

Chapter 6

The Khmer Empire (c. 802 CE–c. 1431 CE)



HISTORY SKILLS

In this chapter you will learn to apply the following historical skills:

- sequence historical events, developments and periods
- use historical terms and concepts
- identify a range of questions about the past to inform a historical inquiry
- identify and locate relevant sources, using ICT and other methods
- identify the origin and purpose of primary and secondary sources
- locate, compare, select and use information from a range of sources as evidence
- draw conclusions about the usefulness of sources
- identify and describe points of view, attitudes and values in primary and secondary sources
- develop texts, particularly descriptions and explanations that use evidence from a range of sources that are acknowledged
- use a range of communication forms (oral, graphic, written) and digital technologies.

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Angkor Wat Temple, built during Suryavarman II's reign of the Khmer Empire, is one of the most remarkable buildings ever built

Inquiry questions



Introduction

Had the Ancient Greeks and Romans known of Angkor, they surely would have counted that great city as the eighth wonder of the world.

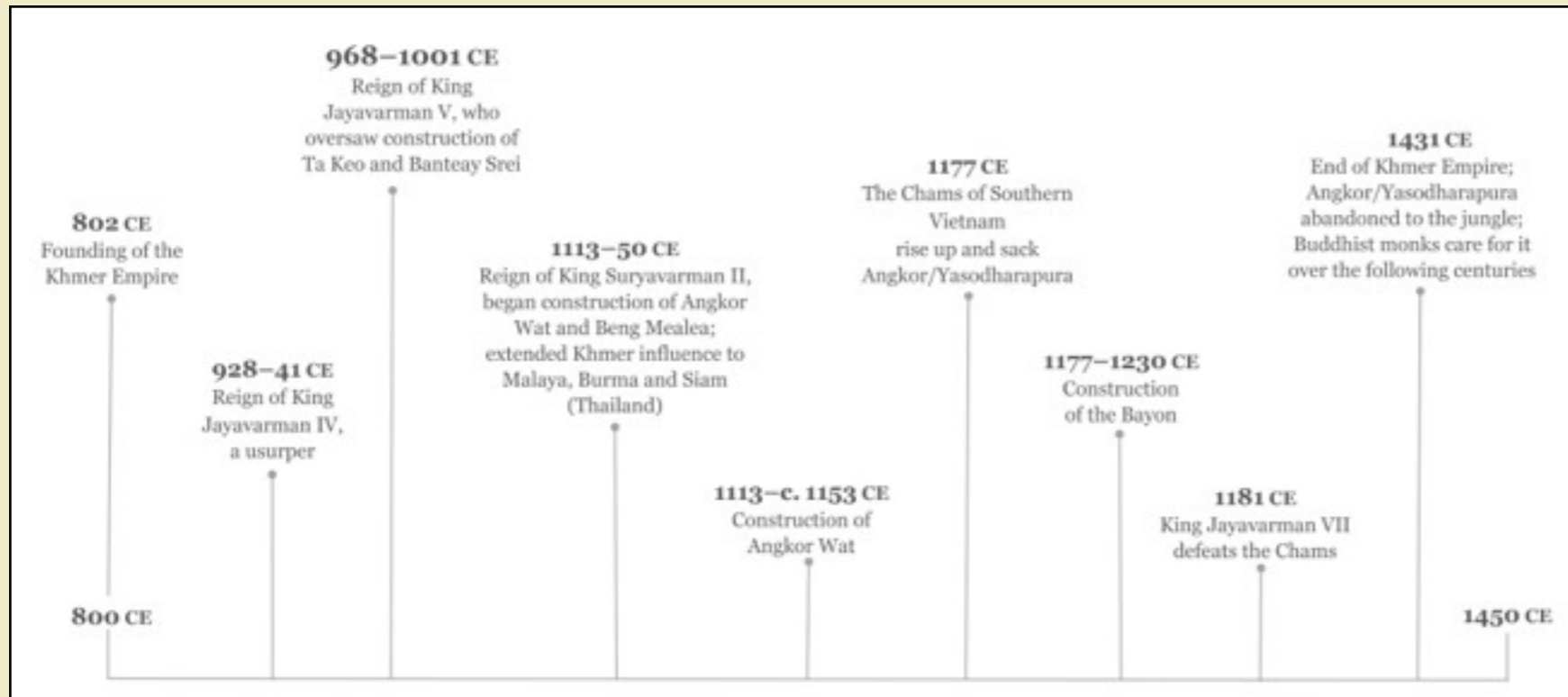
Michael Coe, *Angkor and the Khmer Civilization*, 2003

THE IDEAS AND social practices that were developed in India and China during the Ancient Period spread throughout Asia and parts of the Pacific region. This resulted in sophisticated and dynamic societies being created, which in many cases surpassed their Indian and Chinese origins. The people of Southeast Asia, influenced by India, created highly refined cultures based on irrigated rice-growing. One such group of people were the Khmers of Cambodia, who created an empire that dominated Southeast Asia for 500 years. The Khmer Empire, which began in 802 CE, was one of the world's most powerful, wealthy and populous civilisations before its slow demise from the middle of the 14th century.

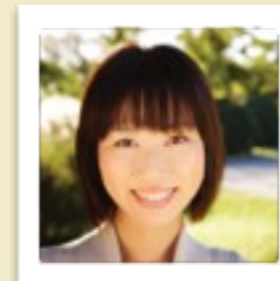
KEY TERMS

baray	a large man-made body of water surrounded by banks of earth; resembles a reservoir
bas-relief	sculpture projecting from a stone wall
Brahmin	a Hindu priestly figure of high standing
caste system	a rigid social system that categorised people into groups that determined not only a person's job and economic capacity, but also their position in the social hierarchy
cavalry	soldiers who fought on horseback
corps	a military unit
corvée labour	compulsory unpaid labour demanded by a king instead of taxes; this system existed in Cambodia until the 1960s
cosmology	an understanding of the place of humans in the universe
delta	in the context of a river, a series of streams that branch off at the end of a river due to the build-up of sediments over time
drona	a bucket, which holds one-sixteenth of a khari
infantry	the most basic of military formations of unmounted soldiers; in pre-modern times they would have been armed with spears, bows and arrows, crossbows and swords
khari	one khari = 100 kilograms
man-day	one person working one day
mercenary	a foreign soldier who is paid to serve in a local army
pediment	a triangular section above a horizontal section on a building; e.g. above a door or window
rattan mats	mats made of woven palm fronds
Sanskrit	the ancient language of India and sacred language of the Hindu religion

Timeline of key dates



Think,
puzzle,
explore



Welcome, traveller! You have chosen to take part in the in-depth Revista Tour of 'The Khmer Empire'. I'm Hitomi, and I'll be your tour guide. Enjoy your trip.

>> Southeast Asian geography and history

By 650 CE, two distinct types of societies had begun to form in Southeast Asia: the coastal trading societies and the inland societies.

The coastal trading societies comprised the Malay people and centred on the island of Sumatra, the Malaysian Peninsula and the Straits of Malacca, which is the body of water that separates Sumatra and Malaysia. Malay people also settled along the coast of present-day central Vietnam, where they were known as the Chams and their kingdoms known as Champa.



Source 6.2 Cambodia and surrounding countries, showing the Tonle Sap Lake, Tonle Sap River, Mekong River and Mekong Delta

The inland societies were made up of rice growers who built temple complexes. Their ruins can be seen in present-day Burma, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam, and on the islands of Bali and Java. They leave behind some of the most spectacular buildings and structures ever made. The Khmers were the most successful of these societies, and their kingdom came to encompass areas that included present-day Cambodia, Burma, Thailand, Vietnam and Laos.

>> Cambodia

Cambodia is situated at the southern end of the Indochina peninsular and is located entirely within the tropics. ‘Cambodia’ is English for the Khmer word *kampuchea*, which comes, in turn, from the Sanskrit word *kambuja*. Although no written creation story has survived, Cambodians have an oral creation story passed down in a similar way to that of the Australian Aborigines’ Dreamtime stories. The Cambodian creation story helps to explain the origins of the country’s name.

According to Cambodian mythology, a foreign **Brahmin** named Kaundinya arrived when much of Cambodia was under water. He fired a magic arrow into the ground to mark the location of his future capital. He then married the daughter of a local Naga king (the Naga were a mythical race of people with a kingdom located somewhere in the Pacific Ocean) and gave her fine clothes to wear. In exchange for these clothes, the Naga king drank all of the water covering the land. The king was then able to build the capital, and named the country ‘Kambuja’.

>> Establishing an empire

Prior to the 9th century, the kingdoms in the lower Mekong River region had been in a constant state of warfare with each other as well as with external enemies such as the Chams. In 802 CE, a powerful man called Jayavarman II was strong enough to unite the independent kingdoms, and this became the foundation of the Khmer Empire.

Jayavarman II came to Cambodia 20 years before the unification of the kingdoms. Historians have speculated that he came from somewhere overseas, or at the very least from Champa. Historically, societies had developed in the Mekong Delta and surrounds to take advantage of trade between India and China, and shifts in trade patterns probably resulted in Jayavarman II relocating north of the Tonle Sap Lake to focus on agriculture, which this area was very well suited to.

Some historians believe that Jayavarman II spent the 20 years between his arrival in the region and the unification building alliances through arranged marriages and other means. He was powerful enough to defeat enemies and prevent foreign powers from controlling Cambodia. All of this united the Cambodian kingdoms and the Khmer Empire was established.

After establishing the empire, Jayavarman II had himself crowned as *chakravartin* (world emperor) by partaking in a ritual conducted by a Brahmin priest at Mahendraparavata, north of the Tonle Sap Lake in the Kulen Hills. Not content with being the supreme king of kings, Jayavarman II then established a cult known as *devarajas*, or god-kings, which he

did by conducting a ceremony that linked him with the Hindu supreme god Shiva, and proclaimed himself a divine universal ruler. The cult of *devarajas* and its link to the gods was the foundation for the royal authority of the Khmer king and all of his successors. A Khmer king was perceived as being god-like by his subjects.

Just two years before Jayavarman II became the universal monarch of the newly founded Khmer Empire, Charlemagne had been crowned the holy Roman emperor of Europe.

>> The first capital city

Jayavarman II initially ruled from the Kulen Hills, where he had been declared a universal monarch. Sometime before his death in 835 CE, Jayavarman II moved south to establish his capital city, Hariharalaya, north of the Great Lake. Hariharalaya is named after the god Harihara, which itself is a combination of the Hindu gods Vishnu and Shiva.

Jayavarman II was succeeded by his son Jayavarman III (reign: 835–77 CE), who began the process of building temples at Hariharalaya. However, it was the next king, Indravarman I (reign: 877–89 CE), who established three key engineering features at Hariharalaya that were new to the Khmer Empire, and would later be used by successive kings when building their own capital cities.

The first feature was the building of massive reservoirs of water known as *barays*. Indravarman I's *baray*, known as the Indratataka (Sea of Indra), was 3.8 kilometres long and 800 metres wide, and was able to hold up to 7.5 million cubic metres of water, which is approximately the volume of 2270 Olympic swimming pools. Historians believe that there were a number of reasons why kings carried out these irrigation works. One was that, through providing a water source in the form of the *barays*, kings were able to honour both their subjects and the local water divinities. Another was that by building these enormous reservoirs, kings were demonstrating their power and their closeness to the gods by creating earthly representations of the lakes that surrounded Mount Meru, the real but undiscovered home of their Hindu gods.



Source 6.4 West Baray, the largest *baray* in Cambodia, located at Angkor/Yasodharapura; building began in the 11th century under King Suryavarman I and was modified later under King Udayadityavarman II who raised the dykes around it and built an island in the middle

The second and third features Indravarman I established were the ancestral and state temples within the capital. The ancestral temple featured statues of Hindu gods that represented the king's ancestors, making it even clearer for all to see that the king was god-like. The state temple was an earthly representation of Mount Meru, and as such was a 'temple mount'. State temples had five towers representing the peaks of the Himalayan Mountains, and were surrounded by a moat.

Temple mounts and *barays* used extensive amounts of water and required the construction of canals and dykes. These engineering features displayed the king's power and success as a ruler, because extraordinary resources of labour were required to build them.



Source 6.5 Angkor Wat



Source 6.6 The Sdok Kak Thom stele, currently in the National Museum of Bangkok

>>The trouble with sources

Neither Jayavarman II nor Jayavarman III left any written record or account of their accomplishments. Most of what is known of that period has come by way of the inscription on the Sdok Kak Thom **stele**, from an 11th century temple of the same name in present-day south-east Thailand. A stele is a tall stone slab that bears inscriptions—they were usually erected in ancient and medieval times for ceremonial purposes or to mark territory. The inscription on the Sdok Kak Thom stele recounts two-and-a-half centuries of royal service by the temple’s owners to the Khmer court. It describes 12 Khmer kings as well as many of the ceremonies that took place during the time of the Khmer Empire. Historians have questioned some of the claims that the inscription makes about the rituals that linked Khmer kings to the gods.

Then [Jayavarman] went to reign at Mahendraparavata ... Then a Brahmin named Hisanyadarma, wise in magic science, came from Janapada, for [Jayavarman] had invited him to conduct a ritual so that [Cambodia] would not be dependent any more on Java and that he would be a sovereign chakravartin.

Source 6.7 Translation of some of the text on the Sdok Kak Thom stele, which describes Jayavarman II’s ascension to become *chakravartin* in 802 CE.

An audience with the king

There is only one eyewitness account of life in the Khmer Empire. Zhou Daguan, a Chinese diplomat, visited the empire in 1296–97 CE during the reign of Indravarman III. He was not the only diplomat to have visited the empire, but he is the only one to have written an account of his time there. His book, *The Customs of Cambodia*, was translated from Chinese to French in 1902 CE, then later translated into English. The most well-known translation is that of scholar Peter Harris, published in 2007 with the title *A Record of Cambodia: The Land and its People*—it is also considered to be the most accurate.





SOURCE 6.11 The Monkey God Hanuman who was sent to Mount Meru to find a special herb, not knowing what it looked like. He returned with the whole mountain.

Hindus believe that the gods live on a mountain called Mount Meru. They believe that the mountain is in the Himalayas, but its location had not been discovered. The religion states that Mount Meru is surrounded by seven different seas, from which springs the river Ganges. As its source is connected to the home of the gods, Hindus believe the waters of the Ganges are pure and the river is therefore viewed as a holy place. As we have learned, the temples that the Khmers built, especially those known as temple mounts, were representations of Mount Meru. As this type of temple was associated with the Khmer



Source 6.12 Part of the temple Phimai

king who built it, this added to his god-like status in the eyes of the people. The Khmer temples can perhaps be seen as a mixture of a house of parliament and a church. The Khmer kings were therefore seen as part political leader and part god.

Temples were also an important way of collecting taxes and distributing power and protection in the Khmer Empire. Where a king established a temple, all of the people in its surrounding area came under imperial protection. The king would appoint priests and other noble people to run the temple. In return for his protection, the people would supply labour, temple slaves and agricultural surplus to the temple. These temples would often be decorated with carvings that stated the greatness of the king, and how powerful, kind, generous and magnificent he was. Temples were the main political, economic and social organising institutions in the