

With a Warm Welcome from the Kingdom of Cambodia

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Preah Vihear Sanctuary

I promised to write about the occasion that I was invited by the Cambodian government to survey the area around Preah Vihear sanctuary in order to prepare “Management Plan for Buffer Zone of Preah Vihear in Thai Territory” during 3rd – 4th January, 2008. Preah Vihear sanctuary is a cultural heritage which is in the World Heritage tentative list along with Koh Ker and several important monuments in Cambodia. It has been chosen to be listed as a World Heritage Site after Angkor, and the Cambodian has attempted to bring the subject into consideration of the World Heritage Committee since the 2007 Session in New Zealand.

However, the dispute on the boundary line has not been settled, the map that each party is using has discrepancies, showing overlapping area that both countries still claim their rights of property. The problem area as mentioned has been presented in the Nomination File proposed by the Cambodian as a complementary zone to the World Heritage Site, which comprises Core Zone and Development Zone. The Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs, therefore, is obliged to protect the rights of Thailand by requesting the postponement of the declaration of Preah Vihear as World Heritage Site even though the distinctive values of the site are accepted and the site has passed the evaluation process of ICOMOS.

The World Heritage Committee Session in New Zealand has resolved that the Cambodian party should prepare an extended management plan for the monument and its surrounding, moreover, because the area is adjacent to Thai-Cambodian border, the committee has emphasized on mutual problem solving between both parties, as well as cooperation from Thailand to support the declaration of Preah Vihear as a World Heritage Site in the World Heritage Committee Session in Quebec, Canada during 2nd – 10th July, 2008. For this purpose, the UNESCO has supported Cambodia by introducing a group of international experts to help make the required management plan. The invited experts comprise the French, Belgian, Indian, American, Chinese and Japanese teams. Thailand has also been invited to join the group but Thai experts however, we were assigned to be responsible for the management plan of buffer zone in Thai territory.

Survey the Area as Part of International Expert Team

Since we, the Thais, have joined the project after other experts have finished their survey and reports, it was a good opportunity that we could study the others' ideas on the matter. From the French report, it was concluded that the layout of Preah Vihear did not emphasize the north-south axis determined by topographical features as has always been understood, but focused on the monument as a centre of the Universe, facing the lowland on the south, with the main axis on east-west directions verified by the remains of stairs on the east, which is called “Bandai Hak”, that

provides access to the monument at the side of the lowest Gopura; and the west axis is signified by a causeway on that direction. The report also mentions that, on the lowland situate a sanctuary and a baray on the west axis. On the south, situated on a location directly points to Preah Vihear is specified as another sanctuary. Moreover, there is a large baray located to the east of Preah Vihear, which is hypothesized as the beginning of the royal parade to the sanctuary in ancient times. On the contrary, the Naga bridge and the main stairs on the north (facing the direction of present day Thailand), are interpreted as structures of later period with the least significance. Although the new information as mentioned concerns the area outside the responsibility of the Thai group, H.E. Ty Yao, President of ANPV or National Authority for Preah Vihear who took care of our group (comprising myself and Mr. Mongkhol Wisitsatam from East Asia Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs), did not refuse to take us to all places that we were interested.

Starting from the eastern stairs, which are built of stone masonry that was integrated to natural stone cut into steps, the same techniques as the front stairs, these stairs are noticeably smaller and existing in a much deteriorated condition, suitable for the name "Bandai Hak" (Broken Stairs). On the day we went for survey the site had been densely covered with plants, however, the last time that I visited the place during ICOMOS Thailand trip on 23rd March, the place was cleared up, enable to viewing the whole area as an open ground down to the beginning of the stairs. This access is not a newly found evidence, but was previously mentioned in a document written by Aymonier, A French scholar of over 100 years ago. Aymonier mentioned that the stairs were an access to "trapeang", or a pond, in the lowland. We would not argue on the ancient access to the mountain on eastern direction, however, whether the route was the main entrance to the sanctuary or not, I believe that all of us have our own answer.

On the western direction, connecting to the side of Naga Bridge flanking by the bald-headed Nagas of Baphuon style, is a long causeway leading to the north. This causeway is quoted as an important east-west axis, which will be the main access route to the sanctuary from the future parking area to be built at the end of this ancient causeway. I agree that the causeway is certainly ancient, as seen from the style and construction techniques, however, it should have been a by-product from construction of a wall to divert the enormous amount of rainwater, that flowed over the stone ground of the whole mountain, from being accumulated at the main stairs which might cause a serious damage. This hypothesis is supported by the evidence of an ancient dam below the mentioned stone wall, which was built to retain water for public utilization. The stone dam is still in good condition, although without water at present but, instead, the area is scattered with a large number of landmines which are being removed as part of the preparation for development of Service Zone.

We then moved down the mountain along a rough road that is being developed, by sponsorship of China, to be used as the main access road to the sanctuary. At the base of the mountain is a village called "Ko Mui", founded less than 10 years ago. In the middle of the said village stands a monument called Prasat Moniwong, an unexcavated site that can be specified from the architecture and decorative elements as an Arokaya Sala of Bayon style, the latest style in Angkor period. The structure differs from that of Preah Vihear in terms of date, art style, and religious belief. Nevertheless, although I believe that the monument is not relevant to the Mandala layout of the sanctuary on the mountain, and not as old in age, I do not deny its historical significance that indicate the ancient route of King Jayavarman VII, whose evidence has not been discovered in Preah Vihear sanctuary on the mountain.

Regrettably, we were unable to visit another sanctuary that was specified to be on the direct south axis to Preah Vihear because the place was not accessible by car, but only by walking for a distance of 1 kilometer and a little longer, for which we had not enough time. From verbal information, it is known that the sanctuary exists only the base, therefore, the size and significance of the sanctuary remains a mystery. We proceeded to an earth dyke believed to be the border of the Great Eastern Baray situated at 2 kilometres distance from Bandai Hak. The site appeared as a range of trees on a long earth dyke, clearly distinguishable only one side. Over the dyke are roads running on 2 sides, moreover, there is a road that built straight into the area of the baray. When we returned to the mountain and look back we could see better view of the area, however, verification of the site's original features as a baray still requires further evidences.

On that day, there was slashing and burning of the forest in the lowland, which could be the preparation for settlement prior to declaration of Preah Vihear as a World Heritage. We shall see further the measures for protection of the area whether the advice of the international experts will be successfully followed.

Back to Thailand

Although Cambodia requests our cooperation in making a plan for Buffer Zone in Thai territory, there are other sites which should be included in the Core Zone namely, Sa Trao pond and the stone ground in front of the sanctuary, Mo I Daeng bas reliefs, stone cutting sites, and the structures called "Sathup Khu" or the Twin Stupas, as well as the whole area of Preah Vihear mount that significantly complement the sanctuary and can be considered a cultural landscape. The survey of the area in Thai territory on that day was accompanied by a UNESCO staff from Phnom Penh who expressed his surprise to our discovery as if he had not known the information previously, however, he later told us that, in case the Thai party sees the significance of those sites, we must provide scientific evidences for verification.

Sa Trao pond, not only significant as a baray (reservoir) on the main axis of the sanctuary, but can also be considered the oldest dam in Thailand identifiable by large stone walls used for

water retention. The water in the reservoir is still sufficient for the use of the present Cambodian community in the area. Near the pond is a stone cutting site that has evidences of ancient people contemporary with the date of sanctuary construction. Moreover, our latest discovery, thanks to Khun Mongkhon's keen observation, is a small engraved base of a Shiva Lingam situated near the edge of the stone ground on a direct axis to the centre of the main stairs, Naga Bridge, and the Gopura of the lowest floor.

The costumes and ornaments worn by the figures engraved on the stone surface of Mo I Daeng are clues for dating of the bas reliefs to be older than any existing structures of Preah Vihear, therefore, they are important evidences on the use of the Preah Vihear mountain as a sacred area. The last structures to be mentioned here are the Twin Stupas, whose features have never been found in other places. Besides, if there was not an illegal breaking of the wall by treasure hunters, we would not know that inside each structure is hidden with a chamber for enshrining image of worship (now remains only the base of an unidentifiable image). Construction of the stupas was of fine craftsmanship, indicating the intention and faiths of the people in the past. The stupas are, therefore, unique examples of the architecture found only at the site.

In spite of all information, the international experts aim to use only the information obtained from the Cambodian party, and they do not seem to be aware of the forthcoming problems on management if the matter of overlapped area is not settled beforehand. Thus the Thai representatives had to declare our dissociation from the group (officially declared in the Meeting of International Experts held in Siem Reap) so that we could make a management plan based on our own information.

...From the survey, however, each of us was given local cloth as a souvenir from H.E. Ty Yao. We, after all, would like to express our thanks to the Kingdom of Cambodia who gave us the opportunity to do the survey and welcomed us with warm friendship.

Photographs, from the 18th ICOMOS Thailand Trip to Ta Muean and Preah Vihear, 22nd – 23rd March, 2008.

01 Preah Vihear Sanctuary, Kingdom of Cambodia



02 Assoc. Prof. Dr. Sakchai Saising, emphasizing the significance of the main stairs and Naga Bridge



03 ICOMOS Thailand members group photo at the main sanctuary



04 ICOMOS Thai girls



05 Bas reliefs on Mo I Daeng cliff



06 Twin Stupas and UNESCO staff from Phnom Penh

