

Cambodia—Heaven on Earth (Part I of II)

In some ways, we all suffer from the same delusion of thinking we know more than we do. This fact relates to where we live, who we know and associate with, and perhaps most importantly, our basic education and curiosity about the greater world beyond. America is—culturally—a very insular place, surrounded on much of her border by protective oceans and seas. We are bounded on the north by a nation with a similar cultural heritage, and on the south by countries that in many ways yearn to adopt our way of life.



The problem as I see it is this: We often don't know what we are missing. In school we are taught the history of our nation, and learn the histories of the cultures from which our own derived. Hence, our schoolchildren can often name the Kings of England as readily as America's presidents. We look to the philosophers of Greece and Rome for inspiration, considering them our philosophic forebears. Foreign cultures are often judged in the light of our Judeo-Christian morés. Even in the clutter of today's information

age, the world is presented to us only as it impinges upon our perceived national interests.

But consider what we do not know. Mention of the Ottoman Empire, the technological advances of the Classic Period Maya or the splendors of China's Ming dynasty will often elicit a blank stare. That's another part of the world, we say, civilizations foreign to our own, and with no part in our heritage. Why should we even care?

I argue that we should—for many reasons. Our Western culture is not so pristine as we'd like to believe. Almost every facet of our daily life is impacted by achievements and discoveries whose roots lie far from our Eurocentric background. Our lives are often made richer through the "discovery" of things we consider strange or foreign. This explains why I wanted to go to Angkor Wat, in modern-day Cambodia.

The temple of Angkor Wat is the world's largest religious structure, but is only one among hundreds of temples built in or near the ancient city of Angkor, in north-central Cambodia. Once covered by the ever-persistent jungle, they are the remnants of the

ancient Khmer empire, a loosely connected series of kingships and city-states that



waxed and waned in the area for about 1500 years. The Khmer golden age is known as the Angkorian period, spanning more than six hundred years from the ninth to the fifteenth centuries.

Compared to our contemporary ancestors in Europe, the sophistication of the culture was astounding. In the dark ages of England's eleventh century, when London was a muddy river port of perhaps 50,000

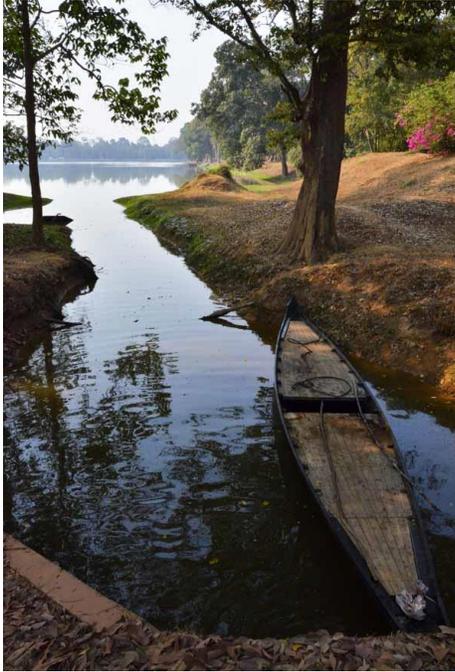
people, the area of Angkor was home to a population estimated to be a million, supported by advanced agricultural methods while producing exquisite art, music and literature.

The Angkorian culture over the centuries was based on the Hindu faith, both with and without the dominance of Buddhism. The earthly temples were often built as representations of Mt. Meru, Hinduism's abode of the gods, similar to Mt. Olympus of the ancient Greeks. Each was dedicated to various gods while at the same time serving other purposes, such as serving as mausoleums for their king-builders. The grandest temple of them all is Angkor Wat, a massive series of integrated structures set inside a moat more than 600 feet wide, and surrounded by a wall measuring some 2.2 miles in length. The detail work is almost beyond belief: Hundreds of feet of bas-relief carvings depict the history of the world, while more than 3000 asparas (heavenly nymphs) dance on its walls. Crenulated towers point to the heavens, while reflecting pools with flowering lotus blooms provide spots of serenity within its walls.



While the grandest of them all, Angkor Wat is only one among many. Nearby, the 216 massive stone faces that adorn the Banyon temple stare serenely at pilgrims and tourists alike. Tree roots that strangle temples like Ta Prohm provided a background for Angelina Jolie in the *Tomb Raider* movie. To see and appreciate them all takes days, not to mention a full working knowledge of Hindu and Buddhist mythology.

In short, a visit to Angkor Wat and the surrounding area of Cambodia is a journey to another world, like our own, yet so very different. We cannot help but be inspired by the heights of art and beauty to which mankind is capable of achieving.



Yet, a few kilometers away in any given direction, lies another part of Cambodian history, the evil and barbaric legacy of the Khmer Rouge. For more than a decade in the late twentieth century, they turned this place that aspired to be heaven on earth, to one that truly represented a version of hell. I will write about that in Part II of this commentary.