

ANALYZING THE EVIDENCE

Bayon Relief at Angkor Thom



Hervé Champollion/akg-images

The Khmer were master builders, devoting great resources to constructing stone temples and palaces and decorating them with stone statues and pictorial reliefs. Some forty sites can be visited today, spread out over an area of 70 square miles. The most famous is Angkor Wat, built in the early twelfth century by King Suryavarman II. It drew on Hindu religious traditions and was dedicated to the Hindu god Vishnu. Less than a century after its construction, another magnificent city was built about a mile north. This complex, Angkor Thom, was built as the official state temple of King Jayavarman VII, perhaps because he was a Mahayana Buddhist and wanted a Buddhist complex that would rival the magnificence of his predecessor's Hindu complex.

Angkor Thom is especially notable for the Bayon Relief, a series of bas-reliefs depicting mythology, historical events, and scenes from everyday life. These stone reliefs decorate a series of walls that surround the central mountain-shaped temple. Since there are no inscriptions identifying the scenes carved into the walls, scholars do not always agree on what they represent. Among the many subjects depicted are naval battles, land battles with soldiers armed with cross-bows and catapults, and a marching army with musicians and officers mounted on elephants. Palace scenes depict princesses, servants, feasts, and people engaged in conversations. A scene of royal entertainment shows athletes, jugglers, and acrobats. Other images include ascetics sitting in a forest and a procession of animals. Equally interesting are depictions of ordinary life, with men weighing goods in markets, people cooking outdoors, women tending to children, people watching a cockfight, and fishermen fishing in their boats.