

The Khmer Civilization and Angkor

Preview handout, May 2025

At its peak in the 11th to 13th centuries, the Khmer empire controlled a large portion of the Indochinese Peninsula, including not only present day Cambodia but also most of Thailand and portions of Laos and Vietnam. The kings of Angkor (a word that translates both as “city” and as “kingdom”) mobilized immense resources of labor and wealth to carry out extensive construction projects north of Tonle Sap Lake in the center of the Peninsula. The city itself was, by current estimates, home to close to one million people.

Today only a far smaller city remains, located on the southern boundary of Angkor where the Siem Reap River enters the lake. The stone ruins of Angkor Thom (the walled central part of the city) and the temples of Angkor—especially the largest and most famous, Angkor Wat, just south of Angkor Thom—are primarily tourist attractions, although several have also been maintained as Buddhist shrines. The rest of the sprawling city has melted back into the jungle. Most of it has been revealed (to western eyes, at least) only by 20th century radar and 21st century lidar surveys.

This seminar will consider the rise and fall of the Khmer Empire, one of the largest, most prosperous, and most sophisticated kingdoms in the history of Southeast Asia. The move of the Khmer king to the Angkor area in the early 9th century marks the beginning of its expansionist phase. Increasing warfare in the 14th and 15th century, along with at least one multi-year drought, led to its downfall. In 1431, after Thai armies briefly occupied Angkor, the Khmer royals moved the capital toward the present-day capital of Phnom Penh, some 150 miles to the south at the confluence of the Tonle Sap and Mekong rivers.

But Khmer history did not begin in the 9th century. The Southeast Asian Peninsula had been populated by humans for at least 45,000 years, during which the ancestors of the Khmers and other peoples learned how to survive, how to farm, and how to build in the challenging environment. Recorded history goes back only to about the 1st century CE, but by that time there were already extensive trade networks in the region that extended from China to India.

Hinduism, brought to Cambodia as early as the 1st century CE, played a crucial role in shaping Cambodia’s religious and cultural landscape for the first millennium. Many Khmer words are borrowed from Hindi, and the Pallava script of southern India was adapted for many languages of the region, including Khmer, by the 7th century. Buddhism too arrived in Cambodia by the 3rd century, and the two religions co-existed and even blended. Buddhism became the dominant religion of the Empire by the end of the 12th century, but both traditions are well represented in the temples of Angkor.

After the royals left, most of the population returned to traditional village life and farming, although Angkor was never entirely abandoned. Its temples continued to be pilgrimage destinations for royals and commoners alike. Border wars continued with neighboring kingdoms, the coastal Vietnamese and the mountain-dwelling peoples of what is today Laos to the east as well as the rising power of the kingdom of Siam to the north.

Angkor was brought to the attention of the west by posthumous publication of the diary of the French naturalist Henri Mouhot. Mouhot first visited the site in 1860, a year before his own death, at a time when France was establishing its colonial presence in Southeast Asia. Angkor

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has been a source of fascination for the wider world ever since. Yet there remains much that is unknown about the city and its history. Archeological investigation remains a challenge, both because of its climate and because of Cambodia's recent, war-torn history. And although the Khmers were literate, the historical records that have survived are severely limited.

Why should we interest ourselves in a state so remote from our own in time, geography and culture? Even the brief description above suggests many topics to explore. How did the agriculturalists of Southeast Asia, both before and during the imperial period, design water systems to cope with the weather extremes—annual flooding during the rainy season and drought in the dry part of the year—that characterizes the region? How did the kings of Angkor amass an empire in a region with significant ethnic and linguistic diversity? How was society organized? What was the relationship between the peasants and the state? What were the roles of women and of slaves? (Both played important roles at all levels of society.) What was the Khmer role in the international trading systems dominated by China and India? How did the Empire manage to accommodate two major imported religions and combine them with indigenous traditions? How did they acquire and develop the hospitals and universities of the Classic period of the Empire?

The Khmer people were masters at assimilating everything from language and religion to trade and scholarship into their own cultural and social practices. Today we are conducting our own experiment in multiculturalism and dealing with our own escalating environmental crises. Perhaps we can learn something from their example.