

Chapter 4. The Longvek Site as a “Living Heritage”

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Longvek as the Capital Site of the Post-Angkor Period

It cannot be denied that the capital sites from the post-Angkor period including the Longvek site received little attention thus far compared to the other Khmer civilization sites that exist within Cambodia. The splendid monuments such as the Angkor site that serve as Cambodia’s national symbol have received much attention both academically and as tourist sites. Two of the sites from the Angkor period—the Angkor monuments and the Preah Vihear site—have been registered as UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Also, while there are nine sites in Cambodia on the Tentative List in preparation to be listed as World Heritage Sites, six are from the Angkor period and two are from pre-Angkor period, but there is only one site from the post-Angkor period, which is the Udong site.

However, some circles have begun to stress the importance of the sites from the post-Angkor period, as well as the necessity of their conservation. Worthy of particular note is the Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties, which has worked in Cambodia for many years since the end of the country’s civil conflicts. In 2010, the institute signed a letter of agreement with the Cambodia’s Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts and began a joint research as part of a program commissioned by the Agency for Cultural Affairs Networking Core Centers for International Cooperation on Conservation of Cultural Heritage Project the capital sites of post-Angkor period, focusing mainly on the Udong and Longvek sites. At the Longvek sites, in particular, in addition to test pitting that was done in several locations, the entire grounds was carefully surveyed. Based on this work, the distribution of structural remnants was mapped out and a list of their characteristics and conservation status was compiled. The reason for carrying these things out was to ascertain the structure of the Longvek site, whose details had not yet been understood, as well as to specify the existence of the structural remnants in order to formulate a conservation and management plan including zoning and to protect the site from destruction and damage due to development work and other reasons.

What we realized as we carried out the survey of the Longvek site was that the “unpretentiousness” of this and other palace sites from the post-Angkor period is precisely an important characteristic that defines them. Indeed, one hardly finds from this period the kind of majestic stone-built monuments that were constructed during the Angkor period, and the representative remnants are mounds believed to have been foundations for temples and houses, mounds and moats that surrounded the palaces, and areas in which pieces of ceramics are scattered indicating traces of residential sites. What’s more, many of these have mostly gotten buried under current village landscapes and therefore are difficult to recognize. The remnants of moats, for example, can be observed fairly easily from the air (Fig. 1), but in actuality, many places have been buried and used for paddy fields and are difficult to decipher when viewed from land (Fig. 2). Additionally, during the survey of the Longvek site, we found a case in which a portion of the clay walls and mounds had been destroyed due to road expansion and earth removal work (Fig. 3). We also saw that near the site was a brick factory in operation, and earth removal had been done because of it within the immediate proximity of the site (Fig. 4). As such, in order to protect the site from damages caused by development work and other reasons, it is essential to create, as basic reference material, a map and list for the site.

Furthermore, as we conducted such research, we were also able to discover that not all parts of the remnants found around the Longvek site are in danger of damage. Rather, we found some examples of cases in which the local residents protected them as they included the remnants as part of their religious faith. In the next section, we will look at some of these cases.

Conversion of Monuments at the Longvek Site

Longvek was built in 1528. It served as the royal capital of Cambodia until it fell under Siamese attack in 1594. The palace capital had a slightly distorted square-shaped layout that extended three kilometers east to west and two kilometers north to south. The Wat Talaeng Kaeng was built at its center, where four standing Buddha statues facing the four directions, and four Buddha’s footprint stones are enshrined (Fig. 5). Including this one, 108 temples were said to have been built both inside and outside the palace grounds (Kitagawa 1998).

After the fall of the palace, however, this area presumably returned to the rural landscape that we see today. While under the on-site survey conducted by the Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties and Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, not all of the structural remnants for all 108 temples could be confirmed but many of them were. Of them, there are some, such as the Wat Tralaeng Kaeng and Wat Preah Tep (temple for god Indra), that were built during the time in which Longvek was the royal capital and still exist today. On the other hand, we also found that many remain only as mounds indicating the foundations for former temples or that they had been rebuilt into new temples at a later time. Of these sites, for the temple that stands on the south side of the Longvek site and is currently called either Preah Vihear Preah Bakko or Preah Vihear Tuol Ong Kiesal, we saw that a new building was being built using concrete and bricks at the top part of the mound that is considered to be a remnant of a former temple (Fig. 6). Also at this temple we found, mixed in with Buddhist statues that were clearly made in recent years, a stone sculpture of Buddha that could date as far back as post-Angkor period or even the Angkor period (Fig. 7). Also, the temple that is situated at the center part of the Longvek site and is currently called the Vihear Kok is today a wooden thatched roof structure that stands on the top part of a mound that is presumably a remnant of a temple foundation. Found scattered in the periphery of the mound were sandstone materials with decorative molding (sculptures) (Fig. 8). These are presumed to be stone materials that formed the foundation of the temple that used to stand there and are thought to date back to the time of when Longvek was the royal capital in the post-Angkor period. In other words, it is likely that after the original temple deteriorated or was torn down, the current smaller-scale temple was built on the same spot.

The abovementioned cases are examples in which even after the original temples broke down or got destroyed, new temples were built again in the same locations and the religious faith has continued. And it is interesting that, as in the first example above, people are taking artifacts (sculptures) from the past and using them in ritualistic practices today.

This example of such practice of incorporating the structural remnants and artifacts from the past into the religious practices taken place today can be found not only in such Buddhist (Theravada Buddhist) temples, but also in the shrines of Neak Ta, which is the local folk religion. Neak Ta is the so-called the land spirit or guardian deity of the indigenous religion that was originally not related to Buddhism, but in actuality, it is worshipped as a god connected to Buddhism as well as Hinduism (Ang 1986). For instance, in Angkor Wat, which is the most prominent monument of the Angkor site, a number of Neak Ta can be found. Among them is Ta Reach, which is considered a representation for Vishnu, and is considered the most powerful Neak Ta in the Angkor region. It is believed that many Neak Ta also exist within the Longvek site. Of them, according to the Royal Chronicle of Ayutthaya, the one called Neak Ta Khleang Moeang possesses powerful spiritual powers and it succeeded in beating back Siam's invading army multiple times (Kitagawa 2006). Many shrines for Neak Ta still stand on the Longvek site, and their distribution may have something to do with the structure of the palace. For example, at the northeast part of the Longvek site, on top of a mound at a part which was cut through to create a road, stands a shrine for Neak Ta called Naak Ta Ap Paang (Fig. 9). While it is not certain whether or not the timing of the cut goes back to the time when Longvek was the royal capital, but if it does, it is highly likely that this area was an important location at which the castle gates were built.

Also, at the junction of three streets at the northern part of the Longvek site are a small Theravada Buddhist shrine called Prasat Preah Miet Dah, as well as a Neak Ta Preah Ko, Preah Kaeu in which a sculpture of a cow is enshrined (Fig. 10). We do not know if this three-street junction dates back to the time of Longvek being the royal capital either, but if it does, its position can be considered a location of importance within the palace. At the Neak Ta shrines, too, we can find examples of past artifacts and structural remains are being used today. For example, in the Neak Ta sanctuary called Tuol Krapau Ni Tung located at the east part of the Longvek site a sculpture of a human figure riding an alligator placed on a concrete foundation is enshrined. Here, we were able to confirm that a sema stone made of sand was placed there (Fig. 11). Sema stones are *kekkaiseki* ("boundary stones") which are placed in Theravada Buddhism temples at the boundaries that separate the inside and outside of temple grounds. These sema stones, judging from their design, are estimated to date back to the post-Angkor period. Based on these facts, it can be speculated that around this Neak Ta shrine likely stood Buddhist temples which have since been destroyed, and enshrined here are articles that were dug up from the grounds.

Further, a number of Neak Ta shrines were confirmed within the temple compounds of the Wat Sotpee Reangsay, located at the northeastern part of the Longvek site. In one of them, some pieces of presumably Buddhist statues that are believed

to date back to the post-Angkor period or even the Angkor period are enshrined (Fig. 12). This can also be considered an example of Buddhist statues that were enshrined in temples that were destroyed by are now being enshrined in the current Neak Ta shrines. In these ways, there were many findings at the Longvek site in which the structural remnants and artifacts from the past have been preserved by their being used for today's Buddhist or Neak Ta faith. This in a sense could be considered a form of cultural asset preservation. While it is not the academic or technical preservation of cultural assets carried out by experts, but it can be considered one that is carried out within the logical thinking of the local community.

This type of cultural asset conservation is not peculiar to areas related to religious faith. As previously pointed out, most of the palace moats have been filled and the area is being used as rice paddies. However, the way the land has been sectioned reflects the former structure of the palace grounds, and this can still be confirmed today by taking an aerial view of the area. If the same land use continues to be observed in the future without any land readjustment such as farmland development being done, these traces of palace grounds will likely continue to exist.

The Longvek Site as a Living Heritage

The expression "living heritage" has become a widely used term in recent years. While there are a variety of definitions attached to it, it is perhaps most appropriate to define it as assets that have been inherited by the local residents that live there today and are still continue to be used by them. In understanding the concept of "living heritage," it is important to consider the charter The Preservation and Restoration of Architectural Monuments that was adopted at the 6th International Congress of Architects, which was held in 1904 in Madrid, Spain. In it, the concepts of "dead monuments" and "living monuments" are indicated, and the policy for their preservation and restoration are explained as thus:

"Dead monuments should be preserved only by such strengthening as is indispensable in order to prevent their falling into ruin; for the importance of such a monument consists in its historical and technical value, which disappears with the monument itself. Living monuments ought to be restored so they may continue to be of use, for in architecture utility is one of the bases of beauty."

To borrow these ideas, many of the palace remnants at the Longvek site, even while some have gotten buried under the current village landscape, are still in use while having been converted or overwritten. These are "living assets" rather than "dead assets," and therefore, we believe it more appropriate to consider them "living heritage."

In order to preserve cultural assets like the Longvek site, countries and their governments must use their administrative means to designate them as cultural assets in order to protect and maintain them. However, we believe it is also important to respect, as "living heritage," the ways in which local residents have maintained their religious beliefs and land usage, and to take advantage of this. In other words, instead of viewing the Longvek site as a the remnants of a destroyed royal palace of the past, we should regard it as a living heritage that still continues today, and as a landscape of today that contains the "memories" of the past as "memories." And based on this approach, we believe it beneficial to adopt the viewpoint that the local residents' religious faith and land use make up one element of the asset.

Currently, the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts is leading an efforts to protect the royal palaces of the post-Angkor period like the Longvek site, along with the Undong site which has already been added to the Tentative List, and the Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties intends to continue to offer its cooperation to this end. In doing so, we believe it desirable to adopt the concept of "living heritage" as a key in developing a mechanism for managing the assets by involving the local residents as important stakeholders.

Reference

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