dedicated to the Vessantara *jātaka*) in Pagan, and Borobudur (Indonesia). Danel utilizes both Sanskrit and Pali texts to support his analysis. He concludes that a focus on “extreme generosity and the renouncement of self” are the most celebrated virtues in Theravāda Buddhism, and “this may well have reflected the political-religious philosophy of the king who acts as the unifier of his nation” (p. 134).

In Chapter 4, “The Buddha Sculptures of Tham Phra (Buddha Cave): Implications for Under-

standing the Complex Religious Atmosphere of Western Thailand during the Early Second Millennium CE,” Samerchai Poolsuwan discusses the authenticity of these wooden Buddha images. He divides the images by stylistic appearance into four groups: Group I, Pala style (eighth to twelfth century); Group II, two standing crowned Buddha images (Angkor Wat style of the twelfth century); Group III, four standing Buddha images similar to Group II; and Group IV, four seated images of Buddha in *māravijaya*. He compares these images to other Theravāda sites and remarks that the wooden sculptures at Tham Phra provide a clue for understanding the religious and cultural atmosphere of western Thailand during the decades after the reign of King Jayavarman VII of Cambodia. They showcase the continuous existence of old Theravāda (Ariya Buddhism) beliefs in this region long before the new waves of Theravāda from Sri Lanka in the thirteenth century.

Chapters 5 and 6 are written by the archeologists Ea Darith and Sato Yuni. These two chapters cover recent archeological discoveries of temple structures, sculptures, reliefs, and ceramics in Cambodia. They broaden our understanding of ritual practices and the functions of Buddhist terraces in Angkor. While Darith studies thirteenth- and fourteenth-century sites near Angkor Thom, Sato focuses on Western Prasat Top in the southwest area of Angkor Thom. In his chapter, “A Brief Overview of Key Theravāda Buddhist Structures at Central Angkor from the 13th to 18th Centuries,” Darith categorizes terraces based on their functions into two main types: those with a Buddha image placed inside a congregational space (*vihara*), and Hindu and Mahayana structures reworked to serve the purposes of Theravāda Buddhism. Interestingly, Darith notes that only the important aspects of these structures were transformed, not entire monuments. One example is the modification of the eleventh-century Saivite temple galleries at Baphuon in Angkor Thom into a large reclining Buddha approximately 70 meters in length. Double *sima* can still be seen around the terrace (p. 197). Most terraces face east and are approximately one meter above the ground. The first type is commonly surrounded by eight *sima* stones at the cardinal and intercardinal points—a standard practice for Theravādin temples. Many objects were recovered in a terrace in Western Prasat Top, such as brown glazed roof tiles, Khmer and Chinese ceramics, Buddhist statues, and jewelry. Darith remarks that the structures are simple and unadorned with elements because they reflect “Theravāda ideology, economic and demographic factors” (p. 194).

Sato reports on important excavation and restoration done by the Nara National Institute for Cultural Properties, which was established in 2001. In her chapter, “New Evidence at Western Prasat Top, Angkor Thom,” she carefully examines the terrace of Western Prasat Top and dates it based on three main elements: the central sanctuary is built of laterite and sandstone, which dates to the early Angkor period; the decorative ornaments on the lintels and colonettes are stylistically related to tenth-century Bantaey Srei style; and the pediments are adorned with images of the Buddha and other motifs such as *kendi* and flowers, which date stylistically to no earlier than the fourteenth century (p. 210). While a white porcelain bowl was recovered in the central sanctuary, Chinese ceramics dating to around the twelfth century were found in the fifth layer of the terrace

structures. Various artifacts made of gold and bronze were found inside the bowl and were confirmed to be objects used in ritual ceremonies (p. 222). Stone post-Bayon-style Buddha heads, a relief representing the Buddhist triad (Buddha sheltered by naga hoods, flanked by Lokeshvara and Prajnaparamita), and *sima* stones were among the Buddhist artifacts recovered from the upper and lower bases of the temple. Sato divides the *sima* stones into five types based on their shape and decorative ornaments (p. 217).

Another interesting group of artifacts at this temple are the false doors on the western and southern sides that are decorated with standing and walking Buddhas, similar to the Sukhothai style in Thailand from around the fourteenth century. Even though brickwork was common during the pre-Angkor and early Angkor periods, bricks were not normally used for temple construction during the late Angkor and Bayon periods. Sato states that due to special circumstances, bricks were used at Western Prasat Top. Valuable artifacts (332 gold pieces [gold balls and non-decorated gold plates], lead glass beads, soda glass, quartz, bronze, and bones) as well as broken Chinese ceramics were recovered under the sanctuary at the site. This demonstrates that “after the ritual ceremonies had been accomplished after the 14th century, the brick structure was filled with sandy soil and then the northern sanctuary was built on top of it” (p. 222). Sato posits two hypotheses for the placement of the artifacts: a funeral ceremony such as cremation, or a Hindu or Buddhist ritual fire ceremony (p. 223). The last part of the chapter presents important inscriptions from a decorative sandstone block. On the basis of the artifacts and their artistic appearance, Sato concludes that Western Prasat Top had four usage phases. The Buddhist terraces can be dated to after the fourteenth century, and the southern and northern sanctuaries were reconstructed around or after the fourteenth century to the early fifteenth.

In Chapter 7, “Back to the Future: The Emergence of Past and Future Buddhas in Khmer Buddhism,” Nicolas Revire thoroughly examines the development of forms, art styles, epigraphy, texts, and premodern rituals of the future Buddha, Metteyya. He surveys the past and future Buddhas in both local Pali and vernacular literature. He compares and contrasts different types of Buddhas, namely, Esoteric Jina Buddhas from the eleventh to the thirteenth century, directional Buddhas (*dasadisabuddha*) from the Middle Period, the five Buddhas (*pancabuddha*), and the ten future Buddhas (*dasabodhisattva*) from the late Middle Period (c. seventeenth century onward). Revire remarks that artistic traces of the ten future *bodhisattvas* are extremely scarce in mainland Southeast Asia. These *bodhisattvas* were probably in vogue during the late Ayutthaya and early Ratanakosin periods (eighteenth century onward) in Siam. The *dasabodhisattva* texts were probably brought to Siam from Sri Lanka (p. 248). Revire concludes that “the emergence of the *pancabuddha* in ancient Cambodia was likely the local answer to the earlier esoteric *pancajina*” (p. 251). Revire remarks that although the cult of the past and future Buddhas is completely appropriated and integrated into local Southeast Asian religions and culture, further research will help point toward the sources of inspiration of premodern Khmer Buddhism.

In Chapter 8, “17th- and 18th-Century Images of the Buddha from Ayutthaya and Lan Xang at Angkor Wat,” Martin Polkinghorne catalogs more than three hundred Ayutthaya and Lan Xang Buddha images that were deposited in the south gallery of Preah Pean, at Angkor. Based on their style, the images can be dated to around the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Polkinghorne proposes that the large number of Buddha images that were brought from Ayutthaya and Lan Xang indicate that Angkor Wat was probably a pilgrimage destination for Theravāda devotees. Polkinghorne suspects that the ten images of the Buddha in *māravijaya* may have been offerings from Ayutthaya after its occupation of Angkor in 1431–32. The colonization period lasted around 12–15 years. More than 15 dedicatory inscriptions record the donation, commissioning, and restoration of the temple as part of merit making in the Buddhist tradition. Polkinghorne focuses on three different types and styles of Buddha images as evidence of Theravāda communities in Angkor Wat. He concludes that the importation of Buddha images in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries can be clearly considered as evidence of international relations. The images characterize Cambodia as holding potential for further research on trans-border material culture and locate it firmly within the context of regional and global history at the beginning of the modern age (p. 289).

Early Theravādin Cambodia is a scholarly book that not only reflects new approaches and interesting interpretations of Khmer Buddhist objects and archeology but is also a comparative study of Khmer material culture and the material culture of neighboring countries in mainland Southeast Asia. The book also provides excellent bibliographical sources for Southeast Asian and Khmer art, archeology, and architecture and Buddhist literature, history, and epigraphy. I highly recommend this book for graduate reading on Cambodian Buddhist art.

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