

THE ANGKORIAN WORLD

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and Damian Evans*

First published 2023

ISBN: 978-0-8153-5595-3 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-43926-6 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-351-12894-0 (ebk)

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DOI: 10.4324/9781351128940-19

The funder for this chapter is École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO), Paris.

ĀŚRAMAS, SHRINES, AND ROYAL POWER

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In his article ‘*Diversité et Rythme des Fondations Royales*’ (1951), Philippe Stern argued that the reigns of Angkorian rulers were legitimated by the sponsorship of three types of ‘major royal projects’, always implemented in the same chronological order: The first included ‘foundations of public interest’, followed by a temple dedicated to the king’s ancestors and then by the construction of a state mountain temple (Stern 1951, 651–54). Archaeological and ethnographic evidence strongly supports this sequence of foundation, especially for a number of the most important reigns in Angkorian history. For instance, this sequence of foundation characterises the reign of Indravarman I at Hariharālaya (Roluos). At the time of his coronation in 877 CE, he founded the Indrataṭāka, a reservoir measuring 3800 m long and 800 m wide, known today as the Lolei Baray. Subsequently, in 879, he dedicated the Preah Ko (Parameśvara) temple to his parents and grandparents. Finally, he founded his mountain temple, the Bakong, where he actually undertook a redevelopment of a pre-existing temple and installed the divine liṅga, Indreśvara, in 881 (Stern 1951, 662–63; see also Pottier et al. 2008; Chea 2018, 27–28). We will focus in this chapter on the first of Stern’s categories, the ‘foundations of public interest’.

In the Khmer context, ‘foundations of public interest’ immediately bring to mind the massive hydraulic works essential to the religious and economic lifeways of the great Khmer ‘cities’, including irrigation agriculture critical to sustain a tropical polity dependent on rice farming, especially in densely populated areas such as Angkor. In addition, the hydraulic infrastructure was integrated with a system of roads and bridges that formed a communication network, as already noticed by Lunet de Lajonquière (1911, XXI–XXVIII and map; Bruguier 2000; Hendrickson 2010). The sophisticated transportation system enabled the movement of administrators, soldiers, and goods across far-flung regions at any season. Indeed, the extent of the territory ruled by Khmer kings in the Pre-Angkor and Angkor Periods necessitated investments in infrastructure and novel institutional mechanisms to administer political control in the most remote regions of the empire (see Lowman et al. 2023, this volume).

Other more subtle but no less powerful measures were adopted by the Khmer kings to impress their seal on the whole of the territory. Certain distinctive classes of temples that were built repeatedly under royal patronage (which we refer to hereafter as ‘repetitive royal foundations’) encapsulated such strategies by inextricably merging the social, educational, religious, and the infrastructural, and they thus served as effective vehicles of acculturation.

Khmer rulers have often resorted to ‘repetitive royal foundations’ of various kinds to exert their authority. This tactic was not an Angkorian invention: as early as the 7th century, Citrasena, who ruled in Cambodia under the name of Mahendrarvarman between 598 and 610, installed about 20 Śivaliṅgas or representations of Śiva’s mount, the bull Vṛṣabha. The commemoration of both kinds of sacred objects, as found in K. 116 (Cœdès 1937–66, *IC* II, 134) and K. 377 (Cœdès 1937–66, *IC* V, 3), relied on very similar wording and they occurred both before and after the coronation of the king. These inscriptions have been found in Laos, Thailand, and the Kratie region of central Cambodia, and it is obvious that behind the solemn testament of the king’s piety lay a clear intention to signal his control over regions far from his capital of Sambor Prei Kuk.

This commissioning of repetitive foundations on a large scale was subsequently instituted many times over the course of Khmer history (Figure 15.1). The most famous examples are the fire shrines, which were evenly distributed along the ‘royal roads’ and probably associated with rest houses, and the hospital chapels founded by the king Jayavarman VII at the end of the 12th century. The stelae of Preah Khan of Angkor and Ta Prohm report respectively the foundation of 121 fire shrines and 102 hospitals throughout the empire (Cœdès 1906, 48; Cœdès 1941, 266; Hendrickson 2008). In both cases, these buildings followed a consistent architectural template (Figure 15.2) that facilitated their identification (Dagens 2005; Pottier and Chhem 2010; Swenson 2013). Although not all such establishments have been located, a number of these buildings, made of laterite and/or sandstone, have already been identified. Along the same lines, archaeologists have analysed numerous ‘*temples d’étape*’, once again following a standardised plan, founded at the beginning of the 12th century along the principal roads. Although the epigraphy provides little detail about their purpose, they clearly conformed to the institution of the repetitive foundation (Hendrickson 2011, fig. 1, 447).

Yaśodharāśrama

Since 2010, the Yaśodharāśrama archaeological project has conducted investigations on the first of the Angkorian repetitive royal foundations to extend across Cambodian territory beginning as early as the end of the 9th century: the āśramas or ‘monasteries’ of the king Yaśovarman I. The foundation of these hermitages is commemorated in inscriptions that provide valuable information on the religious and lay functioning of these institutions. Taking into account the geographical distribution of the hermitages, we may divide them into two categories: the first comprises the four monasteries founded at Angkor, while the second includes the ‘provincial monasteries’ distributed across the rest of mainland Southeast Asia, including in northeast Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and potentially southern Vietnam (Figure 15.1).

The epigraphic evidence indicates that they served as rest houses for religious pilgrims as well as dedicated spaces for spiritual retreat and education (see Bergaigne 1893, 355, 413; Cœdès 1908, 1932). The inscriptions also reveal that, far from serving as simple monasteries dedicated to hermits, the āśramas were richly endowed and played an important role in consolidating and disseminating state authority. In Angkor itself, they were dedicated to different religious denominations (Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, and Buddhist), and they were placed in charge of protecting and sacralising the first great artificial reservoir of the new capital, the East Baray. According to the inscriptions, the heads of the āśramas were responsible for celebrating ceremonies on the banks of the Eastern Baray. However, the irregular layout of the four Angkor āśramas: three along the southern bank and one near the northeastern corner, where the main water supply originates, seems to have been a strategic choice. Thus, their role may not have been only spiritual but actually to ensure the upkeep or at least monitoring of this hydraulic structure (Cœdès 1932, 99, 104; Chea 2018, 179). In the provinces, the inscriptions describe the foundation of 100 monasteries attached to the



Figure 15.1 Location of known Yaśodharāśramas, Virāśramas, resthouses, and hospitals of Jayavarman VII. Source: (GIS data of Angkorian roads, M. Hendrickson).

most venerable sanctuaries of the kingdom that most likely functioned as effective instruments of acculturation and dissemination of royal power (Estève and Soutif 2010–11).

Yaśovarman I followed the custom of welcoming and patronising all religions, a pattern of political tolerance of religious diversity that is recorded repeatedly in the epigraphic corpus of Cambodia from the 8th to the 14th centuries. But each monastery in the capital constituted an independent religious foundation dedicated to a specific religion: Vaiṣṇavism, Buddhism, and



Figure 15.2 Examples of a typical hospital chapel and fire shrine resthouse: a) Ta Muean hospital chapel; and b) Ta Muean Toch fire shrine, both built by Jayavarman VII in northeast Thailand at the end of the 12th century.

Source: (Photo D. Soutif).

likely two distinct streams of Śaivism, whereas each provincial monastery was affixed to a pre-existing sanctuary. Although dedicated to one deity, the provincial āśramas would welcome followers from any religious denomination, affirming a strong commitment to religious diversity and collaborative, inter-faith ritual practice (Estève and Soutif 2010–11, 331).

Only 20 foundation inscriptions have been found, and it has proven difficult to identify many of the 100 monasteries commissioned in the provinces. Compounding the issue is that some of these stelae were not discovered *in situ* and that many of these structures were likely made of perishable materials. The case of Jayavarman VII's hospitals provides a particularly illuminating comparison that allows us to better understand the āśramas as royal political and religious institutions. The chapels of Bhaiṣajyaguru (the healing Buddha) associated with the hospital complexes share a near-identical plan (Multzler o'Naghten 2011, 196), and the standardised inscriptions commemorating the foundations only varied in specific details relating to the size of the hospital and the location of the installation. The hospitals were generally located near a temple and a major town (Barth 1903). Twenty-five stelae and 61 chapels have been identified to date (Pottier, pers. comm.).

Prior to the excavations we conducted in Angkor, little was known about the physical layout and architectural configuration of Yaśovarman I's monasteries. Therefore, it became particularly important to determine whether the complexes were defined by buildings with common plans, as is the case with hospitals. If such a standardised architectural template could be ascertained, we could improve the likelihood of their archaeological discovery in the future as well as elucidating their function and social constitution.

The Yaśodharāśramas of Angkor

We will first examine the four āśramas in Angkor that have been identified with certainty and are the most studied to date: Prasat Ong Mong, dedicated to the Buddha; the Śiva hermitages of Prei Prasat and Prasat Komnap North; and the Vaiṣṇava monastery at Prasat Komnap South (see also Estève J. and D. Soutif 2010–2018; Chea 2018). The combined results of Pottier's remote sensing studies (2003) and of the archaeological campaigns conducted over the last eight years (Soutif et al. 2010–2018 and Chea 2018) reveal that each āśrama was installed in a large rectangular enclosure oriented east–west (375 × 150 m; Figure 15.3). Each of the four complexes was divided into two or three zones. A basin located to the east of the complex and slightly to the

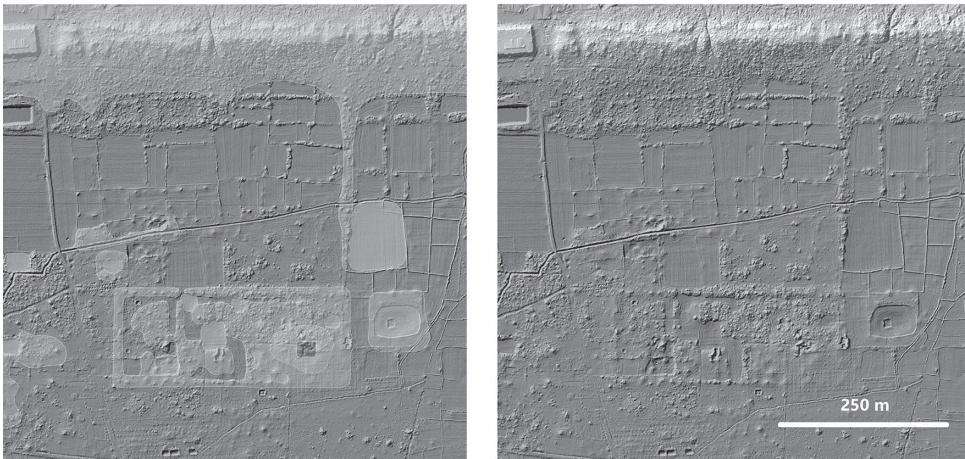
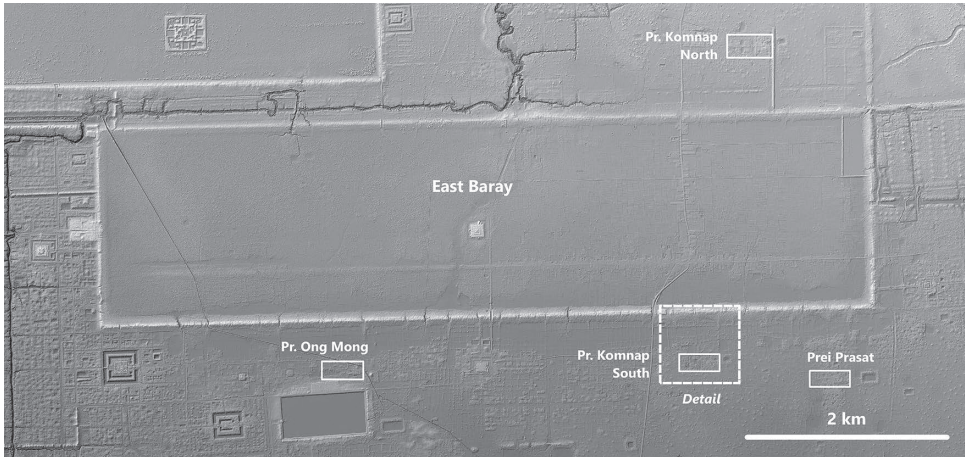


Figure 15.3 LiDAR image of Prasat Komnap South.

Source: (Lidar data KALC 2015).

north of the western access road completed the architectural ensemble. An elevated roadway situated at the northeast corner of the rectilinear compound walls established a physical link between the āśrama and the East Baray, thus facilitating movement by religious celebrants to perform ceremonies specifically prescribed in the inscriptions. In fact, Prasat Komnap North, which is situated near the northeast corner of the Baray, was connected to the Baray's northern dike by a causeway extending from the southeast corner of its enclosure.

The western and central parts of the monasteries were respectively dedicated to gardening and to domestic activities. The low mounds in the central zone constitute the remains of housing for āśrama residents and attendants, and in all likelihood workshops, as evidenced by the discovery of tools and slags. These sectors of the āśrama—sometimes gathered in a single and contiguous area as at Ong Mong—lacked permanent buildings in stone or bricks and lacked standardised architectural signatures that would permit easy identification as parts of an āśrama.

The eastern zone of the monastery is distinguished by two major buildings that clearly delineate the sacred space of the āśramas where worship, teaching, and manuscript conservation took place (Chea 2018, 166). The first of the two buildings consists of a laterite shelter with a square



Figure 15.4 Examples of stela shelters: a) Pre Rup; b) Prasat Ong Mong; and c) Kuk Ta Prohm.

Source: (Photos Yaśodharāśrama Research Program).

plan (about 3×3 m) open to the four cardinal directions (Figure 15.4). As Dumarçay pointed out (2003, 25), their shape may vary from one shelter to another and some adopt a slightly rectangular plan, as at Ong Mong, where it measures 3.70 m east–west and 3.20 m north–south (for the complete study of this shelter, see 2018, 287–95). Its structure is composed of four groups of three laterite pillars placed at each corner supporting a so-called *voûte en bonnet de prêtre* or ‘priest’s cap’ roof (see Trouvé 1932, 125). The shelter contained the inscription of the foundation, inscribed on a high, square-based stela. Such buildings have been identified in three of Angkor’s āśramas, the best example being Ong Mong, where it was intact at the time of its discovery by Marchal in 1920 (*JFCA* 2, 05/1920, 169–70). A stela has been found near Prasat Komnap Nord, but the ruins of the shelter are not visible (*RCA* 1932, 77–78). A contemporary place of worship established on the site prevents verification of the presence of the vestiges of a stela shelter. The same type of building has been found in Pre Rup, as well as at the four corners of the East Baray, the latter also housing a stela by Yaśovarman I (Bergaigne 1893, 432–525).

The second permanent structure, partially visible only at Prei Prasat, is a rectangular laterite building nearly 30 m long located southwest of the stela shelter. The building has access points on its east and west ends and a central room framed on each side by a lateral vestibule and an entrance porch of decreasing width. The entire structure is founded on a high pediment surrounded by a laterite paving (1932, pl. IV, 114; Chea 2018, 295–306). Discovery of a number of roof tiles in the vicinity of the building and evenly spaced concavities in the masonry indicate that it was covered by a tiled roof supported by a wooden superstructure. Although few remains are preserved at Prasat Komnap Nord, Trouvé reported similarities in the moulding of the preserved blocks from this site with the worked stones of the Prei Prasat building (*RCA* 06/1932, 77–78). In Prasat Ong Mong and Prasat Komnap South, GPR studies in 2010 revealed the presence of permanent constructions buried southwest of the stela shelter. The excavation campaigns conducted since then have shown that in both cases the preserved remains corresponded perfectly, in plan and construction technique, with the known layout of the Prei Prasat building (Figure 15.5a; Chea 2018, 300; Yaśodharāśrama Reports 2010–2015). Moreover, in Ong Mong and Komnap South, we proved that these buildings were contemporaneous and that their foundation took place during the first phase of occupation of the āśramas (Chea 2018, 202; Yaśodharāśrama reports 2010).

In sum, the stela shelter and the principal and elongated religious edifice occupied an important place both spatially and symbolically in the Angkor āśramas. Excavations carried out in the three āśramas located south of the Baray have also demonstrated that the sacred area included

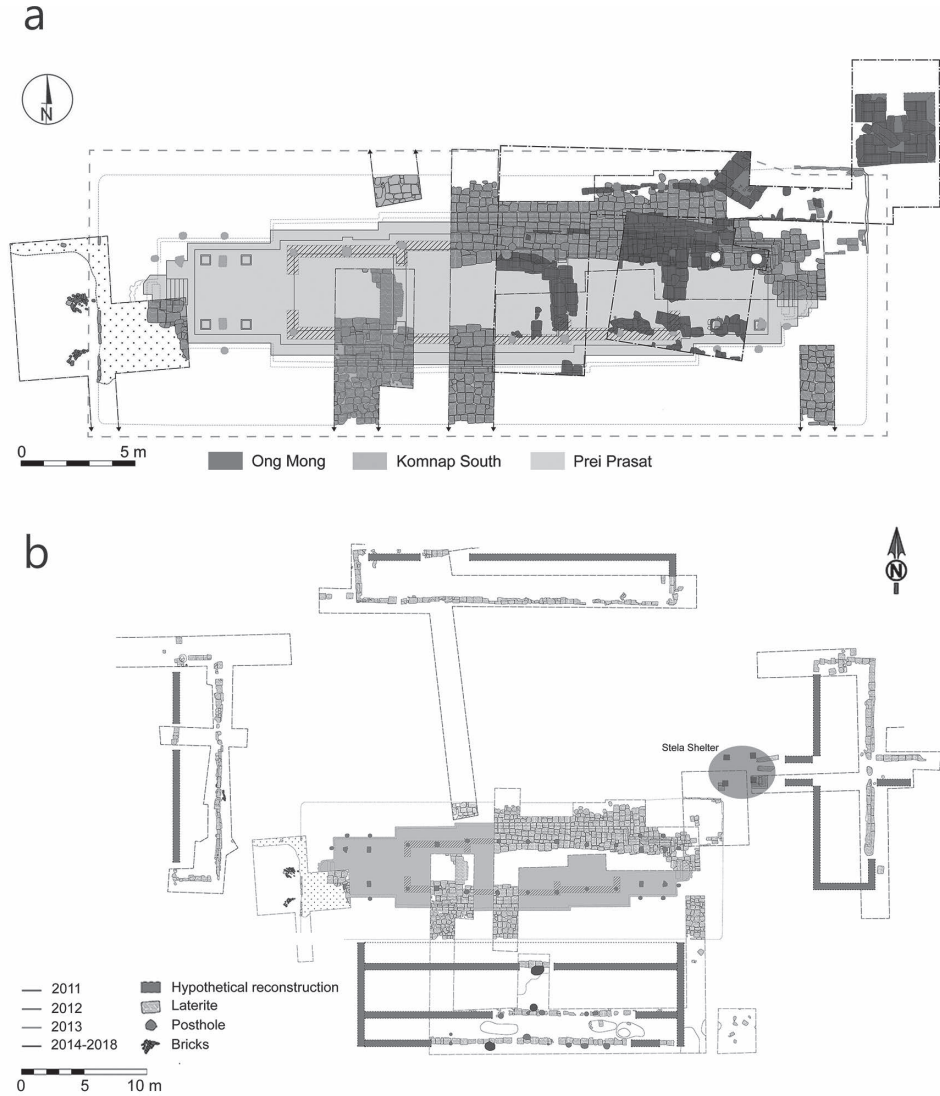


Figure 15.5 Reconstruction of the ‘Long Building’: a) the principal Long Building of Angkor’s āśramas based on an overlay of the excavation plans of Prasat Komnap South and Prasat Ong Mong with Trouvé’s plan of Prei Prasat (Image Yaśodharāśrama Research Program; CAD by Chea S.); b) Prasat Komnap South, simplified plan of the Western Part of the monastery.

Source: (Image Yaśodharāśrama Research Program; CAD by Y. Prouin & Chea S.).

several very long rectangular annex buildings built of wood and covered with tiles. These buildings are easily identifiable because their foundations are delineated by an alignment of laterite blocks (of one or two courses) in which post holes were cut to accommodate the posts supporting the floor and the wooden superstructure. Blocks were placed on their sides to mask the subfloor space below the elevated wooden planks forming the actual floor of the edifice. Given the laterite foundations, we refer to these structures as ‘semi-permanent buildings’ (Chea 2018, 321–22 and Yaśodharāśrama reports 2012–2018). They formed a kind of enclosure interrupted

at the corners around the two more prominent masonry buildings (Figure 15.5b). These structures are reminiscent of the proto-galleries of temples built in the middle of the 10th century at Pre Rup; the overall plan of the sacred area is clearly centred on the stela shelter since the main door of the 'enclosure' surrounding the shelter—in the centre of the eastern annex building—provides direct access to the stela shrine. This particular configuration appears to have defined the aesthetic and architectural style of Yaśovarman I's monasteries.

The Āśramas of the Provinces

We now consider the provincial āśramas identified by the discovery of foundation inscriptions. An important objective of our research is to ascertain whether they were defined by comparable layouts, similar infrastructures, and parallel occupation histories, as has been documented at the four principal āśramas in Angkor.

The provincial foundation inscriptions are less precise than the Angkor commemorations and suggest that they served mainly as resthouses and possibly as places of religious instruction. Another important difference from Angkor's āśramas is that the provincial examples are directly connected to a temple and therefore did not operate independently. Furthermore, the combined epigraphic evidence from the provincial āśramas indicates that they were not as richly endowed or as tightly integrated with the centralised political apparatus.

Most of the sites where the provincial inscriptions have been discovered served as important sanctuaries that were founded long before the reign of Yaśovarman I, often during the Pre-Angkor Period. The āśrama dedicated to Bhadrēśvara, the god of Wat Phu, provides an especially famous example (Estève and Soutif 2010–11, 351). An important exception is the Preah Ko temple at Hariharālaya (Roluos) where Yaśovarman I settled a monastery according to inscription K. 323 (Bergaigne 1893, 376). This can be explained by the fact that he maintained a special relationship to this temple dedicated to his grandparents, which likely explains this particular foundation (see list in Chea 2018, 101).

Placement of provincial āśramas near pre-existing and especially sacred temples reveals Yaśovarman I's policy to impose his authority over the most venerable places of his kingdom (Estève and Soutif 2010–11; see Figure 15.1). Identifying the locations of the provincial monasteries would therefore prove valuable in creating both a map of Yaśovarman I's territory and a map of the principal religious centres of 9th-century Cambodia. Thus, in the absence of inscriptions, the detection of replicated architectural units, similar to the standardised layout of the monasteries in the capital, would provide the only means to identify provincial āśramas.

Currently, no large rectangular enclosures similar to those discovered in Angkor are known near any of the Yaśodharāśrama sites. Similarly, as no excavations have taken place, it remains unclear whether semi-permanent annex buildings surrounded the main religious edifices of the provincial āśramas. Of course, the presence of a stela shelter would serve as a good indicator of the presence of such monasteries, but comparable shelters are quite rare. Kuk Ta Prohm, an isolated site in Kampong Cham province, is the only well-preserved shelter identified in the provinces (see Figure 15.4). This structure is indeed comparable to the stela shrines of the capital, even if the corner pillars are fitted together differently and not in one piece. However, nothing comparable to Angkor's āśramas is visible around Kuk Ta Prohm's stela shelter. Moreover, the shape and dimensions of the stone of the foundation inscriptions outside Angkor are so different that it would be unsurprising if they were housed in a different kind of structure entirely. In other words, the shelters in the capital were designed to house the tall, narrow, four-sided inscriptions of Angkor, and they would have poorly accommodated the two-sided stelae of the provincial āśramas. While the Angkor inscriptions are engraved on high square-based pillars and

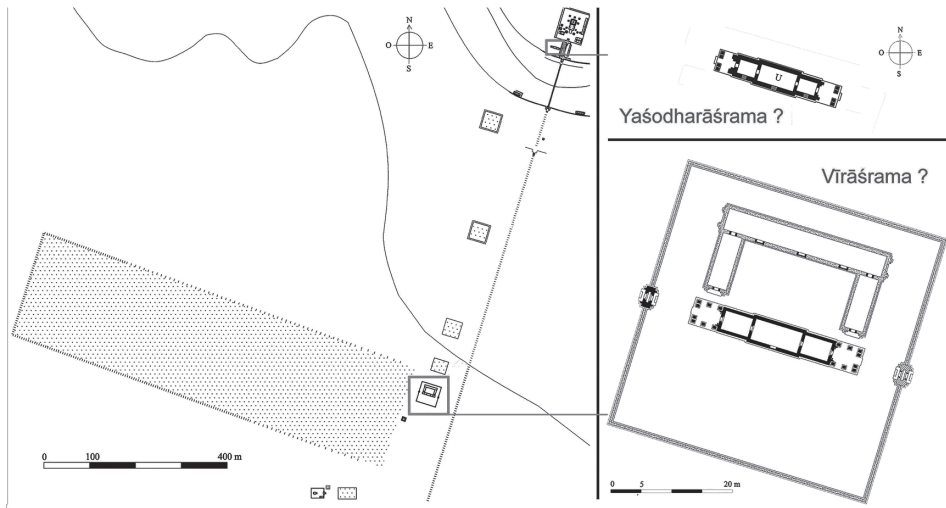


Figure 15.6 Plan of Prasat Neak Buos illustrating the location of the potential Yaśodharāśrama and Vīrāśrama.

Source: (Based on Parmentier 1939, pl. XVII & Bruguier and Lacroix 2013, 456, 459, 462, pl. 80, 82, 83).

use only characters newly imposed by the king, the ‘digraphic’ inscriptions commemorating the foundation of the āśrama in the provinces are inscribed on flat rectangular stelae decorated with a truncated bracing apex. On the flat provincial stelae, the text is repeated on both sides, one in the new alphabet—which was to fall into disuse—and the other using the ‘classical’ alphabet, which is still in use today. The dual alphabets likely served a didactic purpose to transmit a new writing system to the most remote provinces of the empire (Estève and Soutif 2010–11, 342).

A number of buildings similar to the 30-m-long Long Building identified in the Angkor āśramas have been reported in direct proximity to venerable sanctuaries in the provinces. The provincial monastery of Prasat Neak Buos, the ‘western foot of Śiva’ founded during the Pre-Angkor Period, provides one excellent example. The āśrama foundation inscription K. 346 (Bergaigne 1893, 378) was recovered near the building designated ‘U’ by Parmentier (1927, 172; Figure 15.6). This structure dates between the 9th and 10th centuries and is similar in shape and size to the Long Buildings of the Angkor āśramas. A similarly shaped building is also found at Houay Tomo, an important temple located near Wat Phu on the east bank of the Mekong in Laos. Houay Tomo is a Pre-Angkorian sanctuary that also remained in operation throughout the Angkor Period. The Long Building is extremely ruined, but the slab with a mortise that contained the inscription K. 362 (Bergaigne 1893, 389) is still visible (Nalesini 2000, fig. 1, building C). Finally, we find the same structure—but in sandstone—at Wat Phu, one of the oldest and most venerated temples in ancient Cambodia. The origin of the āśrama foundation stela associated with Wat Phu remains unknown, but the presence of an āśrama of Yaśovarman at this temple has been substantiated by the discovery of the two sets of inscriptions found a few kilometres from this important site. They both mention Bhadrēśvara, the tutelary divinity of Wat Phu (K. 1005; Estève and Soutif 2010–11). It is especially noteworthy that each of these three buildings occupies a singular place: to the south of, and perpendicular to, the eastern access road that runs outside the temple.

These spatial and architectural commonalities suggest that Yaśodharāśramas of the provinces included buildings with common characteristics. It is interesting to note that the Long Building finds parallels with the later repetitive foundation of Jayavaman VII, and the latter clearly followed an ancient

tradition. Although the Long Buildings are not all made of the same material, they conform to a specific configuration, thus supporting our general hypothesis. Indeed, Jayavarman VII's hospital chapels and fire shrines exemplify how different building materials could be used in construction, as long as the general plan remained identical. Furthermore, it is possible that not all of the 100 āśramas in the provinces and celebrated in the inscriptions were built or that many were simply constructed of perishable materials, as may have been the case with some of Jayavarman VII's foundations. It should be noted that a temporary building made of perishable material seems to have been initially installed at Prasat Ong Mong during the initial construction phase of the monastery (Chea 2018, 208). Of course, as with the architectural remains of masonry buildings excavated at Komnap South and Ong Mong, it is possible that the remains of largely destroyed provincial monasteries remain buried and out of sight. Future excavations are clearly needed to test our hypothesis, but epigraphic analysis provides some additional clues on the location and function of these important buildings.

Long Buildings as Rājakuṭi

The discovery of several statue pedestals in the immediate vicinity of the Long Building at the Prei Prasat āśrama in Angkor strongly suggests that these elongated structures served as the monastery's principal cult compounds, similar to the majority of masonry buildings in the Pre-Angkor and Angkor Periods. The inscriptions support this hypothesis. The foundation stelae of Angkor's āśramas provide a precise list of the personnel assigned to the monasteries, including the guardians of the 'royal cell' (*rājakuṭi*). Cœdès and Barth assumed that this building corresponded to a pavilion intended to welcome the king for 'a kind of spiritual retreat' (Bergaigne 1893, 375, n. 2), but our archaeological investigations and epigraphic analysis cast doubt on this argument.

The inscriptions indicate that the *rājakuṭi* required two guardians, the only such positions mentioned among the monastery staff. Therefore, this structure must have constituted the most sacred place in the monastery. According to Louis Renou's dictionary, *Kuṭi* refers to 'a hut, a shed', and thus a small place of residence. These texts also reference this term to designate the cells of the religious community (Cœdès 1932, 92, 103). In fact, this word is still used today in Cambodia to refer to the housing of monks in pagodas. However, it can also refer to a 'chapel' in the inscriptions and therefore to a sanctuary or residence of a god (Chea 2018, 144; Pou 2001a, 39, n. 2).

The Khmer section of the inscription K. 349 reports that in 954, the king Rājendrarvarman commissioned a high dignitary to make 'the brick foundations' in the *vrah kuṭi* of the Yaśodharāśrama at Śivapāda, the monastery founded by Yaśovarman at Prasat Neak Buos (IC V, 108, 110–111). The text is somewhat vague but most likely refers to a dedication ritual indicating that the designated building served as a sanctuary and not as a simple cell (Chea 2018, 144, n. 136).

In Cambodia, the term *vrah* refers to a sacred being or object and is employed indiscriminately to designate the king, a divinity, a sanctuary, or a statue (Pou 2004, *s.v.*). Therefore, it seems likely that the compound *rāja-kuṭi* represents only a transposition of the Khmer expression *vrah kuṭi* and referred to a 'sacred' or 'royal' 'chapel' founded by the king rather than an actual 'royal cell'. In the end, we hypothesise that this 'royal chapel' corresponds to none other than the elongated cult building of the monasteries of Yaśodharāśrama, the only permanent building common to Angkor's āśramas and to at least three of the provincial monasteries described previously.

Thus, beginning at the end of the 9th century, the repetitive royal foundations of Yaśovarman included structures built on the same plan, easily recognisable to travellers and signalling both the piety of the king and his dominion over the region. This conclusion raises an important point: Yaśovarman was not the only king to order the construction of āśramas, even if no other ruler commissioned as many, at least according to the sources at our disposal. In the following section, we evaluate the epigraphic evidence to determine whether the āśramas founded in other reigns were also marked by specific and specialised buildings.

Vīrāśrama

The foundation stela of Saugatāśrama (K. 290), the Buddhist āśrama of Angkor, now known as Prasat Ong Mong, proves especially valuable in identifying later royal monasteries postdating Yaśovarman's reign. It is unusual because it bears not only the original Sanskrit text commemorating its foundation and establishing its rule but also two later Khmer texts inscribed on its base. In fact, these texts confirm that this monastery was still in operation during the 11th century under the reign of Sūryavarman I and that it was still prestigious enough for a sovereign to make a generous donation. An excerpt from this inscription reads as follows:

927 śaka [1005 CE], second day of the waxing moon of Vaiśākha, Saturday, New Year's Day, H.M. Śrī Sūryavarmadeva orders the building of the saint Vīrāśrama, . . . This holy Vīrāśrama and all the supplies, H.M. Sūryavarmadeva assigns to the holy Saugatāśrama.
(IC III, 231)

The mention of a Vīrāśrama, 'the āśrama of heroes', conferred upon the Saugatāśrama is clearly significant and prompted a search of other occurrences of this particular compound. Excavations carried out at Prasat Ong Mong corroborate the fact that the monastery was occupied for several centuries (Chea 2018, 324).

The inscription K. 381 of Preah Vihear also reports the foundation of a *vīrāśrama* by Sūryavarman I in 1002. Cœdès notes: '[this *vīrāśrama* corresponds] probably to the so-called "palace" on which the inscription is engraved' (IC VI, 255), since it is inscribed on the south pedestal of the west gate of 'Palace H' in the third enclosure. Whatever the function of this building, it was engraved on a particular edifice that was U-shaped in plan (Bruguier 2013, 545, pl. 99). It is significant that several such U-shaped structures, enclosed by a Long Building and incorrectly identified as 'palaces', have been documented in several sanctuaries of the Angkor Period (Bruguier and Lacroix 2017).

Two other occurrences of *vīrāśrama* are found in the inscription K. 342 of Prasat Neak Buos, again attributable to Sūryavarman I (l. 11–14; 1008 CE; IC VI, 236). It commemorates a royal donation, including rice provisions, expected to 'go down to the Vrah Vīrāśrama' (*cuḥ ta vrah vīrāśrama*) in order to 'feed religious saints studying in Vrah Vīrāśrama'. The expression *cuḥ ta vrah* provides a valuable clue on the location of this complex, since Prasat Neak Buos is located on the lower slopes of the Dangrek. In fact, a U-shaped monument similar to that of Preah Vihear is located directly below the main temple, corroborating the downslope location indicated in the inscription (Figure 15.6). Therefore, it is particularly tempting to identify the U-shaped building at Prasat Neak Buos as our Vīrāśrama. This inscription also sheds light on the responsibilities and function of these institutions that received offerings from Sūryavarman. In the case of Prasat Neak Buos, it indeed served as a monastery that welcomed students, religious experts, and scientists. Similar to the āśramas of Yaśovarman I in Angkor, they thus formed places of study and religious retreat. An 'inspector of the Vīrāśrama' is also mentioned in the inscription K. 353 of Prasat Kantop. However, given the proximity of this sanctuary and Prasat Neak Buos, Cœdès rightly considered that it was the hermitage located at the foot of the hill of Prasat Neak Buos discussed previously (IC V, 134, n. 1).

Another *vīrāśrama* is mentioned in a list of toponyms in the inscription K. 194 of Phnom Sandak (face B, col. IV, l. 22; Cœdès and Dupont 1943, 152). Given the proximity of Preah Vihear and Phnom Sandak and the similarity of their inscriptions (Cœdès and Dupont 1943, 134–135), it would first seem that these two *vīrāśrama* refer to the same site. However, a site called Prasat Kon Chen containing the same U-shaped and elongated buildings as Prasat Neak Buos and Preah Vihear is located just at the base of the hill that hosts the sanctuary of Phnom Sandak (Bruguier 2013, 422–423, pl. 72; Chea 2018, ill. 78–81, p. XXXVIII–XXXIX). In

light of the joint topographic and architectural evidence, we argue that this site is none other than the *vīrāśrama* of inscription K. 194 and that it also served as a monastery allocated by Sūryavarman I to Phnom Sandak. With these monasteries: the Prasat Kon Chen and the buildings located in Prasat Neak Buos and Preah Vihear, all with a U-shaped plan, we can identify a more recent repetitive foundation of āśramas attributable to Sūryavarman I (Figure 15.1), one that was also based on the construction of standardised permanent buildings designed to accommodate devotees dedicated to study and worship.

If this hypothesis is right, it is surprising that unlike Yaśovarman, Sūryavarman did not wish to associate his name with these royal foundations. However, as Saveros Pou explains in her discussion of the *vīrāśrama* of K. 290 (Ong Mong), ‘the first queen [of Sūryavarman] was named Vīralakṣmī’, and it deserves consideration that the monasteries were named in her honour (Pou 2001b, 323). The name of this repetitive royal foundation would thus have been formed to pay homage to this first queen.

Similar to Yaśovarman’s āśramas, Sūryavarman’s monasteries were apparently assigned to large pre-existing temples or monasteries and sometimes to the same institutions that Yaśovarman had already endowed, as in the case of the Prasat Neak Buos. It is impossible to determine whether these foundations were intended to replace or supplement those of Yaśovarman I in the provinces. At Angkor, on the other hand, it seems that the *vīrāśrama* was in one way or another associated with the *Saugatāśrama*, which clearly shows that at least one of Angkor’s āśramas had joined the list of major Khmer religious foundations that successive sovereigns were committed to maintain. The inscription K. 277 mentions a donation made by Yogīśvarapaṇḍita, guru of Sūryavarman I, to the ‘Royal Foundations of the neighbourhood and to the four āśrama’ (l. 31–34; *IC IV*, 160). The four āśrama’ most likely refer to Yaśodharāśrama’s original monasteries built around the Eastern Baray.

It should be noted that the diagnostic U-shaped edifice also characterises several large shrines, especially Prasat Khna, located in the province of Preah Vihear, which housed a Long Building of the same type as the āśramas of Yaśovarman (Figure 15.7; Bruguier 2013, 135). No inscription can confirm that these were the actual monasteries, but future excavations are designed to test this hypothesis. The epigraphic record proves that Prasat Khna was an important sanctuary, and if confirmed archaeologically, it would highlight the long-lasting prestige that this particular temple enjoyed.

Concluding Thoughts

Our hypothesis is that the *Vīrāśramas* were built where the provincial āśramas of Yaśovarman were settled. The construction of these repetitive foundations required a considerable investment of labour and resources, especially as they were built in accordance with a standard imposed by the royal authorities. In any event, the āśramas clearly differ from simple and reclusive ‘hermitages’, as the term ‘āśrama’ has often been translated and understood. The monasteries of Yaśovarman and later rulers were not intended to simply accommodate world-renouncing hermits. While it seems that these monasteries welcomed renouncers into their community (Chea 2018, 137), their vocation was much more extensive, including the preservation and transmission of knowledge, as indicated by the rules specified in the inscriptions and the considerable resources owed to the different monasteries.

The inscriptions reveal names of other kings who were also associated with āśrama foundations (Indravarman/Indrāśrama, Rājendravarman/Rājendrāśrama), but they are too few and isolated to determine whether they formed part of large-scale building programs with similarly standardised structures. We are confident that future research on these repetitive royal foundations will make it possible to identify further examples of specialised buildings annexed to the most sacred sanctuaries of ancient Cambodia.

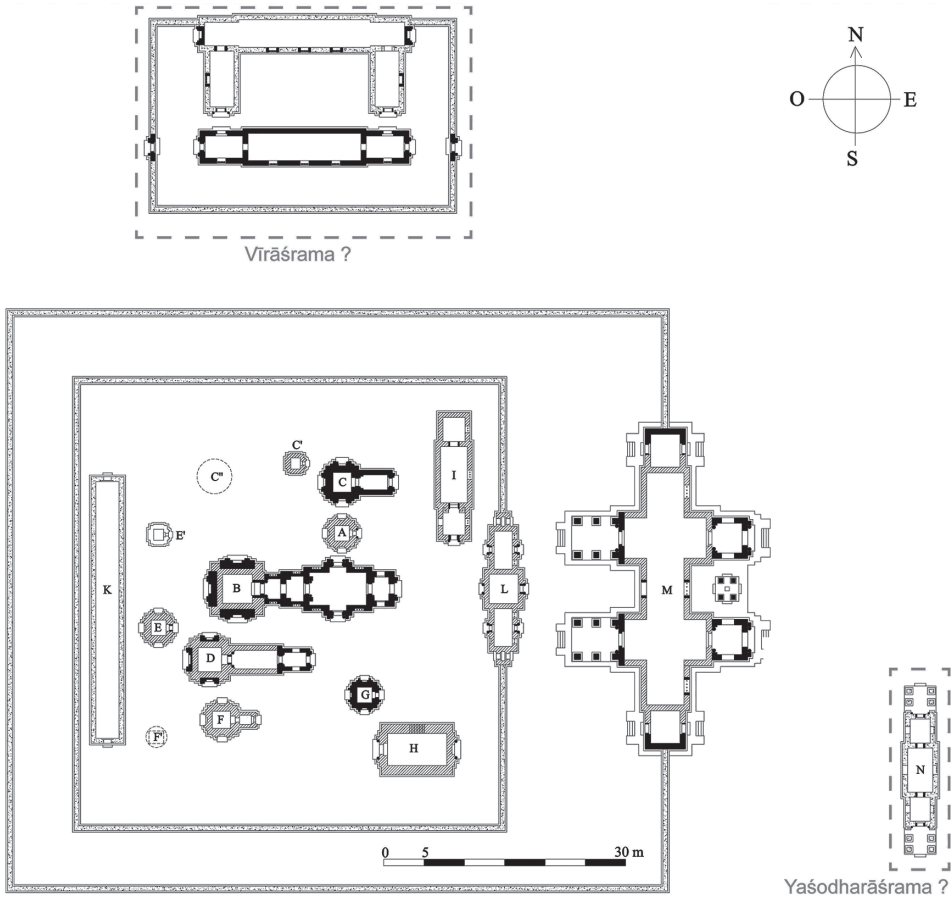


Figure 15.7 Plan of Prasat Khna illustrating the location of the potential Yaśodharāsrama and Virāsrama.
 Source: (Based on Parmentier 1939, pl. XXVII & Bruquier and Lacroix 2013, 135, pl. 19).

An analysis of the two traditions of royal repetitive foundations considered in this chapter has significantly improved our understanding of how Angkorian regimes attempted to centralise power in the provinces through the foundation of religious institutions. In addition, the epigraphic and archaeological study of such institutions will shed valuable new light on how macroscale political and religious policies shaped daily life and material culture in ancient Angkor.

List of Inscriptions in the Text

K.	Reference
116	IC II, 134
194	Cœdès and Dupont 1943, 134
277	ISC, 97; IC IV, 155
290	Cœdès 1908, 203; IC III, 231
323	ISCC, 391
342	IC VI, 236

K.	Reference
346	ISCC, 378
349	IC V, 108
353	IC V, 133
362	ISCC, 389
377	IC V, 3
381	IC VI, 255
1005	Estève and Soutif 2010–11

IC = Inscriptions du Cambodge; Cœdès 1937–66.

ISC = Inscriptions sanscrites du Cambodge; Barth 1885.

ISCC = Inscriptions sanscrites de Campā et du Cambodge; Bergaigne 1893.

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