

THIRD EDITION

A History of Cambodia

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was the growth of Theravada Buddhism at the expense of state-sponsored and caste-enhancing Hindu cults. In the long run, this change had several ramifications. Brahmans retained their positions at court for ceremonial purposes but otherwise diminished in importance. The rich mythical and literary bases of Indian literature and iconography, reflected up to now in bas-reliefs, sculpture, architecture, and inscriptions, narrowed perceptibly to satisfy the more austere requirements of Theravada aesthetics. And Cambodian literature, like the local version of the *Ramayana*, came to be suffused with Buddhist values.

In terms of foreign relations, the most important development affecting Cambodia at this time was the weakening of its control over the people to the northwest of Angkor, in present-day Thailand. Although Cambodian cultural influence remained strong in the central plain (where the Thai capital of Ayudhya was to be founded in the fourteenth century), Cambodian political control diminished. Principalities that formerly sent tribute to Angkor, such as Sukot'ai and Louvo, now declared their independence. So did principalities in Laos and others to the south. Angkor was once again vulnerable to invasion from every direction but the east, as Champa was no longer a power to be reckoned with. A major Thai invasion, in fact, occurred toward the end of the thirteenth century.

ZHOU DAGUAN'S ACCOUNT OF ANGKOR, 1296–1297

The record by Chinese envoy Zhou Daguan of his stay in Cambodia in 1296–1297 is the most detailed account we have about everyday life and the appearance of Angkor.³⁶ Zhou's memoir is rich in circumstantial detail as he was not constrained by the Indian traditions that remove ordinary people from literary consideration. In his account, for example, we see Cambodians bathing, selling goods, and marching in processions. From our point of view, it is a shame that Zhou devoted so much of his short manuscript to exotic revelations of "barbarian" life. In fact, although he provided us with a newsreel—or perhaps a home video—of his stay at Angkor, our appetites are whetted for the feature film he might have made had he known (or cared) about the gaps that have persisted ever since in the historical record.

The account, in translation, runs to fewer than forty pages, divided into forty sections. These range from a short paragraph to several pages and, topically, from religion, justice, kingship, and agriculture (to name only four) to birds, vegetables, bathing customs, and slaves. Many features of thirteenth-century Cambodian life that Zhou described—including clothing, tools, draft animals, and aspects of rural commerce—are still observable today, and others—such as slavery, sumptuary laws, and

trial by ordeal—endured in modified form until the nineteenth century at least.

Five of Zhou's sections deal with religion, slaves, festivals, agriculture, and the king's excursions. Zhou found three religions enjoying official status at Angkor; they appear to have been Brahmanism, Theravada Buddhism, and Shaivism. The brahmans, Zhou noted, often attained high positions as officials, but he could find little else to say about them: "I do not know what models they follow, and they have nothing which one could call a school or a place of teaching. It is difficult, also, to know what books they read." The Theravada monks, known colloquially by a Thai phrase (*chao ku*), closely resembled their counterparts in Theravada Southeast Asia today: "They shave their heads, and wear yellow robes, leaving the right shoulder bare. For the lower half of the body, they wear a yellow skirt. They are barefoot."

Like the palace and the houses of high officials, Zhou tells us, Buddhist monasteries could have tile roofs, but those of ordinary people had to be made of thatch. Zhou was impressed by the simplicity of the Theravada Buddhist *wats*, noting that (unlike Mahayana temples in China) they contained "no bells, cymbals, flags, or platforms," housing only an image of the Buddha made of gilded plaster. Finally, Zhou described the method used to inscribe palm leaf manuscripts, which persisted well into the twentieth century, particularly in the case of religious and historical texts.

The Shaivites, whom Zhou called "Taoists," inhabited monasteries that were less prosperous than Buddhist ones, in which "the only image which they revere is a block of stone analogous to the stone found in shrines of the god of the soil in China." Although monastic Shaivism declined in importance after the abandonment of Angkor and eventually disappeared altogether, Indianized cults, including the use of *linga*, continued into modern times, and officials calling themselves brahmans continued to work at the Cambodian court, where they were entrusted with the performance of royal rituals and with maintaining astronomical tables. When monastic Theravada Buddhism is added to these two "religions," we note that the three categories for religious activity singled out by Zhou Dagan survived, in modified form, into very recent times.

Zhou's account makes it clear that many of the people living at Angkor were in some sense slaves, for he tells us that "those who have many [slaves] have more than a hundred; those who have only a few have from ten to twenty; only the very poor have none at all." He went on to say that slaves are generally taken as captives from mountain tribes, a practice that persisted into the colonial era. It seems likely, in fact, that this is the way Cambodian society built itself up, over time, gradually absorbing and socializing "barbarians," who figure in such large numbers in the inscriptions in Angkorean times. In Zhou's account, slaves were set apart

from other people by several prohibitions: "They can sit or lie down only underneath a house. For their work, they can ascend into the house, but then they must kneel down, join their hands together, and prostrate themselves. After that they can move forward." Slaves enjoyed no civil privileges; their marriages were not even recognized by the state. Forced to call their masters "father" and their mistresses "mother," they tried frequently to escape and, when caught, were tattooed, mutilated, or chained.³⁷

Although Zhou is informative about people at court and about slaves, he is vague about the proportion of society in the 1290s that was neither in bondage nor part of the elite. Clearly, the people with "a few" slaves would fall into this category; so would the private landowners, discussed in an earlier context by Merle C. Ricklefs;³⁸ and so would the Sino-Cambodians who were active in local and international trade. Special privileges were extended to the elite and to religious sects, and special prohibitions applied to slaves, but about those in between—the people, in fact, who probably made the kingdom prosper—we know far less than we would like.

When Zhou goes into detail, however, his account is often illuminating. His description of what he called a new year's festival, which occurred toward the end of November, is a good example of his narrative skill:

In front of the royal palace, a great platform is built, capable of holding a thousand people, and decorated with lanterns and flowers. In front of it, at a distance of one hundred and twenty feet, another platform is built, one hundred and twenty feet high by laying pieces of wood end to end. This is done in the same way as a scaffolding for Buddhist *stupas*. Each night, three, four, five or six of these are built. On top of them, rockets and firecrackers are attached. The cost of these is met by the provinces and by the noble families. When night has fallen, the king is asked to watch the spectacle. The rockets are released and the firecrackers lighted. The rockets can be seen [about a mile] away. . . . The festival goes on like this for fifteen days. Every month there is a festival.

This ceremony, probably observed by Zhou himself, appears to have been celebrated at the end of the rainy season, when the waters of the Tonle Sap begin to subside, setting in motion the first stages of the agricultural year. After the move to Phnom Penh in the fifteenth century, the ceremony became known as the water festival and was similarly marked by fireworks, floats, and royal patronage until the monarchy was overthrown in 1970. The festival was revived, along with the monarchy, in 1993.

As for agriculture, Zhou noted that three or even four rice harvests a year were possible—a statistic singled out by Democratic Kampuchea in its efforts to revolutionize production. It is unlikely that this abundance applied throughout the country, for at Angkor, several harvests were possible only because of the concentration of manpower there, the rich alluvial soil, and the water storage system perfected in the region over several hundred years. Another factor was the peculiarly helpful conduct of the Tonle Sap. According to Zhou's comments on the agricultural cycle's relationship to this beneficent body of water:

In this country it rains for half of the year; in the other half, it hardly rains at all. From the fourth to the ninth month, it rains every afternoon, and the water level of the Great Lake can reach seven or eight fathoms [approximately 50 feet]. The big trees are drowned; only their tops can be seen. People who live on the shores all go away to the mountains. Later, from the tenth month to the third [of the following year], not a drop of rain falls, and the Great Lake can be navigated only by small boats. . . . The people come back down at this point and plant their rice.

The "miracle" of the Tonle Sap amazed many subsequent travelers to Angkor. As long as the region supported a large population, the deposits left by receding water provided useful nutrients for the soil. Even after Angkor was abandoned, the lake remained the most densely populated natural fishbowl in the world, providing generations of Cambodians with much of the protein for their diet.

We would welcome the chance to interrogate Zhou Daguan about the working of agriculture at this time. For example, how was the rice surplus handled? Were cultivators for the most part free people or some kind of slaves? Did agriculture differ markedly at Angkor from that in other parts of the kingdom? How much land was in the hands of members of the royal family and how much was controlled by Buddhist *wats*? What did this control imply?

As we have no answers to these questions, we must be grateful to Zhou for what he gives us. His description of rural marketing, for example, could easily have been written about the Cambodia of today:

In this country, it is the women who are concerned with commerce. . . . Every day, a market takes place which begins at six in the morning and ends at noon. There is no market made up of shops where people live. Instead, people use a piece of matting, which they spread out onto the earth. Each of them has her own location, and I believe that fees are charged for these locations.

It seems likely, in view of Cambodia's trade with China, that many Chinese had by this time settled in Cambodia to engage in commerce. According to Zhou, the products exported by Cambodia in the thirteenth century were those that had been exported since the time of "Funan"; they were to form the bulk of Cambodian exports until the twentieth century. These were such high-value, low-bulk items as rhinoceros horns, ivory, beeswax, lacquer, pepper, feathers, and cardamom. Imported products included paper and metal goods, porcelain, silk, and wicker. It is unclear from Zhou's account how products were paid for, but it seems likely that some form of barter took place at the rural level, with Chinese coins and credit in circulation at Angkor and at the ports.

Zhou was fascinated by the king reigning at Angkor during his visit (Indravarman III, r. 1296–1308), but he seems to have been nonplused by the king's accessibility during his stay. Zhou observed the king five times.

Every day the king holds two audiences to deal with government affairs. There is no set agenda. Functionaries or common people who want to see him sit on the ground and wait for him to appear.

The king had reached the throne, Zhou remarked, in a curious manner:

The new king was the son-in-law of the former one [Jayavarman VIII]. Before assuming the throne, he was a general. Now the father loved his daughter, but she robbed him of his golden sword, and took it to her husband. Thus the king's true son was deprived of the succession. . . . [Indravarman] had this prince's toes cut off and hid him in a cell.

These events, which had taken place just before the Chinese embassy's arrival, are alluded to discreetly by some inscriptions that date from Indravarman's reign. One of them refers to the "old age" of Jayavarman VIII and a "host of enemies" inside the kingdom; another mentions that Indravarman shaded the country with his single umbrella, whereas no shade had existed before, under "a crowd of [such] umbrellas."³⁹

The transition between the reigns of Jayavarman VIII and Indravarman III, in fact, probably marked a sharp transition in Cambodian history, although we do not learn of it from Zhou Daguan. Under Jayavarman VIII in 1285, the last stone temple, the Mangalartha, was erected in the Angkor region. It was built by a high-ranking official and dedicated to Siva; the "single umbrella" to which its inscription refers may well have been Jayavarman's intolerant Hinduism. We know that Indravarman III was careful to sponsor Theravada Buddhists as well as brah-

mans, and it is tempting to speculate about a religious ingredient in his apparently nonviolent coup d'état.

The king's procession, like so much else in Zhou's account, gains in interest when compared with similar processions recorded in the colonial era.⁴⁰ It becomes clear in comparing the procession with the one marking Sihanouk's coronation, or other twentieth-century processions for which records have survived, that ceremonial Cambodian life and the hierarchical arrangement of such events changed little between Angkorean times and our own era. In Zhou's words,

When the king goes out, troops are at the head of the escort; then come flags, banners, and music. Palace women, numbering from three to five hundred, wearing flowered cloth, with flowers in their hair, hold candles in their hands, and form a troupe. Even in broad daylight, the candles are lighted. Then come other palace women, bearing royal paraphernalia made of gold and silver. . . . Then come the palace women carrying lances and shields, [and] the king's private guards. . . . Carts drawn by goats and horses, all in gold, come next. Ministers and princes are mounted on elephants, and in front of them one can see, from afar, their innumerable red umbrellas. After them come the wives and concubines of the king, in palanquins, carriages, on horseback, and on elephants. They have more than a hundred parasols, flecked with gold. Behind them comes the sovereign, standing on an elephant, holding his sacred sword in his hand. The elephant's tusks are encased in gold.

Zhou then described a royal audience of the sort that Indravarman conducted on a daily basis and closed his account by remarking superciliously, "One can see by all this that even though it is a kingdom of barbarians these people certainly know what a ruler is."

CHAPTER 5

Cambodia After Angkor

Probably the least-recorded period of Cambodian history falls between Zhou Dagan's visit to Angkor and the restoration of some of the temples there by a Cambodian king named Chan in the 1550s and 1560s. The two intervening centuries witnessed major, permanent shifts in Cambodia's economy, its foreign relations, its language, and probably—although this is harder to verify—the structure, values, and performance of Cambodian society. Evidence about these shifts that can be traced to the period itself, however, is very thin. When the amount of evidence increases and becomes reliable around 1550 or so, many of the shifts had already taken place.

Evidence from the period consists largely of Chinese references to Cambodia, for almost no inscriptions appear to have been carved, on stone at least, inside the kingdom between the middle of the fourteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth. Indeed, whereas over a thousand inscriptions have been catalogued for the years prior to 1300, less than a hundred more were carved in later centuries. Other sources include a Cham inscription and some from Thailand; two Thai chronicles from the seventeenth century, one of them very fragmentary, probably contain some accurate information about events in these two hundred years. The Cambodian chronicles that purportedly deal with this period appear to have been drawn for the most part from folklore and from Thai chronicle traditions, and unlike those dealing with events after 1550, they are very difficult to corroborate from other sources.

THE SHIFT FROM ANGKOR TO PHNOM PENH

The Chinese evidence is important, for as Michael Vickery has convincingly argued, the shifts in Cambodia's geographical center of gravity in the fourteenth century were probably connected with the rapid expan-