“Angkor Wat: Hinduism, Politics and Prestige” by Tasmin Hong

This undergraduate article from the Australian National University provides a useful model of a straightforward, clearly written essay – something to keep in mind when you start preparing the final essay for this course. Notice how the author provides a neat overview of her points in the opening section; elaborates with supporting points and evidence in the body of the essay (carefully footnoting her material throughout); then sums up, reiterating her main points in conclusion.

As you read it, please pay attention to what Hong tells us about how Suryavarman II used religious iconography to support and enhance his political position, so that we can discuss the specific ways in which he achieved this goal.

Angkor Wat: Hinduism, Politics and Prestige

*Tamsin Hong*

Angkor Wat is regarded as one of the largest religious monuments in the world. It is one of the main reasons why visitors from all corners of the world voyage to Cambodia to view this fascinating site, despite the continuing civil unrest. It is positioned in the north west of the country just outside Angkor, the capital of the Khmer Empire from the 9th-15th centuries C.E. Angkor Wat translates as ‘the capital which is a temple’ and reminds us of its one-time political function. Today, Buddhist monks in their bright orange robes can be observed wandering through the ruins. They indicate Angkor Wat is a Buddhist temple even though it was built for an entirely different purpose. King Suryavarman II, one of the most famous of the Khmer rulers, began building Angkor Wat only three years into his reign. Angkor Wat was built from 1116 to 1150 C.E. and work was symbolically finished the same year as Suryavarman’s death. Later kings would modify the temple for their Buddhist beliefs and political purposes as the temple’s grounds continued to be useful and aesthetically pleasing. The grounds could accommodate congregations of thousands of people. The imposing structure covers 200 hectares and intimidates onlookers with its high walls and forbidding lion guarding gates. It epitomises the strength of the most powerful political entity in Southeast Asia at the time of its construction.

Architecture has been associated with kingship since its inception. Pharaohs and Caesars used architecture as a successful means of propaganda to show their political power and to promote their ideologies. It is of little surprise that King Suryavarman II also created huge monuments to show his power and prestige. What is surprising,

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* Tamsin Hong is in her third year of a Bachelor of Arts (Art History and Curatorship) (Honours) degree. She is a current resident of Bruce Hall.
however, is the way in which his most significant project, Angkor Wat, remains a source of intense interest due to its elaborate and meticulous design. In the 1860s, the French explorer, Henri Mouhot was told that giants built the temple. Durr Fiedly describes Angkor Wat evolving out of ‘an incredible amount of artistic labour’. Though its artistic merits and impressive architecture are what draws visitors and academics alike to the temple, Angkor Wat was conceived out of religious piety and political aspirations. This essay looks at Angkor Wat as a Hindu monument commissioned by Suryavarman to prove and support his political power. Due to the parameters set for this essay, I will focus my essay on three areas. First, I will look at how the layout of Angkor Wat is based in Hindu ideology. Second, I will examine some of the Hindu reliefs of Angkor Wat that are placed symbolically close to reliefs of Suryavarman II. Last, I will show how Hindu numbers and cosmology were used in Angkor Wat, which in turn reinforced Suryavarman as a figure of worship. Here I will focus on the central tower and its depiction of the Hindu Mount Meru.

Angkor Wat contains various levels of meaning, but the most immediately obvious is the importance of Hindu beliefs in the overall structure. It is not clear who was the primary designer of Angkor Wat. However, there is some indication that the chief architect was Divakarapandita, Suryavarman’s chief spiritual advisor and most venerable of the senior priests. No other priest was as venerated during Suryavarman’s reign and inscriptions outside Angkor Wat reveal that he was closely associated with the building of Angkor Wat. The link between priests and architects reveals the importance of Hinduism in Khmer building projects. One of the most obvious references to Hinduism is the use of concentric circles in Angkor Wat. This is a common feature of Khmer buildings as the concentric circles represent the rings of mountains around the seven seas of Mount Meru.

7 Mannikka, above n 2, 25.
8 Charles W Moore, ‘Plug It in, Rameses, and See If It Lights Up. Because We Aren’t Going to Keep It Unless It Works’ (1967) 11 *Perspecta* 33, 34.
Meru is an important element in Hinduism as it is the home of the gods. This is emphasised by the 190 metre wide moat surrounding the complex that is also a reference to the seven seas. Angkor Wat was carefully conceived, designed and built by the spiritually educated to confirm and reflect Hindu beliefs. Its layout further confirms these ideologies to the general populous.

More specifically, Angkor Wat represents Suryavarman II’s patron god, Vishnu. Suryavarman’s posthumous name, Paramavishnuloka, means ‘He Who Has Gone to the Highest World of Vishnu’ and Thomas Maxwell suggests that the temple itself may have originally been named Vishnuloka, ‘The World of Vishnu’, suggesting it was intended as the resting place for the king. Jessup concurs with Maxwell and proposes that part of the reason why Angkor Wat faces west, is because the west is the direction of death and may have been a funerary monument for Suryavarman II. Most Hindu temples were dedicated to Shiva, god of all creation and destruction, and faced east because Shiva ruled the eastern quadrant of the compass. Angkor Wat, however, faces west because Vishnu ruled the western quadrant of the compass. Suryavarman II was clearly trying to establish himself as different from previous monarchs by having a different god. Suryavarman chose Vishnu, the nourishing and preserving god, possibly because of the political instability confronting him at the beginning of his reign. Angkor Wat is also carefully constructed around the cardinal points, which is essential for Hindu architecture. The cardinal points represent points of the compass. Angkor Wat’s design around the cardinal points and in particular, its focus on the west, confirms the architect’s commitment to Hinduism and Vishnu.

The reliefs within Angkor Wat focus on Hindu imagery and narrative. The third enclosure features almost 800 metres of detailed bas-reliefs,

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9 Jessup, above n 4, 143.
11 Jessup, above n 4, 143.
12 Mannikka, above n 2, 9.
13 Keat Gin Ooi, Southeast Asia: A Historical Encyclopaedia from Angkor Wat to East Timor (ABC-CLIO, 2004) 149.
most of which depict the Hindu epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata.\textsuperscript{14} Mahabharata is particularly significant as it deals with two branches of the same family struggling to win the throne of Hastinapura. Suryavarman II also dealt with a struggle for his crown by usurping a claimant from the line of Hashovarman III. These two epics are steeped in Hindu tradition and would have been known by all observers of the reliefs. This reveals why no inscriptions have been left to describe the relief panels.\textsuperscript{15} It also suggests that many of those who looked upon the reliefs were probably not literate. Female figures in dancing poses feature throughout the Angkor Wat complex. These women are naked from the waist up, appear at peace or happy, and wear elaborate jewellery. Due to the position of their arms and their animation, Jessup concludes they are aspasas, celestial dancers who through their dancing pleased the Hindu gods.\textsuperscript{16} The aspasas emphasise the spiritual pleasure visitors are meant to experience whilst walking through the corridors of Angkor Wat. The building complex achieves its status as an impressive religious monument through its numerous figures describing the traditions and ideology of Hinduism.

The third enclosure also contains images of Suryavarman II to emphasise his political and spiritual significance. The king appears twice but what is significant is that he appears on the same level as the Hindu epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata. Like the epics, Suryavarman II needed to be easily identified in the reliefs. He appears on an elephant adorned in royal headgear whilst he himself is wearing the short sampot and has the phkak, or Khmer billhook, resting on his shoulder.\textsuperscript{17} The official Cambodian national dress of today remains the sampot, but in this instance it assists in identifying the figure as Suryavarman. In one particular scene, Suryavarman’s troops are battling with the army of the Chams. Suryavarman II had an initial victory in battle against the neighbouring enemy kingdom of the Chams.

\textsuperscript{14} C.M. Bhandari, \textit{Saving Angkor} (White Orchid Press, 1995) 61.
\textsuperscript{15} Jacques Dumarçay and Pascal Royère, \textit{Cambodian Architecture: Eighth to Thirteenth Centuries} (Koninklijke Brill N.V., 2001) 86.
\textsuperscript{16} Jessup, above n 4, 152.
\textsuperscript{17} Claude Jacques and Philippe Lafond, \textit{The Khmer Empire: Cities and Sanctuaries from the 5th to the 13th Century} (2007) 214.
but then suffered several ignominious defeats, at which point he diverted his energies into building religious monuments including Angkor Wat.18 Malcolm MacDonald concludes that Suryavarman depicted battles against the Chams to compare them to the battles of Rama against Ravana.19 Vishnu appeared in the physical form of Rama with his army of monkeys who set out to destroy the demon Ravana in the Ramayana epic.20 These reliefs have been specifically associated with each other to reinforce the Khmer kingdom as the righteous force and making Suryavarman II god-like.

Figure 1. Suryavarman II on elephant surveying his army.21

Angkor Wat’s elaborate and imposing central tower is thought to have supported the worship of Suryavarman II as a deity. Eleanor Mannikka explains there is evidence to suggest that the Devaraja, ‘god-king’, cult existed and that it resided within Angkor Wat, specifically in the central tower.22 It may have been that the Devaraja was a lingam, a phallic

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18 MacDonald, above n 3, 55.
19 Ibid 104.
21 Yves Coffin, Angkor Wat, Royal Parade Reliefs, Officer on Elephant, Stone Carvings, 196-7 black and white photograph, 18.0 x 24.3 cm, National Library of Australia, Canberra.
22 Mannikka, above n 2, 6.
symbol of Shiva, or a statue placed in the tower for worship. Helen Jessup found inscriptions describing a cult worshipped in association with Angkor Wat and Suryavarman II. It is highly probable that these two describe the same cult. Chambers connected to the central tower include images coming from different parts of the Khmer empire and indicate the unification of the country and all the areas controlled by Suryavarman. This could also be interpreted as representations of all the areas believed to have actively worshiped Suryavarman. Multiple nagas are featured on the central tower. Nagas were Hindu snakes that were incorporated throughout Angkor Wat. Their significance lies in the Khmer kings tracing their lineage to the Khmer nagini princess, who was the daughter of the king of the Nagas. This was used to prove that the Khmer kings were part deities and would have supported the worship of Suryavarman. Thus, the central tower of Angkor Wat reinforced Suryavarman as a deity through Hindu iconography.

The central tower also reveals the meticulous incorporation of Hindu numerology. The height of the finial to the sanctuary and the height from the floor of the sanctuary to the sacred deposit buried beneath it both equal 54 cubits respectively. Added together, this equals 108. 108 is the most auspicious number in Asia: it occurs throughout Hindu and Buddhist texts; Vishnu has 108 names and Buddhist and Hindu prayer beads number 108. This number also has significance in cosmology. The sun and the moon move approximately 54 degrees north and south each year totalling 108 degrees. Mount Meru is often described as the North-South axis and the central tower represents Mount Meru. These remarkable findings reveal how the architects ensured that every detail of Angkor Wat represented an element of Hindu belief. Also, the idea that the central tower is Mount Meru, the home of the gods, as well as

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23 Ibid 6.
24 Jessup, above n 4, 148.
25 Mannikka, above n 2, 6.
26 Ibid 1.
27 Ibid 238.
28 Ibid 34.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid 37.
the home of the devaraja further highlights how Suryavarman was regarded as a god.

Angkor Wat demonstrates how Hindu beliefs could be thoroughly incorporated throughout its architecture using every means available including religious iconography, celestial calculations and auspicious numerology. It illustrates the level of sophistication achievable in 11th-12th century Cambodia. Most importantly, Angkor Wat should not be simply regarded as a fine monument to Hinduism. It should be regarded as an impressive building project conducted to inspire awe among Suryavarman’s subjects and thus support his claims to being a god. Without this political motive, it would not have been necessary to build one of the largest religious monuments in the world. However, there are still many details about the devaraja cult and how it fitted in with Hinduism that cannot be known currently, due to lack of available evidence. It may never be known whether this was king Suryavarman II’s resting place. Nor may it be possible to discover exactly why details on some of the reliefs stopped suddenly. Further investigation into these queries is needed before Angkor Wat’s place in Suryavarman’s political plan is fully understood. Ultimately, Angkor Wat is a testament to political power and religious piety and continues to inspire awe in 21st century visitors who walk within its extraordinary walls.

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