

Khmer Empire: Angkor (A.D. 802-1432)

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*Angkor* derives from the Sanskrit term for “holy city” and its founder, King Jayavarman II, was a highly religious man (McNeill 1079). Jayavarman’s kingdom of Angkor was founded because he wanted to move his capital from the Mekong Valley of what is Vietnam today to found a new capital on higher ground near the tip of the Great Lake, the Tonlé Sap in present-day Cambodia (Tully 7). So in 802 AD, according to inscriptions, this man founded the Angkorean Empire and established a mighty civilization that would last for over 600 years (Tully 15).

Unlike other ancient civilizations, the Khmers left no books because all of their writing disintegrated when the city was abandoned. There are, however, stone inscriptions – around 1200 of them – written in Sanskrit, Khmer, or Pali. Most of the Sanskrit inscriptions are prayers to gods or Buddha, or tell the genealogies of kings; but, they also tell about the daily lives, customs, and occupations of the people. These inscriptions tell of the complex, hierarchical system of administration and show that Angkor was a highly literate society, at least among the elites. The observations of outsiders who visited Angkor during that time also give a glimpse of what this complex and mighty culture was like (Tully 20-21).

Lying in what is Cambodia today, Angkor is situated between approximately 10° and 15° N and 102° and 108° E between present day Thailand and Vietnam. The country is mostly lowland plains with mountains in the southwest and northwest and plateaus in the northeast (Hockings 135). But Angkor, stood on higher ground, since the Khmers were so deeply into religion and like the Indians, believed that the center of the world was Mount Meru. Khmers tended to build temples on higher hills to reflect this belief.

At its height in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Angkor had an empire of about 700,000 and one million inhabitants. Village size ranged from a few hundred to over a thousand people. Settlements had three basic types: houses could be lined linearly along a roadway or stream, arranged in a compact cluster, or spread among rice fields (Hockings 135). There were about 90 provinces with at least one temple as the center of the city (Tully 33). The entire empire spread over an area of 1,000 square kilometers controlling much of what is present-day Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and southern Vietnam. The Khmer acquired much of their land by skilled warfare and diplomacy (McNeill 1079).

And warlike they were. In order to lay claim to its vast empire and protect what was already theirs, the Angkoreans had to be maintained by a force of arms, often clashing with neighboring Thais and Chams. Soldiers had weapons including swords, lances, bows and arrows, and clubs. They also had catapults mounted on carts or the backs of elephants. The soldiers were all men of the king and were forced to sign an oath of loyalty to him (Tully 29).

The empire could only expand as far as its natural barriers would allow, of course – seas, mountain ranges, and impassable jungles. Angkor was surrounded by forests which provided plenty of timber for building and fuel. These forests which gave wood for creating the immense buildings that Angkor is known for is also responsible for hiding these great wonders under overgrowth from the rest of the world (Tully 27).

These jungles and other natural barriers also protected Angkor from being easily accessible to its enemies. The empire is circumscribed with land, sandstone hills, and is remote from the South China Sea with numerous sandbars and treacherous currents from

the Mekong Delta which deterred seaborne enemies such as the Javanese (Tully 21). Its two major waterways were the Mekong River in the east and the *Tonle Sap*, also known as the Great Lake, in the west. The climate was and still is mainly hot and humid with six months of rain from about June to November and then six of drought (Hockings 135).

Water, then, was important for the ancient Khmers and irrigation became the key to survival and development of this great empire (Tully 45). The Great Lake provided countless fish for the people, which along with rice, was the staple diet (Tully 22). The Khmers cultivated rice with flood retreat agriculture, which is the practice of digging low dikes around paddy fields to trap rainwater, and using banded fields, which is a system of embankments to trap retreating floodwaters to irrigate crops. They also built artificial lakes called *barays*, which translates to mean “large pool or reservoir” (Tully 254).

Archaeologists uncovered three enormous barays, the largest which measures to be 8 kilometers by 3 kilometers. This “West Baray,” started between 975 and 1020 and was completed in 1050, was created by making 10 meter high ramparts which extended for over 20 kilometers. This took much time and human effort, showing that there had to be hierarchism present (Tully 45).

The empire also had a network of well-maintained roads, which served for trade purposes. Although these roads fell apart when the empire declined, the French reopened them and they are still in use today. The wealthy rode in palanquins, or hammocks held between Y-shaped poles or on horses, whereas the poor walked or traveled in buffalo carts. The Great Lakes’ many rivers also provided a waterway for trade when the tides were right (Tully 27).

Like most state societies, Angkor was never a democracy and although its social stratification was not as extreme as the caste system of India, there was little social mobility. Angkor had many levels of hierarchy starting with the king who was seen as the human form of all the gods combined. In total, 28 kings ruled over this powerful empire for over 600 years. Inscriptions show that they were seen as incapable of breaking religious laws and they had almighty power over the kingdom. Next on the ladder, were the people who carried out the law – the courts and legal officials. Stratification was so extreme, even the commoners were divided into three separate groups: The *knum* were bound to the monasteries and temples. The peasants, soldiers, builders, and farmers were all grouped into a class. And finally, there were the slaves. Although the *knum* ‘carried out the work of god,’ they could be bought and sold like slaves. Ancient inscriptions talked extensively of the work of these commoners and even among them, there was much division of labor: There were herdsmen who looked after the sacred cows, fruit pickers, guards and other outdoor workers. There were also weavers, clothing workers, secretaries, kitchen cooks and even others employed as singers, dancers, and musicians within the temples (Tully 54-58). Clothing also represented rank, with the commoners wearing drab, mostly colorless clothing and the king wearing patterned, elaborate outfits (Tully 37).

As has been stated above, Angkoreans were highly religious Hindus and there is the hypothesis that even the irrigation system was not built for farming and agriculture, but for religious uses. The “hydraulic city” debate has one side claiming that the man-made barays had no agricultural usage, as the natural environment of the Mekong and Great Lake provided much of the Khmers’ nutrition. New evidence (not cited) suggests

strongly that the waterways had a dual function: Many inscriptions refer directly to the waterways as irrigation, although the majority do refer to their religious functions (Tully 46). Other religious practices, not water-related, were human sacrifices to the gods, especially sacrifices of the wrong-doers. Decapitation and bodily mutilation was also used as forms of punishment for breaking religious and civil laws (Tully 43). Although this seems barbaric, other ancient civilizations were noted to have carried out these practices as well (Egypt, Indus Valley, etc.).

Similar to most Southwest Asian civilizations, Angkor had mortuary practices where the dead were left outside the city for wild creatures. Other methods included cremation and underground burials. Earlier methods included cadavers being thrown into rivers. And, of course, in accordance with their religion, Khmers saw death as an occasion for grief and mourners would shave their heads as a sign of respect. They also believed in reincarnation – a belief adopted from the Indians' Hindu religion (Tully 42).

One of the greatest accomplishments and wonders of this civilization is its architecture which was both grand and immense. The purpose of these buildings were widely disputed until 1933 when Jean Przulski formulated his thesis that Angkor Wat, the largest, best preserved monument, and built in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, was both a temple and the tomb of King Suryavarman II. It served as a place for higher status citizens to come and worship the gods. These complex works of art are the reflection of the egotism and highly religiousness of the rulers. These large temples parallel Egypt's pyramids, which served as burial structures. After the death Jayarvarman II's son, the obsession for monument building really began. Each succeeding king outdid the previous with a larger building or waterway (Tully 31-32).

And these great monuments weren't easy to build. The Khmers were unquestionably great architects, but the construction would have taken thousands of laborers and countless days to erect. Older observations held that the blocks of rock were dragged by elephants, loaded on ox carts, or floated down the Siem Reap River. However, none of these could have moved the largest rocks used for construction. It is more likely that human power was used.

Even now, the great site of Angkor Wat can be visited. Many people don't even know about Angkor, the Khmer Empire, itself, but come to marvel in the wonder of the grand temples such an empire left behind.

As with every ancient civilization, Angkor was destined to decline; however, there can never be a pinpointed reason as to how it fell the way it did. One explanation was that the collapse came suddenly when the Siamese King Paramaraja II took over the city in 1431. Then, there was Christopher Pym's theory that 'the empire's dismemberment [came] from without and loss of religious equilibrium from within.' The Siamese who moved into the country began their own sovereignty and began to challenge Khmer religion. Australian archaeologist Roland Fletcher hypothesizes that the ecological balance of the city began to break down when overpopulation became a problem and the city and its empire went into decline. Even though the Siamese had been constantly attacking and occupying large parts of the empire and weakening Angkor politically, it is unlikely that they caused the empire's collapse. Hints in inscriptions said that the pressure and burden of having to build immense towers put a strain on the people and their resources leading to rebellions, though no hard evidence backs this. It was probably a combination of social, political, religious, and ecological factors that caused

the collapse of the empire. Whatever the factor, the common statement of writers of Cambodian and Siamese history is that the Siamese overran Cambodia and captured Angkor in 1430-31 (Briggs 3).

After Angkor, there was the colonial Cambodia (1863-1954). Then, there was the Khmer Rouge (1975-1979). And following that was the Vietnam occupation from 1979 to 1989. Since then, there has been modern Cambodia (1989-present). The most significant change is that Khmers today are not nearly as strictly stratified and religious as they were during the Khmer Empire. Cambodia has maintained its agricultural economy and trade, however. There is still also gender division of labor, although a number of tasks may be done by either sex. Before, in the first few thousand centuries, the king had his harems and polygamy was accepted. Today, though, marriages are predominantly monogamous. Now Cambodia is composed of 18 provinces, as opposed to the 90 that the Khmer Empire had (Hockings 136).

In conclusion, Angkor had many points that paralleled the different cultures discussed in class. The rise and fall of the civilization was certainly due to many ecological, political, social, and religious factors. Religiosity seems to be a more dominant characteristic of this culture more than any other, although it could equal the people of the Indus Valley. It also had similar ecology and mortuary practices as other Asian civilizations. The one major thing that stood out with this culture was its immense, beautiful, and almost mysterious temples which still stand today.



## References

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