

Preah Vihear (Cambodia)

No 1224

Official name as proposed

by the State Party: The Sacred Site of the Temple of Preah Vihear

Location: Kantuot Commune, Choam Ksan District, Kingdom of Cambodia

Brief description:

The buildings that make up this sanctuary dedicated to Shiva, located on the edge of a plateau that dominates the plain of Cambodia, were built in the first half of the 11th century AD and form the most important sanctuary built during the reign of King Sūryavarman I (1002–50), who seized power at Angkor around 1006.

Category of property:

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a site.

1. BASIC DATA

Included in the Tentative List: 1 September 1992

International Assistance from the World Heritage Fund for preparing the Nomination: No

Date received by the World Heritage Centre: 30 January 2006

Background: This is a new nomination.

Consultations: ICOMOS has consulted its International Scientific Committee on Archaeological Heritage Management.

Literature consulted (selection):

Jacques, C, *L'empire khmer, cités et sanctuaires*, Paris, 2004

Technical Evaluation Mission: 23–29 October 2006

Additional information requested and received from the State Party: ICOMOS sent a letter to the State party on 15 December 2006, and the State party submitted information on 3 January 2007.

Date of ICOMOS approval of this report: 21 January 2007

2. THE PROPERTY

Description

The architecture

The property is situated on a promontory of the Dangrek Range, 547m above the Cambodian Plain, known as Phnom Preah Vihear (Sacred Hermitage Mountain), close to the modern border with Thailand. It is roughly triangular in shape, defined by steep cliffs. The southern extremity of the promontory juts out to form a natural recess that is a sacred place, commanding a vast panorama, the wide expanse of land lying to the south up to Mount Koulên, the cradle of the Khmer civilisation.

The northern part of the property is an almost horizontal sandstone platform, c.100m long north–south and 50m wide, which gives access to the Temple and to the village of Phnom Kulên.

Like many Cambodian monuments, this sanctuary consists of a succession of courtyards on a common axis (though the north-south axis here is somewhat unusual). The sandstone blocks that were used posed enormous handling problems, and there is some indication that the entire south-west part of the property was in effect worked as a quarry.

Access is now by means of a steep, recently constructed track through the forest from the village, which houses soldiers and their families, as well as some Buddhist monks living at the pagoda, which also serves as a school. From here two paths lead to the temple, one passing through a village (Pjum Prasat), wholly dedicated to shops and other facilities for visitors; some 550 people live there.

Preah Vihear shares certain characteristics with other monuments in the north and east of Cambodia:

- It has an axial plan 800m long in which *gopuras* (gateway towers) and streets succeed one another on the way to the temple.
- It comprises outer buildings that are much larger than the sanctuary itself.
- There is considerable use of light materials such as tiled timber roofs.

To the north a 54m monumental stairway with 159 steps leads to a 25m long pavement flanked by enormous rampant *nâgas* (snakes). From here three steps reach the first of the *gopuras* (No. 5). This is cruciform in plan and originally had a pitched wooden roof supported on pillars. Two paths join here – one from Thailand, by means of the monumental stairway, and one from the Cambodian plain, by means of the rock-cut eastern stairway (10m wide, dropping some 400m steeply on the eastern flank of the promontory).

From *Gopura* No. 5 another long pavement rises to *Gopura* No. 4 (similar in form to No. 5), with a large rock-cut water tank with steps around. There is another, smaller tank beside the pavement leading to *Gopura* No. 3. This, too, is cruciform in plan. On either side of the main gateway there are symmetrical U-shaped galleries ending in a long hall of a type known from other sites. Their function is unknown; the custom has grown up of calling them ‘palaces,’ although they were in all probability monastic.

Gopura No. 2 is reached at the end of another pavement, also lined with *nāgas*. It is similar in form to No. 3, but without the ‘palaces.’ It opens on to a large rectangular hall with rooms on either side, designated ‘libraries’, built in sandstone with a brick vaulted roof.

The sanctuary is enclosed by two groups of galleries laid out in cloister form, foreshadowing the ‘cruciform cloisters’ of Angkor Vat. The central enclosure is accessible only by the three passages coming from *Gopura* No. 1 and two small openings to east and west. The southern side is closed by *Gopura* No. 1 and the northern side by a structure which is in effect a false gate. Instead of opening out on the vast spaces of the Cambodian plain, it presents a blank face. The layout thus presents an increasingly closed aspect, until at the end all that is visible is the sky.

The architectural decoration

The finest decoration is to be found on the *gopuras*, many of which are in an excellent state of conservation and clearly visible. The compositions of the sculptures on the lintels, pillars, pilasters, and elsewhere are varied, complex, highly detailed, and harmonious, representing Hindu gods and other religious figures such as Shiva, Vishnu, Indra, and Krishna.

Constructional techniques and materials

The principal material of all the buildings at Preah Vihear is sandstone from the site itself. Structurally they have load-bearing outer walls integrated with alignments of monolithic columns linked by monolithic lintels that are decorated with religious or mythical scenes.

Laterite blocks faced with sandstone are used where foundations were needed for columns. Where the ground had to be raised because of the steep slopes, sandstone rubble was used.

Brick was also used at Preah Vihear because it was easier to bring up from the plains on the Cambodian side than the sandstone from the site itself. Small bricks were used for the construction of corbelled vaulting.

Apart from the central sanctuary, all the buildings had wooden roofs covered with fired tiles.

History and development

At the outset Preah Vihear housed an eremitic community. On the cliffs some caves in which the hermits lived, a feature of the Khmer landscape, can still be seen there. The foundation of the hermitage is often associated with the erection of a sanctuary by Prince Indrāyudha, son of King Jayavarman II, at the command of Shiva at the beginning of the 9th century. He installed there a portion of the great *lingam* from Vat Phou. However, the origins of Preah Vihear were probably earlier. Indrāyudha’s building was a modest wooden structure, on the site of the existing stone building, and only minor modifications were made by successive Khmer rulers in the 10th century.

There are four Khmer and Sanskrit inscriptions from the property that provide valuable dating material, confirming

the close association of King Sūryavarman I with the erection of the present complex. He erected engraved pillars (*lingams*) at various points in his extensive lands, bearing his name and title, *Sūryavarmeshvara* (Lord Sūryavarman), and one of these was raised at Preah Vihear at the beginning of the 11th century, again at the command of Shiva. This was sited next to the earlier temple, which was soon rebuilt in sandstone as part of the overall campaign of extension and improvement of the temple.

By around 1050 new construction had reached *Gopura* No. 3, but it then proceeded more slowly, partly because of the difficult nature of the land and frequent landslips. The complex was not completed until the 12th century, when King Sūryavarman II entrusted the work to one of his best architects, Divākara-pandita.

Ownership of the property was the subject of considerable negotiation in the 19th and early 20th centuries between the French and Thai Governments. A treaty of 1904 assigned it to France, of which Cambodia was at that time a protectorate. It was reclaimed by Thailand in 1934 and occupied six years later. It was not until 1962 that the International Court of Justice in The Hague confirmed ownership by the newly independent state of Cambodia.

The site was closed from the 1970s because of the troubled history of Cambodia during more than two decades. Fortunately, its remoteness meant that Preah Vihear suffered very little damage over that period, even though it had been mined by the Khmer Rouge, who did not move out until 1998.

3. OUTSTANDING UNIVERSAL VALUE, INTEGRITY AND AUTHENTICITY

Integrity and Authenticity

Integrity

The original plan of the Temple of Preah Vihear developed in the 9th–12th centuries, and all its component parts have survived to the present day so that it is possible to trace its complex history. The nominated property includes all elements that express the values of the property. Some parts, such as the Sanctuary, have partially collapsed as a result of natural phenomena, especially erosion by water, but the architecture has retained all its original characteristics. The natural panorama has not changed from what the hermits saw a thousand years ago.

ICOMOS considers that the property has survived almost without change and that the conditions of integrity are met.

Authenticity

The evolution of the buildings and the techniques used in their construction are reflected in the materials used – wood, then sandstone, brick and laterite. No restoration of any magnitude has taken place at Preah Vihear since the clearance work of Henri Parmentier in 1929–30.

ICOMOS considers that the authenticity of the property has survived intact.

Comparative analysis

According to the State Party, the monumental ensemble of Preah Vihear, which is inseparable from its surrounding landscape, can be differentiated from other Khmer monuments already on the World Heritage List.

The site of Angkor (Cambodia), which in fact is a series of cities, symbolises the high point of the civilisation of which it was the capital from the 9th to the 14th century. Preah Vihear differs from Angkor by virtue of the way in which it is inextricably linked with its landscape. Preah Vihear also has some unique structural features, notably the use of tiled timber roofs.

The temple of Vat Phou (Laos) and its associated structures within the Champassak landscape bears exceptional witness to the formation of the pre-Angkor and Angkor civilisations in political and social as well as religious terms, whereas Preah Vihear is exclusively religious in nature.

ICOMOS considers that this analysis is valid. Preah Vihear vividly demonstrates the intimate link between site and landscape and between spiritual and natural values that is to be found at other property on the World Heritage List such as Mont-Saint-Michel (France) or Meteora (Greece). All these properties illustrate the strong relationship between a religion and the material world by means of a powerful integration of architecture and its natural environment.

ICOMOS considers that the comparative analysis justifies consideration of this property for inscription on the World Heritage List.

Justification of the Outstanding Universal Value

The State Party considers that the property is of outstanding universal value for the following reasons:

- The Sacred Site of the Temple of Preah Vihear is distinguished by its exceptional natural environment, which is difficult of access and far away from major traffic arteries. This has permitted its 'natural' conservation up to the present time.
- This sacred ensemble is a rare example of the close relationship between a monument and its setting. In the 9th century it was a sheltered hermitage built in the caves of sheer 500m cliffs overlooking the plain of Cambodia. From the beginning of the 11th century, when it became a Royal temple, until at least the mid 12th century, it developed progressively into a long series of sanctuaries linked by over 800m of staircases and pavements.
- The Preah Vihear group is exceptional for three reasons. First, the natural site exhibits many contrasts – a promontory, sheer cliffs, a vast plain, a mountain range, and a natural environment stretching out of sight. Secondly, the quality of its architectural composition is adapted both to the constraints of the site and to religious traditions. Finally, the property is exceptional in terms of the quality of its carved stone ornamentation, which is based either on vegetation motifs or sometimes on scenes from Hindu mythology.

Criteria under which inscription is proposed:

The property is nominated on the basis of criteria i, iii, and iv:

Criterion i: The State Party justifies this criterion on the basis that The Temple of Preah Vihear is a unique architectural ensemble made up of a series of sanctuaries linked by a system of pavements and staircases on an axis c.800m long.

The site of the Temple and its environment today represent a particularly significant example of the Khmer genius for adapting monuments to their environment.

ICOMOS concurs with the view that this ensemble, the broad composition of which is still especially clear, testifies to the Khmer genius for domesticating vast territories and adapting to the landscape. The property offers the visitor a magnificent landscape embracing nearly 360° of the plain below, a landscape opening out in front of the hermits' grottoes in the cliffs. Furthermore, ICOMOS considers that Preah Vihear is an outstanding masterpiece of Khmer architecture. It is very 'pure' both in plan and in the detail of its decoration.

ICOMOS considers that this criterion is justified.

Criterion iii: The State Party justifies this criterion on the basis that the promontory at the end of the Dangrek Range dominating the plain is exceptional testimony to the cultural traditions of the hermitages. The caves in this 500m high cliff, which are accessible without too much danger from the crest of the promontory, enabled the hermits to settle there. Their presence led to the foundation of a sanctuary at the beginning of the 9th century on the promontory, from which the sacred ensemble visible today developed.

ICOMOS concurs with the view that the Preah Vihear ensemble bears exceptional witness to the capacity of the Khmer civilisation to make use of a difficult site over a long period as a settlement site and as a source of materials. In this way the mountain was levelled over a considerable area to permit the building of the temple. The sandstone extracted for this purpose was used as the building material for the temple. Also, Preah Vihear demonstrates an important interchange in human values and developments in art, architecture, planning, and landscape design.

ICOMOS considers that this criterion is justified.

Criterion iv : The State Party justifies this criterion on the basis that the Preah Vihear ensemble consists of the integrally connected temple and its environment: a natural landscape which is exceptional by virtue of its topography and the boundless view that it gives over the Cambodian plain. From whichever direction the temple is approached and viewed, the temple is indissolubly linked with the cliff upon which it sits and of which it is the expression.

ICOMOS concurs with the view that the property should be understood at the different levels of its components: the temple, and in particular its delicately carved ornamentation of plant motifs and classical mythology, the

sloping layout of the promontory jutting out from the steep slopes of the Mount Dangrek Range, the cliff and its profiles, and the plain with the natural panorama that it offers. The architectural ensemble is exceptional in its representation of Buddhist geometry: and in a sense it is *feng shui*. The position of the Temple on a cliff edge site is particularly impressive. Stairs and historical access surviving for over a thousand years show a sophisticated technological understanding. The whole historic structure demonstrates the high point of a significant stage in human history.

ICOMOS considers that this criterion is justified.

ICOMOS considers that the Outstanding Universal Value has been demonstrated and that the nominated property meets criteria i, iii, and iv.

4. FACTORS AFFECTING THE PROPERTY

Development pressures

Because of the fact that the property is located in a remote and lightly populated area of Cambodia, there are no pressures related directly to development. It is also a national protected site.

However, there is a village within the nominated property devoted to servicing tourists, an activity which is of considerable economic importance to the villagers.

Anti-personnel mines

The property was heavily mined during the Khmer Rouge period. The Cambodian Mine Action Centre has nearly finished clearing the area proposed for inscription. Some pockets remain to be dealt with on the north-east of the perimeter and close to the eastern stairway. After a short break this work began again in June 2006.

Disputed frontier

The frontier between Cambodia and Thailand at this point passes alongside the northern boundary of the nominated property. According to information provided to ICOMOS by the World Heritage Centre, the precise location of this frontier is currently the subject of a dispute between the two States Parties. The nominated property lies entirely within an area presently claimed to be Cambodian territory, but the area to the north of the property lies within territory recognized to form part of the territory of Thailand.

ICOMOS considers that issues reflecting the security of property boundaries, especially in respect of close co-operation with the neighbouring Government of Thailand, require that recent agreements concluded between the States Parties at the 5th meeting for Bilateral Co-operation between the Kingdom of Cambodia and the Kingdom of Thailand be implemented, especially in respect of continued open border agreements.

Environmental pressures

The region where Preah Vihear is located is in a tropical climate zone which experiences monsoons. The main part

of the property is in a balanced vegetal environment, in particular in the eastern part, which is a Thai national natural and archaeological park.

However, the site of the temple at the top of a steep cliff is a very exposed one, subject to the rigours of a mountain climate exacerbated by monsoon conditions. Annual rainfall is around 1500mm, coming mainly in July–September. This causes erosion and some subsidence. Attention is being focussed on rehabilitating drainage systems or introducing new ones. It should be noted that evaporation is roughly equal the rainfall, and so there is a risk of water shortages. This is being taken account of by constructing reservoirs on the property.

Siting on a high promontory also favours wind erosion, as well as the filling of sheltered areas. Changes in pressure can give rise to powerful erosion conditions during monsoons.

There can be temperature differences of as much as 40°C between sunny and shaded areas, a phenomenon made worse by the movement of sunny areas during the course of the day. These cycles lead to surface spalling on sandstone elements.

Natural disasters and risk preparedness

Cambodia is not in a seismic zone. Because of its altitude, the property is not at risk from flooding. However, its location in a wooded area exposes it to danger from forest fires in the dry season.

Visitor pressures

The number of visitors is low, averaging 185 a day. This is not considered to constitute a threat at present, even though the annual visitor numbers have risen from 14,719 in 1999 to 67,843 in 2004. However, once the property has been cleared from landmines, the State Party should ensure that visitor pressures do not adversely impact on the values of the property.

ICOMOS considers that the main risks to the property are environmental and climatic. It recommends that special attention is given to these in management planning.

ICOMOS also recalls that, in order to ensure the sound long-term management of the property, the processes to resolve the relationships between the boundaries of this property and the relevant national borders should continue.

5. PROTECTION, CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT

Boundaries of the nominated property and buffer zone

As noted above, the boundary of the nominated property coincides on the north with the existing frontier between Cambodia and Thailand. The area beyond this segment of the boundary lies entirely within what is currently the territory of Thailand.

Three protected zones of the Sacred Site of the Temple of Preah Vihear which cover both the cultural property and its

environment have been defined by the Royal Decree NS/RKM/0303/115 of 11.03.2003 :

Zone 1: The Central Zone, which extends over the entire upper part of the mountain on which Preah Vihear is situated (i.e. the nominated core area).

Zone 2: The Buffer Zone, corresponding to the landscape around the property and the natural environment.

Zone 3: The Satellite Zone, reserved for economic and social development that preserves the traditional way of life.

ICOMOS considers that the proposed boundaries of both the core and the buffer zone are adequate and logical. ICOMOS notes that the adequacy of these boundaries relies on their recognition by both Cambodia and Thailand.

Ownership

Under the provisions of the Cambodian land legislation NS/RKM/0801/14 of 30 August 2001, the archaeological, cultural, and historical heritage and protected natural reserves are public property.

Protection

Preah Vihear is protected under the *Law on the protection of the cultural heritage* (NS/0196/26 of 25.01.1996) against illegal destruction, vandalism, illicit transfer of ownership, illicit excavations, and illegal exports and imports. It applies to both movable and immovable heritage, whether public or private. The interministerial *Conseil Supérieur de la Culture Nationale* (CSCN) is responsible for developing policies, and these are implemented by the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts.

As mentioned above, the Royal Decree NS/RKM/0303/115 of 11.03.2003 defines the three protected zones of the Sacred Site of the Temple of Preah Vihear which cover both the cultural site and its environment.

A number of other decrees relate to the protection of animal and vegetal resources in the area and the protection and management of natural resources.

ICOMOS considers that the protective measures for the Sacred Site of the Temple of Preah Vihear are adequate.

Conservation

History of conservation

Because of the political situation in Cambodia over recent decades, no conservation work was possible until relatively recently. The work that has been done has been restricted by the inaccessibility of the property and the dangers from mines. There has been no major restoration work carried out at the property since the clearance work of Henri Parmentier in 1929–30.

Present state of conservation

The state of conservation of the monumental stairway and the pavements is variable. Stabilisation is required and a monitoring programme is needed.

The main structure is in good condition, with the exception of *Gopura 5*, where consolidation work is needed to rectify serious problems resulting from water infiltration and erosion. A policy should be developed for reinstating and replacing certain fallen architectural elements in order to retain the spirit of place, and also to preserve the ‘poetry of ruins’.

Systematic survey has produced a conservation inventory detailing the measures needed for each of the components of the property. Proposed actions include the re-erection and stabilisation of columns, insertion of supports, installation of tell-tales, reconstruction of stairways, reinstatement of paving, etc.

Active conservation measures

There are no conservation projects currently in progress, apart from those associated with minefield clearance.

ICOMOS considers that there is an urgent need for a systematic and comprehensive conservation programme and the allocation of financial resources to permit its implementation according to a prioritised timetable.

Management

Management plans, including visitor management and presentation

There is at the present time no formal management plan in force. However, awaiting the formulation of such a plan, an action plan has been prepared. This has involved the creation of an interministerial coordination committee (November 2005), amendment of Royal Decree NS/RKM/0303/115 of 11.03.2003 so as to increase Zone 2 (February 2006), issue of an order (*sous-decret*) implementing the above Royal Decree (July 2006), and establishment of an Authority for the Conservation and Management of Preah Vihear, based on that for Angkor Siem Reap, known as APSARA (December 2006).

The eventual management plan, to be prepared following an exhaustive preparatory study by Cambodian and international specialists in the relevant domains, will include the following:

- Conservation plans for the protected site;
- Tourism and visitor management;
- Public awareness and participation;
- Promotion and presentation;
- New access routes and parking facilities;
- Public access for pilgrimages or other religious activities;
- Population and land use within the buffer zone;
- Construction of buildings (type, size, materials, etc).

Resources, including staffing levels, expertise and training

The proposed Authority for the Conservation and Management of Preah Vihear will initially have a staff of between 35 and 40, comprising administrative, scientific, documentation, security, and labouring personnel. It will be responsible for daily maintenance, field studies, and exploratory excavations preparatory to the formulation of the conservation plans.

ICOMOS considers that a management plan should be prepared and implemented with the minimum delay. This plan should include details and priorities for conservation works. It is desirable that the Management Plan refers to the necessity for the bilateral cooperation in the long-term.

6. MONITORING

Until now the level of monitoring, carried out by the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts and local authorities, has been minimal, restricted to mine clearance, security and daily maintenance.

It is recognised that there is a need for a dynamic monitoring procedure directed towards the state of conservation of the buildings, stairways, and pavements, so as to produce a plan for conservation interventions over the next 15–20 years.

ICOMOS considers that the existing monitoring measures for the property are inadequate.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Recommendations with respect to inscription

ICOMOS recommends that the Sacred Site of the Temple of Preah Vihear, Cambodia, be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria i, ii, and iv*.

Recommended Statement of Outstanding Universal Value:

The Sacred Site of the Temple of Preah Vihear is distinguished by its exceptional natural environment, and the close relationship with its setting. A 9th century hermitage developed into a Royal temple, consisting of a long series of sanctuaries linked by over 800m of staircases and pavements. The Preah Vihear group is exceptional for the quality of its architecture, which is adapted both to the constraints of the property and to religious traditions, and also for the quality of its carved stone ornamentation.

Criterion i: Preah Vihear is an outstanding masterpiece of Khmer architecture. It is very 'pure' both in plan and in the detail of its decoration.

Criterion ii: Preah Vihear demonstrates an important interchange in human values and developments in art, architecture, planning and landscape design.

Criterion iv: The architectural ensemble is exceptional in its representation of Buddhist geometry. The position of the Temple on a cliff edge site is particularly impressive. Stairs and historical access surviving for over a thousand years show a sophisticated technological understanding. The

whole historic structure demonstrates the highpoint of a significant stage in human history.

ICOMOS recommends that the World Heritage Committee invite the State Party, in close co-operation with the neighbouring Government of Thailand, to implement recent agreements concluded between the States Parties at the 5th meeting for Bilateral Co-operation between the Kingdom of Cambodia and the Kingdom of Thailand, especially in respect of:

- Joint management agreements;
- Continued open border agreements;
- Mine clearance agreements;
- Protection of the natural forest areas surrounding the property, especially of small areas where burning has been recently observed on the Cambodian territory.

ICOMOS further recommends that the World Heritage Committee invite the State Party to:

- Continue its efforts to urgently remove the threats posed by the presence of minefields.
- Give priority to conservation planning and action within the Management Committee structure, and allocate adequate resources to these according to a prioritised timetable.
- Address environmental and erosion threats, and development of facilities of visitors within that same framework.
- Develop a monitoring programme directed at the state of conservation of the property.



General view



Monumental stair



Gopura no. 2



Large pool



Gopura no. 5