

History of the Phnom Bakheng Monument

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The name Bakheng is relatively recent: it appears for the first time in inscriptions from the end of the sixteenth century, among which two have the date 1583 (see below). François Martini¹ studied the meaning of Bakheng: he isolated the prefix *ba*, often found in the names of temple-mountains, which, according to him, would come from the Austroasian substrate and would be associated with a “notion of power and especially of magic-religious power.” *Kheng* for its part is a Khmer word meaning “hard, vigorous, powerful”: it would thus be the “powerful *Ba*.” The author specifies that these are “suggestions that need confirmation and adjustment from specialists.” To my knowledge, the specialists have not yet given their point of view.

I. Ancient history of the site

Reigns that precede Yasovarman I

Christophe Pottier’s research-in-progress in the area of Roluos led to a certain upheaval in the history of this epoch. It is in fact now clear that the pyramid of the Bakong is appreciably older than we had thought and that it might have been established in as early as the second half of the eighth century. The two enclosures of that temple are in fact contemporary and date from around 750. Which king built it, we do not know, and we even have trouble proposing a name, considering the lack of epigraphic evidence from this time period; but we have known for a long time that, long before his coronation as *cakravartin*, Jayavarman II seized the throne of Hariharalaya (Roluos site), of which the Bakong was probably already the center. With his coronation in 802 on the Mahendraparvata (Phnom Kulen), where he seems to have taken refuge for a few years, Jayavarman II “created” the Khmer Empire. Afterward, we know little about his reign, except that he came back to Hariharalaya, that he certainly did not realize his dream of uniting the various Khmer States, and that he died around 835.

His son Jayavarman III succeeded him at that same site, apparently without trouble. The inscriptions indicate only two dates of his reign, 850 and 860. Jayavarman III was considered for a long time as a sovereign of little stature; it is true the inscriptions report only vivid stories of elephant hunts, but this trait was trivial for a king. We can nonetheless note in passing that he had the Prasat Cak built in the middle of a forest, after a wish concerning an elephant: this monument is hardly, as the crow flies, fifteen kilometers away from the Bakong and four kilometers from the future sanctuary of the Phnom Bakheng: it gives an idea of the landscape at the time.

It remains that, during a reign that might have lasted forty-some years, Jayavarman III might have had more importance than we suspected. Indeed he doesn't seem himself to have left any important work of architecture, but the scope of constructions should not be the only criteria of appreciation for assessing a reign, neither should lack of information bring about negative and more importantly definitive judgments: nothing tells us that the ever-possible discovery of inscriptions will not lead to an important change of opinion.

We do not know the date of Jayavarman III's death: as for most of the other Khmer kings, we set this date in 877, according to the accession date of his successor, Indravarman I. He was the son of Jayavarman III's maternal uncle, succession perhaps to be considered as "normal" in a country where matrilineal filiations are the rule. However, we would have expected one of his sons to succeed him; yet the epigraphy does not show it—which is normal if he was eliminated violently. The distant relationship between Jayavarman III and Indravarman I suggests that the succession must have been nothing but peaceable, Jayavarman III's death having occurred several years before 877. We also consider that Indravarman I—probably younger than Jayavarman III, but of the same age group—died in 889, only for the reason that it is that year his son Yasovarman I came to power; we will soon see that we have to push back this date a little bit. According to the chronology I have just expounded, Jayavarman II would have reigned thirty-three years, Jayavarman III forty-two years, Indravarman I only twelve years: yet it is to him that the most considerable monumental works were attributed.

Indravarman I ascended the supreme throne in A.D. 877. We credit him with three major works: the development of the Lolei *baray*—Indratataka, of which he probably did not build the northern dike; the construction of Prah Kôh—a temple dedicated to the kings who preceded him, whose history appears to be quite complex;² and the construction of the Bakong's temple. We saw that we had to push back the date of the beginning of this temple to more than a century earlier; Indravarman was content to face with sandstone a pre-existing laterite pyramid. Besides, his panegyrists do not mention the construction of the pyramid; on the other hand, they underscore the fact that he had the Indresvara³ *linga* installed at the top of that pyramid, in 881, and that he sheltered it in a stone sanctuary. This is the first time in Cambodia that a king thus placed his name beside the one of the *linga* of the state temple, protector of his empire. Nonetheless, he had to remove the god—whose name we do not know—that was placed there, installed by one of his predecessors.

The date given for the death of Indravarman I is usually 889, it being the year his son, Yasovarman I, acceded the throne. Yet we must note that, to this day, no

inscription mentions the king Indravarman living after 886;⁴ if we add to this that indeed it seems that a king, probably the son of another wife, designated as the heir by Indravarman, succeeded him before being supplanted by Yasovarman, we can suppose that Indravarman died not long after 886 and that fights for succession happened right in Hariharalaya, maybe even on the Bakong, fights the stelae of the Eastern Baray reflect. The destructions that then occurred because of these fights probably urged Yasovarman to leave Hariharalaya to establish his capital around Phnom Bakheng. Another reason might have incited him to do so: we know that in the same way Suryavarman I abandoned the state temple of Ta Keo used by Jayavîravarman after he defeated him; it is seemingly true that kings were not eager to establish themselves in places where the ones they killed had lived.

During a reign of slightly over twenty years,⁵ Yasovarman I accomplished a significant body of work. With his accession in 889,⁶ he installed *ashrama* in a large number of sacred sites, the location of some twenty among which we know from the famous "digraphic" inscriptions, bearing the same text engraved in the usual alphabet as well as in a new alphabet, which did not survive the king; we know in particular a number of them in the northeast of today's Thailand. We therefore see that his domain was more considerable than that of his predecessors; he will moreover be celebrated later as follows:⁷

He [Indravarman I] had an incomparable son, glorious, who assumed the name of Sri Yasovarman, supreme master of the land that goes to the country of the Suksmakamrata,⁸ the ocean, China,⁹ the Campa, etc.

Moreover, he ordered hydraulic works of a grand extent: the completion of the Indratataka—in the middle of which he would erect, in the same year of his coming to power, the statues of the Lolei temple in memory of his parents—and especially the development of the large Eastern Baray, the Yasodharatataka, nearly four-and-a-half times wider than the Indratataka, as well as the network of canals that connect to it. He also had four *ashrama* built south of the great *baray*, one for each of the major religious streams, sivaïte, vishnuïte, and brahmanic—this last one including also some sivaïte, but focused more specifically towards the Indian philosophy—and Buddhist.

He finally established his capital around Phnom Bakheng, without our knowing the reasons for this choice: he would have the hill leveled in order to create a large esplanade, cutting the stone that would be used to form the structure of his state temple, faced with sandstone as the temple of Bakong. Around the principal divinity—erected, apparently, soon after 900—Yasovarman I would have 108 divinities

installed in as many sanctuaries, on the steps and near the temple's base, and probably also others in annex sanctuaries.

It is this king praised in stanza 29 of the inscription of Baksei Chamkrong, engraved under Rajendravarman's reign, around 950, and summarizing his important works: the temple of the Phnom Bakheng and the temple of Lolei, as well as the Eastern Baray:

On the five summits of a mountain that resembles the five summits of the Meru¹⁰ and on the surface of the island of the great ocean,¹¹ he has more than one hundred divinities installed; and he dug the Yasodhara reservoir.¹²

We can here pass on the Yasodharatataka and the temple of Lolei.

We found relatively few inscriptions on the very site of Phnom Bakheng, and no useful ones that are contemporary to the monument's construction. However, some texts coming from other sites enable the establishment of the main traits of this important monument's history, which marks the center of the first city of Angkor.

We can quickly mention nine small inscription fragments in schist, discovered in 1933 at the pyramid's base, around the northeast corner, assessed under the number K.729. Cœdès attributed its writing to the seventh century. These fragments went to the EFEO Museum in Hanoi, where they were assessed under the number B 3,12, but they did not return to Phnom Penh as they should have: this is not a unique case;¹³ we must remember that the relocation of the pieces from Hanoi's museum to their country of origin, in 1954, was done hurriedly under the direction of Jean Filliozat. It is possible that they are still in some drawer of that museum, and it would be interesting to find out.

That said, I have trouble believing these fragments—which I have not seen—came from a local inscription. The inscriptions on schist—if the stone was correctly analyzed—are found only in the south of the country; these fragments would of course gain importance if it had been recognized as fact that the inscription they came from had been engraved right there, considering this supposed date.

One of the difficulties posed by the monument comes from the fact that, for a long time, we did not know the ancient name of this hill or of its temple and that we could say little about it, except that we observed that the monument's style was similar to the Bakong's and that it must have dated from around the end of the ninth century. We will further see that several years were needed before understanding what it really had been. Because of the K.235 inscription, engraved under the reign of Udayadityavarman II in the year 1050 and coming from Sdok Kak Thom,¹⁴ we knew as early as the end of the nineteenth century that Yasovarman had built a tem-

ple (called) *Vnam Kantal*, but we thought until 1930 that this "central mount" referred to the Bayon. This opinion reinforced the idea that the Bayon was of primitive art, attributed thus to the ninth century. It is only in 1930 that, with Victor Goloubew's research, we would discover that Phnom Bakheng was this *Vnam Kantal*, this "mount of the middle"—"mount" being here applied to the pyramid as well as the hill itself and "middle" referring to the empire's center. We were sure henceforth that the temple was thus built by the king Yasovarman I as was his state temple, marking the center of his capital and empire.

We very nearly had information, maybe even precise information, on the temple: indeed a grand stele exists, apparently engraved on only one side, but it is, alas, totally illegible: we cannot even figure out today if, as it should be, its text is engraved in the new alphabet, "of the North," created by Yasovarman I, or if the alphabet was classical! The stele was probably sheltered under the eastern *gopura*, now disappeared. It was discovered in 1932 by Henri Marchal, but no one took notice of it: it is mentioned in only one report (April 1932); I myself brought it to the Cambodian inscription inventory, quite late, under the number K.1157. It can be seen there where Marchal set it upright, near the ruins of the eastern *gopura* of the temple. We can only hope that one day a miraculous technique will enable us to read its text, which is certainly likely to inform us on the beginnings of the sanctuary.

The inscriptions K.643 and 543 are described as two fragments of a same doorjamb, of which the central part would still be missing.¹⁵ They were found in two locations relatively far apart, brought there to be used in some monument. It could also appear that they were part of two doorjambs of the same door.

In any event, the texts seem to be indeed the beginning and end of a unique poem. The first part (that of K.643¹⁶) contains nineteen lines, forming nine *sloka anustubh* and a half, dedicated to the praise of Vishnu and its *avatara* (five stanzas), then to Siva, to Brahma, to a subordinate female divinity of Vishnu and one of Siva (one stanza for each divinity). We can notice that stanza 5 salutes Vishnu under the name of Pundarikaksa, specifying this god is (honored?) "on the Yasodharaparvata."

The second part (that of K.543¹⁷) contains sixteen lines: it starts with the conclusion of praise for the mandarin of a king—we have the names of neither; it ends with the mention of the erection of a Pundarikaksa statue, undated; the last two stanzas contain the usual imprecations and benedictions.

Where do those fragments come from? Certainly from a temple specifically dedicated to Vishnu. To speculate on the title, if the discovery of the stone near the Prah Pithu X suggests a nearby monument, we could think about the small unnamed monument located east of the north Prasat Khleang; it is open on the west side and therefore was probably dedicated to Vishnu. This small temple is of a style similar

to the one of the Banteay Srei (around 970) and the writing of our inscriptions must be contemporary to it. This foundation could thus date from the last years of the reign of Jayavarman V, who, as we will see further, revived the Bakheng temple; a sanctuary of Vishnu was probably set there, under the name Pundarikaksa, which may be the source of this mention.

Another detail is introduced with the stele of Sdok Kak Thom, already mentioned. Its stanza 43 says:

On the hill of Sri Yasodharagiri which was like the king of the mountains by its beauty, he [the royal guru Vamasiva] had a linga of Siva established, at the invitation of the king.

And the Khmer text that confirms this:

Thus, S.M. Paramasivaloka¹⁸ established the royal city of Sri Yasodharapura and transported the devaraja of Hariharalaya in that city. Then S.M. Paramasivaloka had the central Mount installed. The lord of the Sivasrama established a holy linga in the middle.

In the Sanskrit stanza and the Khmer phrases we first have the certainty that Yasovarman had created the city of Yasodharapura. We can also see that *Vnam Kantal* refers not to the hill but to the temple where the installations (*sthapana*) of the gods were done. Finally, we must understand that the king, to honor his guru, asked him to erect a god, not in the central sanctuary, but most probably in one of the four towers elevated on the superior plateau.

This shows that the kings, in creating their state temple, must have invited the high dignitaries of the kingdom to join them by installing divinities. We have evidence of this practice with the inscription K.598, indicating in its stanza 22 that a dignitary erected a *linga* in the temple of Indresvara at a date that should be 805 *saka* (A.D. 883).¹⁹

Offerings could also be given at the temple, as the one mentioned in the inscription of the Prasat Prei Kmen K.774:²⁰

Under the reign of He who went in the world of Paramasiva, we inaugurated the central Mount; then we gave the servant named Tai Kanlan and four rice fields, a small house attributed to this servant given to the Vrah Kamraten An.²¹

We can also mention K.683, a small fragment with three odd ends of *pada* whose writing enables us to consider them as contemporary with the monument, found in the place at the bottom of the pyramid, on the west side: this fragment, whose text

is unusable as it is, remained, as those of K.729 mentioned above, at the Hanoi museum where it was registered under the number B 3,13.

Finally, we should point out that, in a famous article (“The symbolism of the Phnom Bakheng,” published in the *BEFEO* XLIV, 529 *sq.*), Filliozat thought he had recognized an allusion to the temple of Bakheng in a stanza of Lolei’s stele, installed in A.D. 879; however, this stele was probably engraved before the temple of Bakheng’s consecration and this proposition is thus hard to acknowledge.

We have noticed, for a long time now, that a causeway, most probably built by Yasovarman I, united the northwest corner of Lolei’s *baray* (Indratataka) and what we thought was the avenue leading to the east stairway of Phnom Bakheng. This causeway stops at the entrance of Angkor’s park, because this region most likely underwent severe disruption after the beginning of the tenth century. All of the former maps of Angkor show this causeway, but the satellite images, SPOT in particular, show that the proposed layout was inexact.

In fact, the visible and rectilinear part of this causeway, if continued in a straight line, shows that it ended exactly on the side of the Siem Reap River, across from an old causeway that connects the southeast corner of Angkor Thom’s enclosure to the river, a former canal. This ancient causeway, miraculously preserved, has been out of use for a long time. But we can see that before the construction of this enclosure, it could have corresponded to an entrance in Yasodharapura—or Goloupura, if you will—and that, compared to Angkor Thom’s royal accessway, it could lead to the royal palace, located, as in Angkor Thom, north of the state temple. The only explanation is that it once continued to the royal palace, the same way as in Angkor Thom. I had asked Guy Nafilyan to express this relationship in the schema he did for my books on Angkor (Bordas, then River Books). Rather than wondering why there is no south monumental staircase, it is easier to think that besides the east and west stairs, one wanted to build one on the side of the palace.

It is likely that the monument was completed by Harsavarman I and Isanavarman II, sons of Yasovarman, but no evidence of this exists—we can notice only that Khmer monuments in general, as well as those of many countries in the world, have been modified over time.

There followed the episode of Koh Ker (928–940), during which the temple was apparently abandoned, at least as a state temple. However, we can read the name of the Yasodharaparvata in the K.187 inscription,²² with the date A.D. 930. But the name appears in a completely ruined context, and we can draw nothing from it.

After the fleeting reign of Harsavarman II—he too an “outsider” who had not been designated heir by his father—there arrived the supreme throne of Rajendravarman (944–968), first cousin of the previous king and king of Bhavapura, a kingdom locat-

ed around Sambor Prei Kuk, which he would integrate into the Khmer Empire. He was an admirer of Yasovarman, but he left no testimony on the Bakheng, which was yet probably his state temple at the beginning of his reign. Moreover, he would restore the little pyramid of Baksei Chamkrong, at the bottom and north of the Bakheng, before settling, near the temple of Pre Rup, the state temple he had built. It is under his reign that the name Yasodharapura appears for the first time in the epigraphy.

Besides, we have a mention of the *Vnam Kantal* in K.265,²³ with the date February/March 960, engraved on a doorjamb of the small temple of Lak Nan, forgotten although it is close to Pre Rup:

In 881 saka, fifth (day) of the (quinzaine of the moon) waxing of Phalguna, Sri Ranavikhyata who obtained the title of Sri Na--vira²⁴ respectfully informed the king (of his intention) to acquire this land of Sindura, belonging to His Majesty of the Vnam Kantal, to His Majesty Paramesvara, to the corporation of the kmap and to the corporation of the ancen to give it to Our Lord Sivalinga.

We can also read the name of the *Vnam Kantal* on K.690,²⁵ an inscription engraved on the north doorjamb of the south tower of the Prasat Trapéang Ropou, located in the surroundings of the Siem Reap airport. The text seems to have been engraved under the reign of Rajendravarmān. In a ruined context, it is a question of “measurements of the land (*bhumi*) of *Vnam Kantal*.”

The death of that reforming king was tragic: he was assassinated in 968, the year the temple of Bantay Srei was consecrated. His son succeeded him under the name Jayavarman V, and because Pre Rup and the neighboring palace no longer seemed accessible to him, he returned to the Bakheng. There we can read two inscriptions from him: K.464 is engraved on the east doorjamb of the central tower's north door and was discovered at the same time as the monument; K.558,²⁶ also engraved on a doorjamb, was not found in place as was K.464, but at the northern corner of the temple's higher terrace; it is likely that this doorjamb comes from a secondary tower of the flight above.

The purpose of these inscriptions is to recall the names of the servants assigned to the temple, after an introduction in Sanskrit and then in Khmer, identical in both texts. We therefore have sure evidence of the resumption of the cult at the beginning of Jayavarman V's reign, thus before he had the temple of Ta Kev built. Mentioned in passing are the rules decreed by Yasovarman I in A.D. 907, indicating the approximate date of the divinities' installation at the Phnom Bakheng temple.

We can also see that the name of the principal god of the temple is *Yasodhavesvara*. None of the inscriptions indicates the name of the *linga* installed by Yasovarman I, which should have been Yasovarmesvara if it was built as Indresvara, for example. *Yasodhavesvara* appears thus as a name given later on, maybe under Rajendravarmān's reign, and would literally be the “Yasodhara(pura).”

The name of Yasodharaparvata can again be read on K.444,²⁷ a stele found “at the residence of Kompong Thom by Lunet de Lajonquière,” written by Cœdès; we therefore do not know its exact origin. It reproduces an edict promulgated by Jayavarman V “in the city of Yasodharaparvata, at the stone holy basin—the location of which is unknown—with a date corresponding to Monday, 21 December 974. Three other inscriptions reproduce this edict: K.868, from the Battambang province, designates the city the same way, while the two others say, “in the capital of Yasodharapura.” I commented on this passage in the *BEFEO* LXV, p.308-309: my conclusion was that the capital of Jayavarman V was still located near Phnom Bakheng in 974.

K.684²⁸ is an inscription engraved on a doorjamb, found in 1931 by Marchal “in the rubble” at the bottom of the pyramid, on the east half of the north side. The stone is seriously ruined and the inscription seems to have been defaced on either side (perhaps during the construction of the monumental Buddha). The writing is cursive, quite slipshod, and therefore difficult to date; it could have followed closely upon the temple's construction, unless it was cut during Jayavarman V's reoccupation. The god of *Vnam Kantal* is there mentioned as seller of lands to the god of Vrah Thkval—a toponym of unknown location—and consequently the beneficiary of fees: he was thus then in full occupation.

We can again mention the inscription K.521,²⁹ engraved under Suryavarman I's reign on the doorjambs of the Prasat Cak's two small sanctuaries (located between Siem Reap and Angkor Wat). At the end of the inscription (south doorjamb of the north tower), one reads the name *Vnam Kantal*, which here marks the northern limit of a parcel of land coming under this Prasat Cak.

Under this same reign, on the stele K.382,³⁰ B, 22 found at Prah Vihar, the main portion has been engraved with lines unrelated to this temple. But it must have been brought there under Suryavarman I's reign, and a few lines, quite ruined today, were added: however, in a ruined context, we find the mention of an event on the Yasodharagiri.

It is a question of the temple in some inscriptions: K.91, of Kuk Trapeang Srok (Kompong Cham),³¹ was engraved in the eleventh century and recalls the acquisition of a land close to the *Vnam Kantal* under the reign of Yasovarman I, according to archives of the lineage, however, in a defunct context and thus difficult to inter-

pret in detail. The *Vnam Kantal* is probably not precisely the temple here, but rather the capital.

Finally, we should point out the stele of Palhal, K.449,³² which evokes (stanza 41), in quite bad Sanskrit, a *Vnam Kantal*; here it is actually the pyramid of Koh Ker.

We apparently have no more mention of this sacred tie in the epigraphy after Suryavarman I (which of course does not mean it was abandoned).

The important works ordered by Jayavarman VII for the implementation of his capital, Angkor Thom, have inevitably modified the landscape surrounding this temple—if only the moats and enclosure—especially where the area of the palace must have been. Jacques Gaucher's research should help clarify our opinion on that matter. Besides, we also know that the road going from Angkor Wat to the south gate of Angkor Thom, a road that at least dates from this city's implementation, has cut the causeway of access to Phnom Bakheng and thus interrupted it: perhaps it was no longer used at that time.

Such a long history certainly caused a certain number of modifications, as is normal and as happened in numerous Khmer temples and those of other countries. It would most certainly be interesting to attempt this monument's history accounting for the strong probability and trying to date as precisely as possible, as far as possible, every element of the temple.

However, during the sixteenth century we have two inscriptions, K.285 and K.465,³³ that have a similar text concerning the restoration of Buddhist statues erected on the Phnom Bakheng. It is there that we can read the name of Bakheng for the first time:

May the success be! In 1505 of the great era, year of the Goat, eighth day of the crescent moon of the month of Jestha, a Sunday, Samtec Prah Racamuni Bapit came to erect a stele on this hill of Bakhen. He noticed that the old statues (of Buddha) were broken and in ruins. Samtec Bopit came to restore them. He painted them vermillion and gilded them. It was finished and well made. These statues were in number 26.

We can note that there is in this text no mention of monumental sitting Buddha built on the superior plate-form of the temple that has generally been attributed to the fifteenth or sixteenth century; we will see that this construction was probably of a much later time.

The date of A.D. 1585 is probably pretty close to the date—unknown—of the fall of Lonvek, capital of the South, and probably of Angkor into the hands of the Siamese. Moreover, we have found at Phnom Kulen, near the large Buddha, a stone—a former element of the top of an enclosure wall—cut with an inscription in Siamese,

K.1006.³⁴ It has no date, but it is clearly from the same period of time as the two previous inscriptions. It is from a Siamese dignitary of Ayudhya having come to Cambodia to visit various holy places, starting with the hill of Oudong (*Rajadrayya*), near the southern capital of Longvek: after having saluted the king of Brah Nagar Hlvang—a name generally given by the Siamese in Angkor—he successively went on to the Bakheng, the Jetavana (Angkor Wat), and Phnom Kulen. We can be surprised that he visited the Bakheng before Angkor Wat.

Phnom Bakheng, before and after the brief Muslim interlude, which we will talk about, was the subject of a sort of Buddhist pilgrimage. A cult was practiced with numerous statues, evidence given by the inscribed stelae as well as the large number of *Prah patima* found in the debris, during several excavations.

Oddly, we found at Phnom Bakheng a stele engraved with an Arabic text, published as soon as it was discovered in the *BEFEO*.³⁵ A new interpretation by Professor Azedine Beschaouch³⁶ gives it more importance than we had thought, for he was able to read more words than Gabriel Ferrand, its first publisher.

We must recall that we, understandably, considered since its discovery that this stele dated from the apostate king, well known throughout the *Chroniques royales* under the name Ramadhipati or Ang Cand.³⁷ These late texts are not in agreement with the date of this king's consecration, which varies between 1693 (manuscripts P3 and P63) and 1665 (manuscripts B39/12/A).

However, Adhémard Leclère, whose *Histoire du Cambodge* is usually and rightly considered obsolete, here gives quite precise and additional information,³⁸ using the *Chroniques royales* as well as the notes of the Dutch tradesman Gerrit van Wuijsthoof, which enables Leclère to specify that this king had himself consecrated at the age of twenty-six and that he died in 1659 at the age of forty, "having reigned for about eighteen years."

Leclère calls this king Bautum-Réachéa II (*ponhéa* Chant, *sdach chaul sasna chvéa*, "the king who entered the religion of the Malays" or *sdach chénh sasna*, "the king who got out of religion"), Prince Chant before his consecration. Converted to Islam under the influence of a Malay wife shortly after acceding the throne, he had taken the name of Ibrahim. Beschaouch established that the stele recalls one of this king's triumphs: it seems he wanted to celebrate a victory won in 1646 over the Dutch, whose boats the new coreligionists had chased from the Phnom Penh harbor in order to facilitate their own commerce. In 1658, two princes, whose father Ibrahim had ordered assassinated, took up arms against him. Defeated, they took refuge with the queen, widow of Chey-Chetta (king from 1618 to 1628³⁹), who was Vietnamese. She contacted the king of Vietnam, who saw an opportunity to seize Cambodia. In October 1658, he sent an army and war started again. Ibrahim, defeat-

ed, was placed in an iron cage and deported to Vietnam, where he died the following year.

We can therefore estimate that the stele was engraved around 1650. It is unclear why this stele was erected precisely on Phnom Bakheng: an element of response is given by the *Chroniques royales*, manuscript P57:⁴⁰ the *oknha* governor of Angkor Wat would have escaped to Thailand with Ibrahim's partisans after his defeat and deportation. Angkor and its province were thus attached to this king, and we can from that moment imagine that a ceremony commemorating of the royal success happened on Phnom Bakheng, marking at the same time his victory in what was a sacred Buddhist location.

Jacques Dumarçay, moreover, has discovered in the middle of a basin dug east of the pyramid a Muslim grave, which most probably dates to the same period of time. Finally, we must note that the Arabic stele being found, as we will say further along, in the monumental Buddha's base, we have to believe this last construction [the monumental Buddha] was necessarily from after the stele and must from now on be attributed to the end of the seventeenth or even to the eighteenth century.

We cannot date the Buddhapada that has so impressed many nineteenth-century travelers, for it was the main religious monument honored at the time. It was guarded by Vietnamese monks, established there for the longest time.

2. History of the monument's conservation

We move now to the year 1860, when Henri Mouhot discovered the monument: the Khmers seemed to have abandoned in part the immense site of the former capitals; only the temple of Angkor Wat, flanked by its two pagodas, remained really alive. On the Bakheng's esplanade, there was only one Vietnamese pagoda, of which monks became the guardians of the Buddhapada, dug on the esplanade, in the middle of the eastern causeway. For Mouhot,⁴¹ the monument was above all a viewpoint, which he praised at length. We can moreover suppose that it was what he was brought there to see. Alas, things have changed little, and it is sad to have to report that a monument of such value is today used as a stepping stone!

The history of the discovery and research of Phnom Bakheng is exemplary for it shows the difficulty in understanding an ancient monument about which we know almost nothing from the beginning. The first obligation of those who work to highlight it should be to exalt its symbolism and aesthetics, while admitting that it can also be used to admire a landscape, in fact less interesting than what is often described.

Mouhot shows in passing a rather bad estimation of distances, which indicates that he was walking through the forest on winding paths, without perspective: "Two

miles and a half north of Angkor-Wat, on the path that leads to the city, a temple was established at the summit of Mount Ba-Kheng, about one hundred meters high." Further, he adds: "Six or seven kilometers northwest of the temple [of the Bakheng], lay the ruins of Ongkor Thom, (the) former capital."

Soon after, in June 1866, Angkor was visited by the expedition led by Doudart de Lagrée; on his part, Francis Garnier, assistant to the commandant, describes thus the top of the pyramid: "At the center of the superior terrace is a base of about 1 meter high, having 30 meters in the north and south direction, 31.50 meters east and west. It was on this base that the towers that overlook the surrounding land were elevated. Their examination enables one to recognize that there were three towers, facing east, and that the middle one must have been the most considerable. From the summit of these ruins, the view is ravishing: at the feet of the spectator stretches the moving dome of the forest, whose waves and indefinable murmurs come up to him."⁴²

The travelers who were to follow would not bring much to these first descriptions, with the same questions about the central temple and the same false answers.

The École française d'Extrême-Orient took charge of Angkor's preservation at the beginning of 1908. A few preliminary research works on Phnom Bakheng in 1911 are surely mentioned, but nothing of importance. Jean Commaille, the first curator, describes the monument in good place in his *Guide*:⁴³ "The temple of the Phnom Bak-Keng," he writes, "was elevated on a pyramidal base comprised of five superposed terraces. Of the temple itself we can say nothing, for it no longer exists. It disappeared for the most part in a deep cavity that can be seen by leaning above the heap of fallen rocks and that enables one to believe that the builders had dug a vast crypt under the sanctuary, for we must dismiss the hypothesis of a subsidence (of the ground) at a location where the rock is, that is to say, *à fleur de peau* (quite close to the ground)."

In order to enjoy the view, tourists start to climb up the hill, and that is why the EFEO had two trails—still in use today—created in 1919 or 1920, which provide an easier ascent than did the old eastern stairway. In the year 1920, however, one still wondered about what the Khmers had tried doing with the massive stone blocks that covered the last terrace. Henri Parmentier notes⁴⁴ that "the temple's pyramid, maybe with the hill itself, underwent a movement of subsidence in the southeast corner; it caused the ruin of some of the small pavilions that were on the steps and seems to have compromised the solidity of the central sanctuary built with a studied hardness not ordinary for the Khmers." Therefore he explains that the four doors of the central sanctuary "were closed by the construction of a huge belt of masonry that offered outside a sort of facing and was executed with care, using

sandstone blocks." He adds further: "The whole excavation will have to be done with great caution; the establishment of this belt is not explained in a precise way yet, and we don't know if, as it is likely, the catastrophe that it appears to be, has happened or is still to be feared."

The work of the *École française d'Extrême-Orient* on the temple of Phnom Bakheng, led by Parmentier and Marchal, would not really start until November 1922; it would last, for the first half of the work, until October 1925. They excavated principally the central mass and, at the same time, the small sanctuaries constructed around the pyramid, mostly collapsed and partly hidden under a heavy heap of earth. The task was considerable and the credits were meager.

Previously, in December 1920, Parmentier had dug an east-west passage through the central solid mass, fashioned to be able to penetrate directly in the tower, which was accessible until then only from its top, using a ladder. It was during this excavation that the Arab stele, previously mentioned, was discovered.

Charged with clearing the central mass of its vegetation and noting that this work would have to be done repeatedly because of the layer of humus that had settled over the centuries, Marchal decided in 1922 to remove the ground and the conglomeration of stone blocks which enclosed the tower "in order to avoid the return of this uncontrolled vegetation which made it dangerous to climb over the heap of fallen rocks to arrive at the top." It was then, and after a few months of work, realized that this considerable stone mass actually constituted the base of a monumental statue of a sitting Buddha, unfinished.

"At the Phnom Bakheng, the excavation of the pyramid which rises at the top of the monument made it possible to recognize a work analogous to the construction of the sleeping Buddha of the Baphuon. Here, the Cambodians of the late period tried to raise on this formidable throne a gigantic seated Buddha. It was never carved and undoubtedly even the mass of the torso was not built. The intention however is recognizable with the layout in the shape of opposite lotus cushions; it [the base] draws the shape of a large heart, which usually supports figures with crossed legs. Thus it explains the strange accumulation of material at the multiple crampons that, in such an odd way, surrounded the central sanctuary with four bays. Under this mass the four small corner *prasats* disappeared: a part of the western face of the northeast *prasat* was preserved in the mass of the legs of the Buddha."⁴⁵

The first photographs of the entirely excavated central sanctuary date back to April 1924. One was then able to understand that the platform on top of the pyramid carried five towers in quincunx arrangement of which remain, apart from the central sanctuary, only vestiges, still visible, from the northeast tower.

During this time, the excavation began of numerous smaller brick temples at the foot of the pyramid and the smaller sandstone temples on the steps, work also considerable even if it proved less rich in surprises. Work began again from 1929 until the end of 1931, then, more episodically, until 1935. Work consisted of excavating the small sanctuaries surrounding the foot of the pyramid from the enormous mass of earth that had accumulated; some of these sanctuaries gave the impression of having been voluntarily destroyed, without its being possible to propose a date. At the same time, one consolidated or one restored, when able, where it was necessary. It was during this period that the work of Victor Goloubew made it possible to place the monument in history. In association with Henri Marchal, he then made a good number of excavations and surveys in the city that he believed surrounded the hill of the Phnom Bakheng: even if the conclusions he drew have been revealed to be erroneous, all of this work was not useless; it brought to light numerous urban structures belonging to the following centuries.

In 1948, Marchal, then more than seventy-two years old, returned to Angkor to replace the curator Lagisquet; he remained the head of conservation until June 1949, before taking a definitive retirement to Siem Reap, where he died in April 1970. Aside from various works, notably on the small sanctuaries of the pyramid, he sought, without much success, alas, to find the stones of the corner *prasat* of the upper platform—particularly on the hillsides where, in the 1920s, he had the blocks of stone from the central mass discarded. It would undoubtedly be important to find these stones, if only to know if the five principle temples could be restored, at least in part.

Jean Laur had to intervene in (second part of) 1956 following the collapse of the southern wall from the first terrace. In July 1959, he noted new damage on the first tower north of the central staircase, on the western side of the first terrace. He then had to be content with stabilizing it before withdrawing from the conservation.

Rocks again fell at the beginning of the 1960s: Bernard-Philippe Groslier notes that it would be necessary to make a serious restoration, but he did not include it in an already full program. He settled with some clearing and installation on the northern staircase in 1969, following the restoration of the temples established at the bottom of the hill. However, it is necessary to note the large study of the monument made by Dumarçay, who published the plans of the temple in 1972.⁴⁶

To my knowledge, the first work that was made on the monument of Phnom Bakheng since the end of the serious events of Cambodia was clearing the undergrowth, carried out around 1994 at the request of a Japanese Buddhist congregation, under the direction of Ung Vong. Various studies were made there since, in

particular by the APSARA Authority, up until those of the World Monuments Fund, currently underway.

Important consolidation work and essential restoration has become urgent, and it is hoped that it will soon begin. However, much research will still be necessary to understand the history of Phnom Bakheng, which is far from having delivered all that one would want to know.

Notes

¹ “De la signification de “ba” et “me” affixes aux noms de monuments Khmers”, *BEFEO* t. XLIV, 1947-1950, pp. 201-209.

² Christophe Pottier, “De brique et de grès. Précisions sur les tours de Prah Ko,” to be published in *BEFEO* 92.

³ Stele of the Bakong K.826, edited by G. Cœdès.

⁴ Inscription of Bu’ng Ke K.495, edited by G. Cœdès, *BEFEO* XXII, p. 62.

⁵ The date of 900 often proposed as the date of his death is clearly erroneous; he died in 910 or very shortly thereafter. See “Sur les données chronologiques de la stèle de Tuol Ta Pec (K.834),” *BEFEO* LVIII, pp. 166-168.

⁶ Perhaps it would be preferable to say “official advent” because it is difficult to believe that it was carried out so quickly and could well have been prepared a few years before.

⁷ Inscription from Baksei Chamkrong K.286, stanza 27.

⁸ The name of this place is unknown: we could separate it out: *suksma* (with the suffix *ka*), signifies “end, subtle” and also “cardamom,” and *amrata*, the name of a mango and also of a mountain in the *Ramayana*. It is thus permissible to think of the Cardamom mountain chain.

⁹ Through today’s Laos considered as Khmer, Vietnam was then Chinese. The borders of the Khmer country indicated here are found in more inscriptions, the oldest probably dating back to Jayavarman I.

¹⁰ This is the state temple of Yasovarman I, constructed on the top of Phnom Bakheng. Interpretation is slightly different from Cœdès, IC IV, p. 98 and note 2; this note was a comment by Filliozat, “Le symbolisme du monument du Phnom Bakheng,” *BEFEO* XLIV, 1954, p. 552-553, and also by Groslier, *Les inscriptions du Bayon*, p. 159 and n. 2.

¹¹ In the middle of the Indratataka, where he built the Lolei temple.

¹² “Carrier of glory,” pointing out the name of the king. It is about the Eastern Baray, the Yasodharataka.

¹³ There is also K.870, four fragments of a bronze inscription in pre-*nagari* writing (Inventory of the former EFEO Museum in Hanoi, B3, 10).

¹⁴ *BEFEO* XLIII, pp. 56–134

¹⁵ These fragments have been found: the first at the time of the excavation of the Buddhist terrace that is south of the Bayon, the second around the excavation of Prah Pithu X.

¹⁶ Published in the *BEFEO* XXIX, pp. 343-344.

¹⁷ Published in the *BEFEO* XXXII, pp. 1-5.

¹⁸ Posthumous name of Yasovarman I, abbreviated from the complete name that was found in K.774.

¹⁹ The digits of dates are frequently given as symbolic names, e.g., “eyes” for 2. In the present case, the symbolic name for units is *ardha*. Louis Finot, who edited this inscription (in *BEFEO* XXVIII, p. 58), understood the word *ardha* as units of two. Finot’s explanation, however, is incorrect, and we must think that *ardha* here is an error of the stonemason (lapicide) for *artha*, which usually means five.

- ²⁰ Edited in the *IC* IV, p. 64 (1. 10 to 12). This inscription bore the date of 21 May 995.
- ²¹ These last words are speculative.
- ²² It is engraved on the north rock face (interior) of the south wall of the *gopura* west of Prasat Thom, and the name appears in line 17.
- ²³ *IC* IV, p. 102
- ²⁴ We know the title of *Narendravira*, which would perhaps be suitable.
- ²⁵ *IC* VII, p. 91.
- ²⁶ *BEFEO* LVII, p. 58
- ²⁷ *IC* II, p. 62
- ²⁸ *IC* IV, p. 106. This *prasat* was mentioned earlier, in reference to Jayavarman III.
- ²⁹ *IC* IV, p. 167.
- ³⁰ *IC* IV, p. 270
- ³¹ Edited by Cœdès, *IC* II, p. 126 (1.6 to 9)
- ³² *BEFEO* XIII, (6), p. 27
- ³³ Khin Sok, "Deux inscriptions tardives du Phnom Bakheng (K. 465 et K. 285)," *BEFEO* t. LXVIII, 1980, pp. 271-281.
- ³⁴ Edited by Michael Vickery, *BEFEO* t. LXXI, 1982, pp. 77-86.
- ³⁵ Gabriel Ferrand, "La stèle arabe du Phnom Bakheng," *BEFEO* XXII, 1922, p. 160.
- ³⁶ Coming from *Manuel de l'épigraphie khmère*, vol. II.
- ³⁷ See Mak Phœn, *Chroniques royales du Cambodge* (from 1594 to 1677) ***, Coll. Of texts and documents on Indochina XIII, *EFEO*, Paris, 1981, pp. 187-200, and, for the notes, pp. 345-366.
- ³⁸ *Histoire du Cambodge*, reprint of the 1941 edition, pp. 345-352.
- ³⁹ According to A. Leclère (op.cit., pp. 368-340).
- ⁴⁰ Mak Phœn, op. cit., p. 369.
- ⁴¹ Henri Mouhot, *Voyage dans les royaumes de Siam, de Cambodge, de Laos et autres parties centrals de l'Indo-Chine. Relation extraite du journal et de la correspondance de l'auteur par Ferdinand de Lanoye*, 1883 edition, pp. 197-199.
- ⁴² Francis Garnier, "Voyage d'exploration en Indo-Chine," *Le tour du monde*, [pub. separated, p. 45... also see in the journal the description of the Phnom Bachei/Vat Nokor].
- ⁴³ *Guide aux ruines d'Angkor*, Paris, 1912, p. 104.
- ⁴⁴ Chronicle of the *BEFEO* t. XX, no. 4, 1920, p. 208.
- ⁴⁵ Chronicle of the *BEFEO* XXIII, p. 541.
- ⁴⁶ Jacques Dumarçay, *Phnom Bakheng Étude architecturale du temple*, Mémoires archéologiques de l'EFEO no. 7.