

By G. COEDES

*The Ancient Khmer Empire*

BY LAWRENCE PALMER BRIGGS

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The publication of Mr. Briggs' book will mark a date in historical studies on South-East Asia. For it is the first time that the already considerable body of research work relating to the history and archaeology of ancient Cambodia has been assembled, sifted, and brought within reach of the English-speaking public.

The author has set out to write a book which shall at once satisfy the requirements of the strictest scientific discipline and those of the wide public for whom it is meant. It was certainly with the requirements of science in mind that he has made a point of being so full, and I cannot detect a single gap in the bibliography of 750 items which ends the work. This was assembled and

drafted in 1943, but Mr. Briggs has scrupulously kept in contact with all the work published since that date and has taken it into account, either in the text itself, or in the notes. In the latter case, it sometimes happens that the note contradicts the text, but that is only a minor disadvantage which would have been difficult to avoid unless the author had resigned himself to being inaccurate or incomplete.

Mr. Briggs has read and noted everything without failing, and if there were anything to reproach him with it would be that he has been almost too thorough. In his anxiety to be objective, he has sometimes encumbered his account by recalling bygone views that have been completely abandoned today. To show

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the manner in which successive investigators have felt their way in order to arrive at what they believe to be the truth is interesting in itself and would not be out of place in a work of pure science or of historical criticism. But it is to be feared that the reader to whom the book is addressed will sometimes be a little bewildered by the presentation side by side of divergent opinions of which many are out of date, and he might wish that the author had taken up a more definite stand on the more controversial questions, leaving it to him to find in critical notes other aspects of the problem, if it is of particular interest to him.

In a short but substantial foreword, Professor R. Heine-Geldern underlines the importance of the subject dealt with and brings out strikingly the big role played by the Khmer Empire in the first centuries of the Christian era as a pioneer of Hindu culture in South-East Asia, and also the predominant influence which Angkorian Cambodia exercised from the thirteenth century on upon the T'ai principalities.

In his preface, after having paid homage to the achievements of French science, and particularly to those of the French Far East school, Mr. Briggs sketches, in a few pertinent remarks, the characteristic features of ancient Cambodian history as the sources at our disposal permit us to reconstruct it. We have few military facts, and a certain amount of information on daily life, thanks to Chinese sources and scenes represented on monuments. There is a predominance of religious records, and prime importance is attached to art, particularly to the

architecture which forms the Khmers' major contribution to civilisation.

The order of the sections and the chapters is strictly chronological. Within each chapter, there is a division into distinct paragraphs, dealing respectively with the genealogy of the king under consideration, his ministers and spiritual advisers, his foundations, his inscriptions and so on, and this sometimes entails certain repetitions, the same fact being mentioned both in connexion with the epigraphy and with the religion of the reign. Here again Mr. Briggs' fault, if fault it be, is over-thoroughness. On the other hand Mr. Briggs is to be congratulated on having devoted very considerable space to the history of those priestly families which played such a big part in the religious, artistic, and indeed political history of ancient Cambodia and whose rivalries sometimes explain and illuminate certain of its episodes.

Of the five periods of Cambodian history distinguished in the introduction—Fu-nan, Chen-la, Angkor, Cambodia, and the French protectorate—the first three only constitute the theme of this history of the ancient Khmer Empire and correspond to its three sections.

The first section, devoted to the Fu-nan period, is divided into four chapters, of which the two first, based essentially on the Chinese sources made accessible by the translations of P. Pelliot, describe the country and its inhabitants and recount the story of the first Kaundinya dynasty and of the Fan sovereigns. With regard to the relations between India and Fu-nan at this period, it should be mentioned that

the views of H. G. Quaritch Wales on the 'cultural stages' in the Malay peninsula have been much modified in his latest work, *The Making of Greater India*, which appeared almost simultaneously with Mr. Briggs' book and which is reviewed in this issue. Chapter three studies the Hinduisation of Fu-nan and the influence of Pallava India with the coming of the second Kaundinya dynasty.

The story of the kings of this second Kaundinya dynasty occupies Chapter IV; this is followed by a fifth chapter which concludes the first section and deals with Fu-nan art and architecture. There is of necessity a good deal of conjecture in this, since, apart from three or four Sanskrit inscriptions, there are no archaeological remains which can be attributed with certainty to the Fu-nan period. It was useful, however, to review the various opinions put forward by the authors who have tackled this question, and Mr. Briggs has done it with enough critical spirit to forestall the accusation of having been determined at any price to create a Fu-nan art *ex nihilo*.

The second section of the book is entitled 'The Chen-la period' (c. 550-802). This title is perhaps not very happy, because the name of Chen-la, which is still unexplained and which is certainly not a Chinese transcription of Kambuja, as the author supposes, was used by the Chinese to designate Cambodia right down to the present day. The term pre-Angkorian, generally used for Cambodian art before the establishment of the monarchy in the Angkor area, is much to be preferred.

In his first chapter, devoted to the

country and its inhabitants, the author sets forth his views on the origins of Chen-la; this paragraph seemed to me a little confused. In the first place, there is no question of inferring the possible relationship of the Khmers with the Môngs from the expression Mông-Khmer ('as their joint name, Mông-Khmer seems to imply', writes Mr. Briggs); for this expression, far from being an ethnic appellation of long-standing authority, is a recent linguistic hypothesis and has in consequence no value as proof. In the second place, there seems to me a certain contradiction between the idea that the Indians probably met on the Middle Mekong the Khmers who had come from the valley of the Mun and the plateau of Kôrat, and the other idea, expressed a few lines further on, that the appearance of Indian religions on the middle Mekong probably preceded the arrival of the Khmers who received them from the Chams. This last conjecture is based on the identity of name between the oldest of the Cham divinities and the lingam worshipped by the Khmers at Vat-Phu, i.e., Bhadresvara, an identity which is indeed very suggestive and which doubtless conceals relations between Champa and Chen-la of which we know little.

The reigns of the first kings of pre-Angkor Cambodia occupy Chapters II to V. There is one point in this period over which I am in disagreement with Mr. Briggs. He knows it and admits good-humouredly that his position is 'hazardous', but despite the exchange of correspondence we have had on the subject, he maintains his viewpoint, which consists in identifying the king

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of the Han Chei temple inscriptions with Bhavavarman I and not, as I suggested, with Bhavavarman II.

The division of Chen-la in the eighth century, and the differences of the Water Chen-la with the Malays of Java form an obscure and little-known period in the history of pre-Angkor Cambodia. Mr. Briggs has succeeded, however, in devoting two chapters to it. The reconstruction of the history of the two Chen-las and of their subdivisions, the speculations on the identity of the Khmer king who was beheaded by order of the Mahârâja of Zâbag are conjectural: the author knows this and makes no bones about saying so. The only danger is that the popular works, general histories, and encyclopaedias which take Mr. Briggs' book as guide will almost infallibly reproduce his conjectures without the prudent reserves with which he has accompanied them, and thus pure hypotheses, honestly presented as such, will be in danger of gaining currency as authoritative statements.

The eighth chapter deals with pre-Angkor architecture and art, of which recent but so far unpublished researches have shown that, if the relative chronology put forward by Ph. Stern and G. de Coral-Rémusat is still valid, it is necessary in absolute chronology to antedate the last two styles of the period. After this, the second section of Mr. Briggs' book ends in a rather unexpected manner with a ninth chapter on the reign of Jayavarman II before 802. The return of this king, whatever date be attributed to it, is an essential episode in Cambodian history, and it would have been in my

opinion preferable not to have cut it in two but to have placed it at a whole at the beginning of the Angkor period. In any case, it is inaccurate to talk of the 'reign' of Jayavarman II before 802, for whatever was the date of his return from Java, the year 802 was that of the beginning of his reign and not that of his installation on Mount Mahendra, which is not known with any exactitude.

The third section of the work deals with the Angkor period. It is far the most important part, since it represents nearly two-thirds of the book. Of its nineteen chapters, the first fifteen are devoted each to one reign, the last four recounting the progressive decline of the Angkor civilisation till the capture of Angkor by the Siamese in 1341. The task of the historian of this period, whose epigraphic sources are very plentiful, is far easier and he is freed from the temptation to pad his account of the empty years with speculations which may or may not be well founded. Mr. Briggs has done his utmost to bring out the personality of each of the great rulers of Angkor, on the basis of the knowledge with which their inscriptions and their foundations provide us. His chronology, his genealogies of the kings and of the priests in their service, his attributions of monuments to the various reigns are beyond reproach, and any criticisms that could be made would be on points of detail only.

Mr. Briggs' book will be highly appreciated by the epigraphists and archaeologists whose works he has used with such conscientiousness and intelligence, and it is to be hoped that it will meet with the real success it deserves at the hands of the public for whom it was written.