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**NARRATIVE RELIEFS FROM THE
SW & NW CORNER PAVILIONS
OF ANGKOR WAT**

VOL I

PART I

**SOAS
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Vittorio Roveda

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Abstract

This study examines the religious and social meaning of the reliefs from the western corner pavilions of the temple of Angkor Wat (12th century AD.). It investigates how visual narrative was articulated by the Khmer, and how the reliefs contributed to the sacredness of the temple and the consolidation Suryavarman II 's kingship.

In Part I (Chapter1), after a brief introduction on the political and religious status of Cambodia at the time of Suryavarman II, the Indian texts to which the stories of the reliefs refer are extensively discussed. After a critical analysis of the literature available on the reliefs of the corner pavilion, a detailed examination of the reliefs of the south-western and north-western pavilions is then presented in order to establish the base for their interpretation. For a better understanding it was essential to study, even if briefly, narrative reliefs from other sites of the temple.

Part II (Chapter 1) deals with the use of semiotics, seeking a level of meaning of the reliefs underlying that revealed by iconography. Semiotics provides the possibility of an analytical practice, of describing and explaining the process and structures through which meanings are constituted. This is followed by an investigation into narration's techniques used by the Khmer in depicting events in the reliefs. Chapter 2 includes my attempt to interpret the narrative, the analysis of the arrangement and selection of the themes, and their narrative program. It results that narrative elements were fundamental components of a sacred discourse. Finally, in Chapter 3, the conclusions of the study are summarised. The reliefs are symbolic of the temporal power of the king, and affirm his right to rule the Khmer in intimate association with the divine. Moreover, they were used for creating the image of a sacred universal meaning, a visual representation of Khmer metaphysics. They were the visual manifestation of devotion to Vishnu.

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Le Temple d'Angkor Vat, by Finot L., Parmentier H. et Coedes G., EFEO, 1927-32: Plate 1 top left, 2 top, 6 bottom, 5 top, 7 bottom, 8 top, 10 top, 12 bottom, 13 top & bottom, 15 left & right, 16 bottom.

Angkor Wat, Time, Space and Kingship, by Eleanor Mannikka, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 1996 : Plate 5 bottom, 6 top & bottom, 7 top, 11 top, 14 top.

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Preface

Myths are about so many things - about life and art and the universe and the imagination. In a single myth may simultaneously exist several perhaps contradictory messages. In my study of the myths displayed in the reliefs of the corner pavilions I could not find an overall theory reconciling several interpretations. As Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty¹ rightly says: "...when a single theory is used to extract a single meaning from a broad corpus of myths, the result is a thread of truth that may be illuminating when woven into a wider fabric of understanding but is pitifully only one part of the story".

In my research and development of this thesis, I had to face a great obstacle: the absence of written records about the reliefs, the temple and the life of Suryavarman II. No palm leaf 'books' or any version of the *shastras* (manuals) used by the designers and the sculptors of the reliefs have been found to date in Cambodia. Furthermore the few words mentioned about Suryavarman II in the stele of Preah Vihear and of Phnom Sandak (1119AD) are of very little help to my enquiry. As a result of this, my theoretical framework is mainly based on premises or conclusions, hypothesis and conjectures that I deemed necessary for the development of a coherent thesis. For my interpretation and production of hypothesis I have used the information provided exclusively by the reliefs of the temple, the architecture of the monument itself, the original Indian texts, and the large crop of modern data.

Fundamental to my research is the 'reading' of Khmer reliefs, that is the description and interpretation of images and stories, both verbal (Indian texts) and visual (reliefs), and their relationship. Although they are two distinct - but not opposed - ways of producing signs and meaning, they have been constructed on the social and religious values of the time. Reliefs are not only visual texts, but also cultural texts; they have been encoded with specific meaning and their decoding through semiotic practice is part of my thesis. By extending this approach for the reliefs to that of the overall architecture of the temple, I have attempted to set out the global sacred meaning of Angkor Wat, in a way not attempted by previous authors.

I am aware of the subjectivity involved in the process of dealing with the juxtaposition of texts and visual images, and with their encounter with the reader. This 'reading' process takes place within my own context, and tends not to be fundamentally different from what is contextualised. Although the signs encoded in the reliefs convey sets of meaning, it is the interpreter who triggers the meaning that may fit with the general intention of their producers, and with the contemporary views on Khmer art and history.

¹ *Women, Androgynes and other Mythical Beasts*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1980

Part I - Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1. ANGKOR WAT

The construction of Angkor Wat was initiated by king Suryavarman II, who reigned from 1113 to about 1150 AD, as a temple in honour of Vishnu. Although there is no evidence on who where the architects of the temple, it is more likely that it was conceived and planned by the royal Brahmin Divakara who had served two previous kings and was himself a descendant from a family of illustrious brahmins¹.

The temple has 4 enclosure galleries (see fig.1), the third of which, is decorated with splendid narrative reliefs²; of its corner pavilions, only the two at the western side are sculpted with 12 panels each. The ones to the eastern side are bare, undecorated, probably unfinished. The construction of the temple started around 1113-15 and took 30 years to complete. It seems that the central sanctuary was installed in 1126, and that perhaps all works of decoration (including reliefs) stopped after the king's defeat by the Chams in 1136³.

The two western corner pavilions are decorated with beautiful narrative reliefs. Each pavilion, having a cruciform plan, has 12 panels, some occupying the full wall, others only the wall over the window and the pillar at the side of the window; the wall over the lintels of each four doors are decorated with pediments (fig.2). The reliefs of corner pavilions, almost surely contemporaneous to the large panels of the western side of the temple⁴, and thus completed during the temple's

¹ Divakara *pandita* must have been very old at this time, as inferred from the stele of Sdok Kak Thom, translated by G. Coedes & P. Dupont, BEFEO, 43, 1943, p.145. See also Aymonier E., *Le Cambodge*, Vol.III, p. 516 and 520, Leroux, Paris, 1904

² In this text, by 'relief' is intended a low-reliefs or bas-relief, and by 'narrative relief' one representing facts and stories narrated in complex or single scenes.

³ Mannikka, *Angkor*, 1996, p.23, and Aymonier E., *Le Cambodge*, Vol.III, p.522, Leroux, Paris, 1904

⁴ On the ground that they are sculpted in the same style, they all completed, and there are no inscriptions proving the contrary.

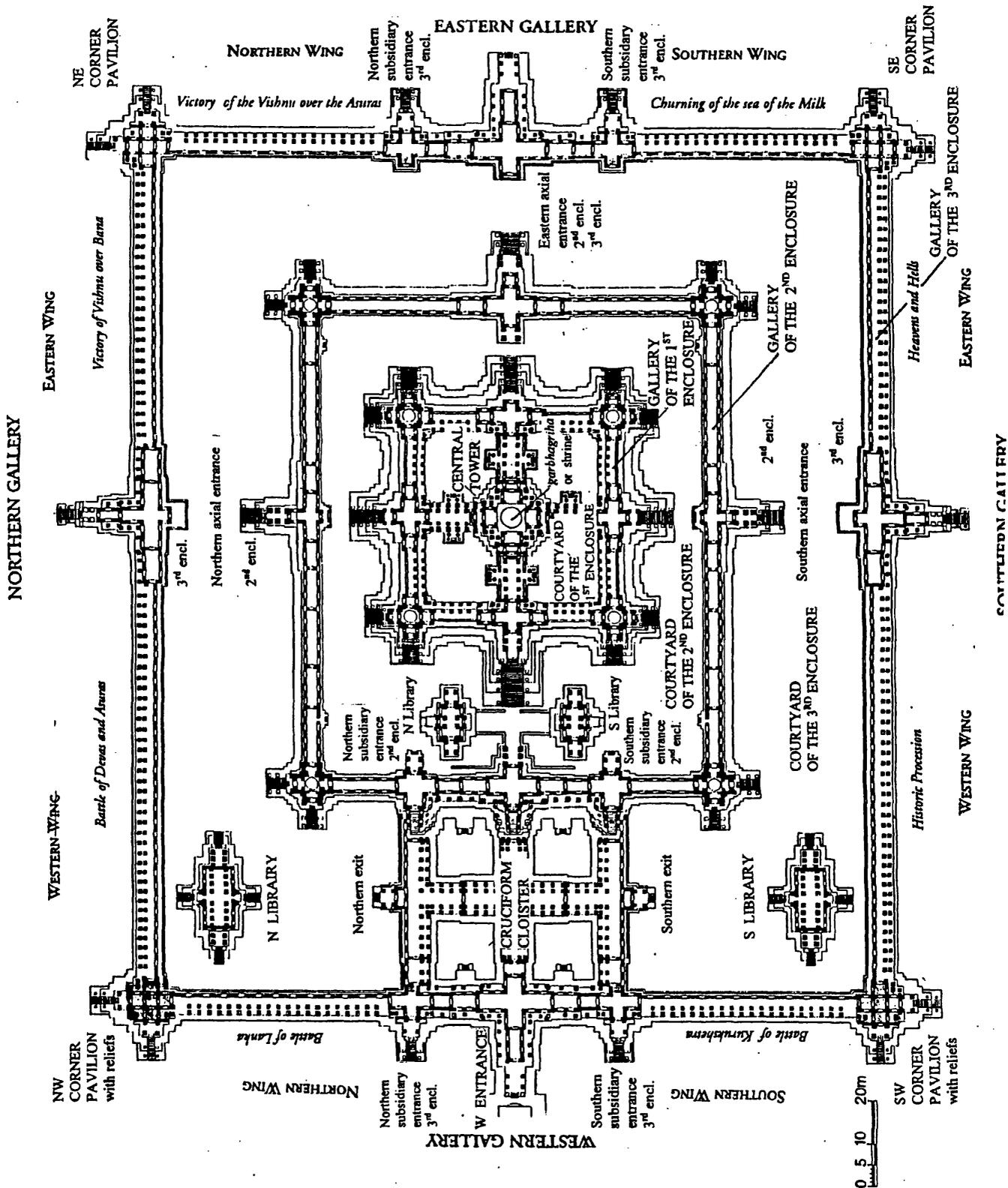


Fig.1 - Plan of the temple of Angkor Wat and its nomenclature

building, are finely executed, have a great narrative richness and variety of themes. I selected them as the topic of this dissertation because of these unique features, and for their meaning within the symbolic framework of the temple. Furthermore, they have not been studied in detail by any previous author.

The galleries of the third enclosure are decorated with extraordinarily long panels sculpted in very low relief illustrating Indian myths and legends. Although their height remains around 2,40 m, the length varies from 50 m to 100 m. They will be described in some detail later (chapter 4.2.) because of their importance in the overall meaning of the narrative composition of the temple, and their contribution to its sacredness. It is important to mention here that out of eight galleries of the 3rd enclosure, only five have been sculpted with reliefs that were completed at the time of the construction of the temple. One relief - at the eastern side of the temple - was abandoned before completion, that of The Churning of the Ocean of Milk, despite being so important for symbolising the concept of Creation essential to the Pancharatra cult. The long walls and the two galleries of the north-eastern quadrant were left totally undecorated with reliefs. They were carved in the 16th century, as demonstrated by George Coedes⁵ on stylistic and iconographic grounds, probably on the basis of existing drawing of the themes, stencilled in ink on the walls⁶. These factors, in addition to the absence of reliefs in the eastern corner pavilions, bring one to conclude that the western part of the temple had priority over the eastern side.

The orientation of the temple with the opening to the West, cardinal point of Vishnu, seen in conjunction with the fact that the overwhelming majority of the reliefs refer to Vishnu and his avataras of Rama and Krishna, are a clear evidence that the temple was dedicated to Vishnu and his incarnations.

⁵ Coedes G., *La date d'exécution des deux bas-reliefs tardifs d'Angkor Vat*, Journal Asiatique, fasc.2, 1962, p.235

⁶ This will be discussed later, in chapter 4.6. See also Roveda V., *The use of drawings for the making of the reliefs from Angkor Wat*, 7th International Conference European Association of Southeast Asian Archaeologist, Berlin, 1998

1.2. SURYAVARMAN II

Suryavarman II, probably a vassal prince from the Mun valley⁷, was the maternal grandson of a sister of Jayavarman VI (1080-1107), and not in direct line of succession to the throne. He managed to usurp the throne from Dharanindravarman I, Jayavarman VI's elder brother - who was the rightful king after the death of Jayavarman VI - probably when he was still quite young⁸. He thus became king Suryavarman II in 1113, and ~~started his own~~ ^{continued the} dynasty of Mahidharapura, one of the most outstanding dynasties of dominant rulers with Suryavarman II and Jayavarman VII. A warrior king, Suryavarman launched repeated war expeditions against the Dai-Viet (Vietnam), mostly ending in defeat, and against the Chams (from Champa) with whom he also established alliances to fight the Dai-Viet. During his rule, Thai territories and the town of Lavo (Lopburi) were occupied.

Suryavarman II reigned from 1113 to around 1150⁹; was Vaishnavite of the Pancharatra sect which had been popular in Cambodia since early times, although - from the epigraphy - we know that during his reign Shaivism was still the dominant religion; it is possible that the king himself may have been a worshipper of Shiva¹⁰. There are no historic records mentioning the reasons why Suryavarman II devoted such an important temple, the largest ever built till his time¹¹, to Vishnu. It would be interesting to know if his departure from the Shaivism of his Angkorean predecessors was part of an increased syncretism, which allowed the contemporaneous veneration of two sectarian beliefs as strong

⁷ In modern NE Thailand

⁸ The little we know about him comes from the inscriptions of Phnom Rung (Coedes G., *Inscriptions cambodgiennes*, 1954, Vol.5, pp. 297-305), of Phnom Sandak (*ibidem*, pp.300-311), and from Ban That (Finot L., BEFEO, 12, 1912, no.2, p.26). It appears that young Suryavarman challenged his aged great-uncle Dharanindravarman in a battle which 'lasted only for one day' and 'jumped on the enemy king's elephant and killed him, stripping the defenceless royalty from Dharanindravarman'. The Ban That inscription tells us that he fought the battle when still "in early youth, at the end of his studies". Eleanor Mannikka (University of Michigan Ph.D. Dissertation, 1985, p. 148), believes that this implies that he must have been 14-16 years old, suggesting thus that he may have been born in the 1021 Shaka. This is based on numerological coincidences with the measurements of elements of the sculpture and architecture of Angkor Wat.

⁹ Suryavarman II probably died around 1148-1150 during a maritime expedition against the Champa and Dai Viet (Groslier B.Ph., *Inscriptions du Bayon*, Publ. EFEO, *Memoires Archeologiques*, 1973, III-2, p.167)

¹⁰ Bhattacharya K., *Les religions du Cambodge ancien et l'epigraphie sanskrite*, RMN, 1997, p.47

as Vaishnavism and Shaivism, or whether it was part of a personal preference for the Pancharatra. There had been an illustrious precedent in king Suryavarman I who, although a Shaivite, permitted, and possibly encouraged, Buddhism. One can only suggest the hypothesis that the new king may have believed himself to be connected with Surya, thanks to his royal name, the old Vedic god of the solar dynasty, which had been gradually replaced by a far more powerful god of the same dynasty, Vishnu¹². Or, as I believe, it may be that Suryavarman II identified himself with Krishna who in the original texts was seen to rightfully usurp the worship of Indra (Suryavarman II descended from a family of usurpers). Thus the Angkor Wat's relief depicting the story of Krishna fighting the Indra-cult (S.12), instructing the cowherds to abandon the old ritual and to worship him, could symbolise Suryavarman's replacement of the older cult of Shiva with the new Vaishnavism. Other justifiable reasons may be that the King¹³ was in need of a more powerful god as a protector, after disastrous internal and external strife, or a god like Vishnu who had incarnated to redeem man, and was promising final releases from the endless cycle of reincarnations¹⁴.

Signs of syncretism are evident from the fact that, during his reign, the Bhadresvara Shiva from Lingaparvata (Vat Phu) continued to be the national divinity of Cambodia. Suryavarman II also completed the construction of this temple initiated during the last year of the reign of Jayavarman VI, and many images were erected in it by royal ordinance between 1118 and 1139. He also restored the temple of Ishvarapura (Banteay Srei)¹⁵, and completed the Phimai complex in NE Thailand; the former was dedicated to Shiva and the latter to Shiva and Vishnu (before the arrival of Buddhism).

¹¹ and the largest religious monuments of the world, now.

¹² Shiva who was a 'lunar' god.

¹³ Perhaps on the advise of his *purohita* (main minister and guru).

¹⁴ However, a theogonic discussion on the values of Shaivava and Vaishnava beliefs would take me too far in this thesis.

¹⁵ Bhattacharya K *Les religions du Cambodge ancien et l'epigraphie sanskrite*, RMN, 1997, p.47;

1.3. VAISHNAVISM AT THE TIME OF SURYAVARMAN II

In Angkorean times, Hindu religious belief was focused on the concept of the Trinity (Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva) which fulfils the 3 cosmic functions of creation, conservation and dissolution, and on the monistic tendency of both Shaivism and Vaishnavism, which emphasised the transcendence and immanence of the god. In Vaishnavism, greater importance was laid on the devotional aspect, or *bhakti*, the trusting abandonment of the self to the god, which alone is the source of salvation. In their syncretic attitude, the Khmers must have kept alive the diffused local animistic cults, of which unfortunately nothing is known from epigraphy, but that seem to be implied in the *devaraja* cult. Many hypothesis have been put forward by scholars on the meaning of the *devaraja*, since nothing is explained from the little epigraphic record available. Claude Jacques believes that the *devaraja* was a local divinity in charge to rule the Khmer country, 'the king who is god', (1990) and not the Khmer 'king who is god'.

The Pancharatra was the most popular form of Vaishnavism in Cambodia; by the end of the 10th century, all the Vaishnavite were designated by the names of Vaishnava, Pancharatra or Bhagavata or Satvata¹⁶, and king Yashovarman I (reigned 889-900) dedicated to them an *ashrama* at Prasat Komnap. Mentions to the Pancharatra are common in Khmer epigraphy; the earliest being the Funan's inscription of prince Gunavarman¹⁷ (5th century), followed by the Stele of Baset (Reign of Jayavarman I, 7th century) which mentions the 5 daily rites, the inscription of Kuk Sla Ket (Rajendravarman I, 944-968; K.522), and of Thvar Kdei (K.165), both contains the concepts of the 4 emanations (*Vyuhās*). In the inscriptions of Pre Rup (961) and Prasat Kok Po (Jayavarman V, 968-1001) the Khmers interpreted Vishnu's emanation in a different way from the orthodox Indian doctrine by attributing to Vishnu's 4 emanations (*Vyuhās*), the 3 qualities (*gunas*) of nature, while the Pancharatra considers them well above nature¹⁸.

no details are given on which part of the temple were affected by the restoration.

¹⁶ In the Narayana section of the *Mahabharata*, the Pancharata system is proclaimed as the religion of the Satvatas, and is also called the Satvata religion (Rajamani, p.193).

¹⁷ Bhattacharya K., *Les religions Brahmaniques dans l'ancien Cambodge*, EFEO, Vol. XLIX, 1961, p.97

¹⁸ *ibidem*, p.98.

The Vaishnavite doctrine of the Pancharatra is known from the early *Samhitas*¹⁹, in particular the *Ahirbudhmya Samhita*, the *Narayaniya* section of the *Mahabharata*, the *Gita* and *Anugita* portions of the *Mahabharata*, and - most of all - the *Bhagavata Purana*²⁰. Its doctrine is based on the identity of Krishna Vasudeva with Vishnu, elevated thus from the heroic 'tribal' status to the rank of Supreme God. Essential to the Pancharatra is the dogma of the *avatars*, and the doctrine of the Creation taking place in three phases (Pure Creation, Intermediate or Mixed Creation, and Impure or Lower Creation). From the early centuries of the Christian era, it was known in Cambodia together with other religious beliefs such as Shaivism (Shaivas and Pasupatas) and Buddhism. During the 9-10th century AD., the Pancharatra became powerful and underwent considerable divergence from orthodoxy, still retaining its quietism, a passive devotional contemplation, with extinction and withdrawal from all things of the senses²¹.

The doctrine of Creation²² starts during the last part of the night of the Great Dissolution when the *shakti* of Vishnu, figuratively spoken ~~and~~ ^{as} Lakshmi (Vishnu's consort), awakens and appears in the dual aspect of Force and Matter (Kriya and Bhuti), together with 6 ideal qualities, or *gunas*. The latter are combined in different ways into the hero-divinities (*Bhagavatas*) of Samkarshana, Pradyumna, and Aniruddha to create the *vyuhas* as emanation of Vishnu Vasudeva. This takes place in a chain of emanations, where each emanation originates from an anterior one, 'like a flame proceeding from another flame'. Samkarshana-Pradyumna-Aniruddha constitutes the original triad of single entities necessary for the creation: matter, mind, and individual self-awareness. Once they detach themselves from the God-matrix, manifest creation can commence in an orderly proliferation of forms. On top of all of them is a still higher God-concept, *Para* (Supreme)-*Vasudeva*, who - together with Vishnu - constitutes the 5th element of the pentad. To the Pure Creation further belong *the avatars*, that is incarnations of God, or his *vyuhas* or sub-*vyuhas*; they are 39, all listed in the *Sattvata Samhita*. The better known are: Krishna, Rama, Samkarshana or Balarama, Parasurama,

¹⁹ compositions, compendia

²⁰ Rukmani T.S., *A critical study of the Bhagavata Purana*, Chowkamba Publications, 1970, p.198.

²¹ According to Sharan M.K., *Sanskrit Inscriptions in Ancient Cambodia*, 1974, p.239.

Narasimha, Pradyumna, Trivikrama, Narayana, Hari, Kalkin, just to mention a few. In the *Samhita*, the *avataras* are distinguished between primary and secondary *avataras*; the former are like a flame springing from flame, and the secondary as a soul in bondage within a natural body possessed or pervaded, for some particular mission, by the power (*shakti*) of Vishnu. The primary *avataras* should be worshipped only by those seeking Liberation, while the secondary for mundane purposes. Concerning the origin of the *avataras*, it is believed that from Vishnu spring the Fish, the Tortoise, and the Boar; from Samkarshana the Man-lion, the Dwarf, Shrirama and Parasurama; from Pradyumna Balarama, and from Aniruddha Krishna and Kalki; the other avatars have to be distributed in a similar way. There are also some vegetal *avataras* like the crooked mango-tree in the Dandaka Forest. Inanimate objects like the image of Krishna, the Man-lion, Garuda, etc. become *avataras* of Vishnu as soon as duly consecrated to the Pancharatra rites, since Vishnu, due to his omnipresence, is capable to 'descend' into such images with a portion of his *shakti*, that is, with a Subtle body; this is the *arca avatara*, or incarnation for the purpose of ordinary worship. Finally, there are the *Antaryami Avatara*, which is Aniruddha as the 'Inner Ruler' of all souls; Antaryamin is the mysterious power which appears as instinct and the like; it is like a smokeless flame inside the lotus of the heart, and which plays an important part in Yoga's practice. The *avatara* function is that of meditation, since it is also for that reason that Vishnu is believed to have manifested himself under different forms.

Although we know from epigraphy that the Pancharatra was the most commonly practised form of Vaishnavism at the time of Angkor Wat, it is more likely that its metaphysical and religious concepts may have been understood and adopted mainly by the Khmer elite. Representations of myths and legends of Samkarshana, Aniruddha and Pradyumna are unknown in the temple, apart from the story of Pradyumna prisoner of Bana in a pediment of the central door of the southern gallery of the 3rd enclosure (Pl.20, bottom). One of the basic themes of the Pancharatra doctrine, that of the creation-dissolution's cycle, has a prevalent position at Angkor Wat's main entrance. Over the central door of the Western

²² Schrader Otto F., *Introduction to the Pancaratra and the Ahirbudnya Samhita*, Adyar Library, Adyar, Madras, 1916.

Gopura, one can see a lintel (Pl.16) elaborately sculpted with Vishnu immersed into the cosmic sleep, on the Ananta snake on the Ocean of eternity, ready to activate his power at each new period, starting thus a new creation's cycle. Since the Churning of the Ocean of Milk is an act of creation, this theme is commonly appearing in reliefs from various sites of the temple. Besides these Pancharatra favourites, it seems that the basic religious concepts of Vaishnavism were made visually evident through the traditional myths and legends of Vishnu and his *avatars*. The use of images was the most efficient way to communicate the beliefs in vogue at that time.

1.4. THE TEXTS ILLUSTRATED

After having examined the personality of Suryavarman II, the temple's founder, and established the context for his religious belief, I wish to review the texts that he and his brahmins may have deemed important to use for the creation of the visual narrative and its symbolism. I will examine, firstly, the status of the literary tradition versus visual tradition, in order to clarify the relationship of the narrative sculptural reliefs with the original Indian texts from where the stories have been taken.

Indian literary culture, and culture in general, had reached the Khmer country through two main processes. One was Indian initiative, the work of merchants, warrior adventurers and priests, starting from the early centuries of the first millennium. The other - much more plausible - was local initiative: Indian culture was not imposed from outside but was rather the creation of local rulers who invited Indian brahmins to serve them, and selected what they wanted from Indian ritual, lore and literature²³. Although these exchanges with India may have

²³ A. Kulke (*The Devaraja cult*, Cornell University, 1978, p.8) has questioned the concept of the so-called Indianisation of SE Asia, loaded with the presupposition of a superior and different society exercising an influence of some sort on a more backward one. There was a difference between northern India, the centre of high Sanskrit culture and great empires, and the kingdoms from southern India which in the earliest time were the main cultural source for the states of SE Asia, and much more on a level with them. The relationship between the southern Indian states and SE Asia would have been one of convergence, not domination.

started even earlier, there is only archaeological evidence for them (coins, pottery, beads) by the beginning of the Christian era²⁴.

The stories sculpted in Angkor Wat are generally faithful to the original Indian texts, visually representing what is narrated in the Sanskrit texts, almost in all details, and recounting the plot in its original version. This faithfulness, this close interaction between the texts and the reliefs, reproduces and continues the emotional values of the original texts, without altering them, in strict obedience to the orthodoxy imposed by the brahmins and elite.

The constant concern of the Khmer to adhere radically to the Indian texts applies also to other Angkorean reliefs from different locations and even of different age, implying that their creators must have relied either on written texts, or on an oral tradition faithfully transmitted through time. One is tempted to assume that, like in India, *Ramayana* manuscripts written on palm leaf could have been common amongst Khmer elite. V.Dehejia²⁵ notes that, a *Ramayana* manuscript (text only) from Nepal, on palm-leaves, as old as 1020 AD. has survived till today in India. Between then and the introduction of printing in the 19th century, the *Ramayana* was regularly copied by hand in all parts of the country, and more than 2000 manuscripts are known to exist. The sculpting of reliefs faithful to the classic stories may also be due to the sculptors using the extremely conservative *silpashastra* (sculpting manuals), handed down from one generation to the other. In Cambodia, these manuals and/or palm leafs copies would have made it impossible not to conform, in a totally faithful way, with the repetition of models and stories of the Sanskrit texts. They may also have already included a limited choice of themes, thus excluding the possibility of an idiosyncratic choice by the Khmer elite. Unfortunately, for the moment, there is no answer to all these assumptions, since no written text antedating the 17th century has been found in Southeast Asia.

²⁴ Mabbett I., & Chandler D., *The Khmers*, Blackwell, 1995, p.63

²⁵ Vidya Dehejia (editor), *The legend of Rama. Artistic visions*. Marg Publications, Bombay, 1994, p.10.

In this process of communication of Indian original texts, encoded with concepts and precepts, through the production of visual images and their reception, one may consider as 'noise' the use of different 'tellings' of the *Ramayana*, the various Puranic versions of the same story, and the introduction of local folkloric legends. The complexity of this message transmission is further increased by the inevitable problems inherent to any transmutation of literary texts into visual images, between the meaning of words and the meaning of images. When looking at the reliefs under consideration, we are facing the process of production and exchange of meanings. The Khmers have encoded the messages (the reliefs) with particular meanings on the basis of the significance that Indian texts had within the culture of their time. Initially encoded and decoded by the Khmers themselves, they are now received and decoded by us, interpreters of considerable cultural difference.

The Indian texts, and perhaps local legends, have been used to introduce values in Khmer culture in an arbitrary process specific to the time of Suryavarman II. It seems that if the *Puranas*, *Harivamsa*, and *Mahabharata* were addressing general metaphysical, religious and political principles, the *Ramayana* emphasised personal values in the figure of the protagonist, Rama the hero, who could be easily identifiable with the figure of the king, which would explain its great popularity. *Mahabharata*'s stories are known at Angkor Wat only in the large panel of the 3rd enclosure, where the only event chosen is that of the greatest epic battle of Indian mythology (battle of Kurukshetra). It may be, as I believe, that the Khmers could not see in the *Mahabharata* the heroic figure of the god/king they needed, since even Arjuna - the most popular personage - was considered too dependent on Krishna for decision making and choosing the path of action.

The Ramayana. The story of Rama is perhaps the most widely diffused tale in Southern and South-eastern Asia. Its diffusion and continuing popularity since the early centuries BC. in the sculptural reliefs of Indonesia and Cambodia is a matter of great interest. The *Ramayana*, is the oldest of the Sanskrit poems. It is dated from the middle of the 4th century BC in the early version that includes chapter 2-

6, while chapters 1 and 7 are later additions. The final version dates from the 2nd century BC to the 2nd century AD. For the purpose of this study, two main editions have been studied: the one in prose translated by H.P. Shastri²⁶ and the one in verses edited by R.P. Goldman²⁷.

The basic narrative plot, common to many different Asian oral and literary traditions, has branched out in a variety of shapes, with different openings and endings. It has various forms of narrative, numerous incidents, different kinds of characters, and remarkable details in the whole-connected series of events. Various events may have been introduced according to the taste and fancy of the narrators around central or subsidiary ideas, heroes or villains. In Northern India, the story of Rama is mentioned in the *Mahabharata* (about 800 BC), and the Tamil version contains verses referring to Valmiki's epic. The latter version is ascribed to the end of the 12th century, although some scholars believe it dates from AD 978. This posits the existence of Rama's story well before its literary versions. It is more likely that these, or similar oral traditions, circulated in South-eastern Asia with the arrival of Indian traders.

The Valmiki version is believed to be the first literary form of Rama's story, and therefore it has been taken by many scholars as the 'definitive' *Ramayana*, from which all other editions would 'divert'. This is questioned by Paula Richman (editor)²⁸, who prefers to consider it just one telling among many, like the Tamil narration of Kampan, the Cambodian *Ramaker*, and so forth. A comparison between Valmiki's and Kampan's *Ramayana* would reveal that they are telling the same story, with the difference that Kampan's rendition of some events is shaped by the Tamil *bhakti* tradition emphasising different religious aspects and the relationship between god and devotee. Kampan's *Ramayana* is not a divergence from Valmiki's, just a different voice within the *Ramayana* tradition.

²⁶ *The Ramayana of Valmiki*, first edition 1953; 5th edition 1993

²⁷ *The Ramayana of Valmiki*, Princeton University Press, 1984

²⁸ Richman P., *Many Ramayana*, University of California Press, 1991

The Thai and Cambodian written versions of the story of Rama, respectively the *Ramakien* and the *Ramaker*²⁹ (The Glory of Rama, written also *Ramker*), are 17-19th centuries compilations of previous tellings, too late to have been used for the reliefs of Angkor Wat. They diverge from all other Asian version. In Cambodia, the stele of Veal Kantel (K.359)³⁰ of the 7th century mentions that the *Ramayana* had to be recited daily, without interruptions, as were the *Harivamsa* and the Puranas. This indicates that Sanskrit literature was already popular in Khmer traditions since early times. The *Ramaker* does not emphasise Rama' heroism, nor his victory, but his 'glory' of spiritual order.

Exceptionally, there is, at Angkor Wat, a divergence from Indian texts with regard to the iconography and details of a few scenes. One example can be found in reliefs from the Corner Pavilions depicting Sita's *svayamvara* (N.6), which some scholars attribute to the mixing of details of the story of the *Ramayana* with that of *Mahabharata* (relief N.10), or to the use of a different 'telling' of the *Ramayana*. Similarly, in the panel of the Invitation of Vishnu to incarnate (N.11), there are noticeable iconographic anomalies in the representation of divinities. Both reliefs are discussed in detail later.

Bizot has elucidated the sequence of events leading to the quest of the elusive text containing the few variants from Valmiki's *Ramayana*. These variants were firstly noticed in 1923 by J. Przyluski³¹. He insisted that Khmer sculptors must have known a quite different local version of the story of Rama's archery contest to obtain Sita in marriage. Around the same time, W. Stutterheim³² expressed a similar opinion concerning Malay and Javanese reliefs which, since the beginning of the 9th century, depicted also stories from a version very different from the *Ramayana* of Valmiki, presumably a local popular version. Van Stein

²⁹ It is important to notice that both are composite names revealing a Sanskrit construction (Rama-glory, Ramakirti), the reverse of the normal Thai or Khmer construction. Therefore, these text may refer to the title of an old Indian work, now lost, or a local sanskritised name of Indian story, not of local origin. The term *Ramaker* is often replaced by *Ramkier*, *Reamker* or by the Sanskrit *Ramakerti*. (F. Bizot, 1989, p.28)

³⁰ Coedes G., *Inscriptions cambodgiennes*, III, 1929

³¹ Przyluski J., *La legende de Rama dans les bas-reliefs de Angkor*. Art & Archeologie Khmers, I, 1923, p. 319

³² W. Stutterheim, *Rama-Legenden und Rama-Reliefs in Indonesien*, Munich, 1925

Callenfels carried this hypothesis forward³³ when he attempted to explain the anomalies of some reliefs from Angkor Vat. At this point, François Martini started to defend the originality of the Cambodian reliefs and their fidelity to the Indian text by using the partial *Ramayana*'s edition, in Khmer language, by S. Kérpeles of 1937³⁴. However, he did not take into consideration the inevitable influence that visual elements of the famous reliefs may have had on the arrangement of certain events in later literary compositions, like for the *Ramaker*.

Following this, scholars started to speculate that probably that elusive local version may be reflected in the text of the *Ramaker*, arguing that there are some elements foreign to the *Ramayana* which are common in the *Ramaker*. Many singularities apparent in the *Ramaker*, however, lose their uniqueness when compared with the texts of the rich Puranic literature or the *Mahabharata*, or even with other sectarian Bengali, Tamil, Jaina and most of all, Malay legends of Rama. In particular, in the Tamil tradition the great monkey Valin intervenes in the Churning³⁵. A relief from Candi Prambanan, shows - already in the 9th century - the details of fish carrying away in their jaws the stones laid down by the monkeys; these details exist also in the Malay version, and in many others from India³⁶.

At this point, I would put forward the hypothesis that the Khmer must have been familiar with an oral version of the *Ramayana* that was very close to Valmiki's telling. This oral telling would account for details such as: the presence of a monkey in the scene of the Churning, the strange moving target with a bird which Rama has to hit at Sita's *svayamvara*, the belief that Rama and friends returned to Ayodhya by boat and not on the Pushpaka chariot (Phimai, Thailand), the sea animals which attempt to destroy of the causeway to Lanka (Phimai³⁷), and iconographic variations in the representations of Viradha and Kabandha. Although some of these variations are found in the modern *Ramaker*³⁸, we know

³³ Van Stein Callenfels, *Le mariage de Draupadi*, BEFEO, XXXIII, Paris, 1933

³⁴ F. Martini, *En marge au Ramayana Cambodgien*, BEFEO, XXXVIII, Paris, 1938 ; *Note sur l'empreinte du buddhisme dans la version cambodgienne du Ramayana*, Journal Asiatique, 1952

³⁵ Filliozat J., *The Ramayana in South-East Asian Sanskrit Epigraphy and Iconography*, New Delhi, 1983, p.202

³⁶ Zieseniss A., *The Rama Saga in Malaysia, its Origins and Formation*, Singapore 1963

³⁷ Boeles J.J., *A Ramayana relief from Pimai*, Journal of the Siam Society, 1969, p.143

³⁸ Martini F. *La Gloire de Rama. Ramakerti*, Edit. Les Belles Lettres, Paris, 1978,

that this is a much later text (16-17th century). The core of the elusive Angkorean version of the *Ramayana* was based on the Valmiki's telling to which new events were added while other were missed out. Variations of different type were also introduced, like the ones mentioned above. In this version, the Rama's epic was probably narrated at the time of the building of Angkor Wat.

The Puranas - They are Sanskrit verse texts (non-Vedic) containing mythological accounts, composed between 500 and 1500 AD, but based on much earlier material. Of the two categories - the *Mahapuranas* (or 'great', 'major') and the *Upapuranas* ('minor') - the former include the texts illustrated in Khmer reliefs, the most popular being the *Bhagavata Purana*, the *Shiva* and *Vishnu Purana*. The Puranas stress *bhakti* (devotion) and miraculous manifestations of divine grace, and remain the dominant texts of Hinduism's religiosity. They also reflect the theoretical cosmogony of the two big poems, the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, expand and systematise their chronology. They are the more exact and better worked out versions of mythological legends and historical traditions. Most *Puranas* have a strong sectarian bias, so that the same myths appear in very different versions in different *Puranas*.

For the purpose of this study the *Bhagavata Purana* (950 AD) has been commonly used, followed by the *Brahma Purana* (900-1300 AD), *Shiva Purana* (730-1350 AD), and *Vishnu Purana* (450 AD). The *Bhagavata Purana* is one of the texts that exercised the most direct and powerful influence on opinions and feelings of the Indian and Khmer people, more than any other *Purana*. Dedicated to Vishnu, or Bhagavata, it consists of 18,000 verses grouped in 332 chapters divided in 12 books (*shankas*). Its 10th book, narrating in detail the stories of Krishna's life, has been the most frequently consulted for my research; its stories are also the most popular in Indian folklore.

Mahabharata and Harivamsa - The *Mahabharata* comprises 100,000 verses divided in 18 books, supplemented by the 19th, the *Harivamsa*; it grew into its present form over a long period of time, from about 400 BC to 400 AD.

The epic narrates the events before, during, and after the great battle for kingship fought at Kurukshetra between the Pandavas and the Kauravas asuras, two family descendants of the great hero king Bharata. Central to the *Mahabharata* is the decline of *dharma* at the onset of the Kali-yuga age of history (the present era) which initiated at the time of the Kurukshetra war. To the 6th book of the *Mahabharata* belongs the *Bhagavad Gita*, the fundamental Hindu text. In it the emphasis is on Krishna's (Pandavas' allied) transformation of the battle of Kurukshetra from a mythic one between *devas* (Pandavas) and *asuras* (Kauravas) into a cosmic event during which Krishna re-establishes the *dharma*, the cosmic law and order. The battle is also referred as of *dharmas^khetra* (field of *dharma*) because during it, the *dharma* met its ultimate test. At the most critical moment of the fight, Krishna - as advisor of the Pandava prince Arjuna - transcends the action and evokes a comparable transcendence in those who attend him, making the Mahabharata the locus of *bhakti*.

The *Harivamsa*, probably composed around 400 AD, is generally considered as an appendix of the *Mahabharata*, although some scholars believe it is a Puranic compilation, probably of Southern Indian origin. It consists in 16,374 verses grouped into three parts. The first is introductory and gives details of the creation and of the patriarchal and regal dynasties; the second contains the life and adventures of Krishna; the last - and third - deals with the future worlds and the corruption of the Kali age. The second part is the most relevant, since it has inspired the reliefs depicting events in the life of the god³⁹.

Like in the case of the *Ramayana*, oral tellings may have been used also for Vaishnavite stories of which we do not have any textual record. This would explain the meaning of the image of a crocodile in Shaivite reliefs (Angkor Wat, Phnom Kulen) as well as in Vaishnava ones (Prasat Kravan), the presence of Garuda in the scene of the Churning (Preah Vihear). Not pertaining to any Indian text is the story of Krishna fighting a large lion (*simha*), ubiquitous in Khmer

³⁹ I have used the rare edition available at SOAS and BM, a French translation of 1834-35 by M.A. Langlois that includes 161 chapters.

lintels' sculpture, as well as of Krishna slaying his uncle Kamsa with a sharp sword, instead than with his sheer weight and strength.

PART I - Chapter 2

RELIEFS AND ARCHITECTURE

2.1. THE FUNCTION OF THE RELIEFS

The stories narrated in the reliefs may have been addressed only to members of the royalty and of the religious establishment, rather than aiming to educate and illuminate the pilgrims or the visitors to the temple. It may be, however, that people were allowed to see reliefs in some parts of the temples only during celebrations of special importance, but even then, accompanied by religious instructors. Many reliefs, particularly the ones from Angkor Wat and Bayon, must have been difficult to 'read' by the uninitiated.

The functions, the reasons for the creation and execution of the reliefs, has been a topic debated at length by a series of western scholars, which merits to be discussed in the following pages. What was the scope for their existence? Is their meaning related to their function? This analysis is important because the function of the reliefs may determine their meaning. Were the stories narrated in the reliefs addressed only to royalty and the brahmins? Were they part of the mechanism of merit gaining? Were they instead meant to educate and illuminate the pilgrims or visitors to the temple, ordinary people, or were they purely meant to be part of the sculptural decoration of the temple, having an aesthetic appeal? Were the reliefs subjected to norms governed by the structure and function of the monument?

I hope to address these questions at greater depth in my conclusions. It is important, however, that we assess the opinions and interpretations so far expressed in the available literature, as they should lay the ground for our understanding of the function of the reliefs. Previous authors have distinguished a few theories and function's categories that I discuss below at some length. This because they provide the scholar with a greater understanding of Khmer idealism and religious symbolism involving the "magic" transformation of an earthly site

into a celestial palace, and introduce the possibility of a metaphysical vision of Angkor Wat.

Magic function - In his lecture on the Indian legends illustrated in Khmer reliefs, George Coedes¹ was of the opinion that in Khmer monuments the role of the decorations (statues and reliefs with scenes and personages) was not aesthetic (the Khmer not having the concept of 'art for art's sake'), but had an 'evocative' function, that of bring about life into the temple. Coedes believed that the images of the gods had a 'magic' power that would transform the temple into a real divine world. In my opinion, Coedes explicitly uses the word "magic" perhaps in the sense of the bringing into operation of some occult controlling principle of nature that would influence the course of events, or a rite producing unnatural, surprising phenomena. Similarly, this was excepted from the magic circles of *mandalas*. It is probable that "magic" was of fundamental importance and at the basis of Khmer motivation for the production and reception of the reliefs. Furthermore, the representation of *apsaras* and *tevodas*, celestial dancers and courtesans, all over the walls of the temples reinforced the concept of the transformation of terrestrial stony residence into a heavenly palace. At Angkor Wat, the celestial palaces as seen in the reliefs of Heavens and Hells, are in the shape of pavilions flying in the sky supported by *garudas* and lions, while at the Royal Palace, robust caryatids/atlasses have the task of transforming symbolically the monument into a flying palace.

It follows that this celestial transformation is enacted also by reliefs representing legendary events of gods and mythological heroes, which would give life to the temple with their real presence. Reliefs were not made to edify visitors, but to contribute to the realisation and materialisation on earth of the divine world. The reliefs of Angkor Wat narrating the stories of Suryavarman II, and the ones of Bayon dealing with Jayavarman VII, had the objective of animating the temples with the actual presence of these kings. This is why - Coedes believed - it is essential for the images to be exact, correct in every detail, otherwise they would fail the objective, like a magic ceremony in which the essential rite was omitted or

¹ CEFEO (Cahiers de l'EFEO), 6, 1936, p.24-29

wrongly performed. This resulted in the simplification and, at the same time, complication of the iconography's task. If the sculptors knew the specific texts or were following a particular tradition they could control all the details of the image and the iconographic interpretation would be simple. If not, the identification of the scenes would be doubtful or incomplete, if not impossible. It was essential to make clear which text the reliefs referred to, or by which version the sculptor was inspired, otherwise the scenes could not be totally explained.

The importance of the flying palaces in Khmer mythology may be explained from an old local legend, probably based on an Indian tale, reported by Henry Marchal². There was a young prince by the name of PreaⁿKet Mealea, most beautiful and perfect, son of the king of Indraprastha (old name of Cambodia). His qualities were so outstanding that the god Indra living on Mount Meru in the sky, came to earth to abduct him. After a while, the *tevodas* (celestial beings like the *apsaras* but living on M. Meru), complained about his human smell and expressed their dissatisfaction with Indra. The latter had to please the *tevodas* and had the prince sent back to earth. To comfort him, Indra had a palace exactly like the one in the sky that the prince appreciated so much, built by all the celestial people, including the architect of the gods, PreaⁿPusnuka. The location was decided by the bull Nadinⁿ to the East-South-East of the hill of Phnom Bakeng. On this story was based, according to H.Marchal, the legendary origin of Angkor Wat.

In 1943, Coedes³ suggested that there were reliefs meant not to be visible under normal circumstances; they would have been sculpted above the ground and subsequently covered by a layer of earth and rubble. Since the temple was equated to Mt. Meru which extended under the earth and even under the sea, some reliefs had to be under the ground to reinforce the analogy, as he believed had been done also at Borobudur (Indonesia). As a further proof, there is the example of the Bapuon temple, where reliefs were carved at the base of the central tower and subsequently covered over by a layer of building material. Another example would be the Leper King Terrace depicting mythological animals sustaining

² Marchal H., *Les temples d'Angkor*, 1955, p.9

³ see revised edition of 'Angkor' of 1961, p.44

celestial palaces in the sky: the same (or very similar) scene was sculpted on the other side of the wall, but hidden under the earth.

In his classic work on Bayon, Stern⁴ disagreed with Coedes's theory, on the grounds that, in the case of the "Leper King Terrace", it was improbable that the Khmers wanted to symbolically hide the reliefs underground. Rather, this would have been due to a change of plans during the building of the temple, which would have involved the creation of additions and extensions. This would have given rise to situations in which previous reliefs had to be hidden or practically masked by the new ones, as it can be clearly seen in the temples of Preah Khan and Banteay Kdei. In this event, the hiding of reliefs would have been for practical, technical reasons, and not due to religious symbolism.

Funerary function. On the basis of the epigraphic discoveries of his time, G. Coedes⁵ thought that the main royal temples were funerary buildings, not public temples or places of pilgrimage. Palace-like, they were the last dwellings of the Khmer kings, where they returned to their divine aspect. The discovery of stone containers similar to sarcophagi brought Coedes to the conclusion that Angkorean monuments were both temples *and* mausoleums, funerary palaces where the mortal remains of the king would rest, and where a statue representing the monarch under the traits of a god was erected.

The funerary function of the temple can be related to the cult of ancestors, a common Asian cult which it is inferred to have been consolidated in Cambodia by the brahmins and Khmer royalty probably from around the 7th century. The basic concept is that the ancestors are intercessors between the supernatural and the people; they are not themselves the object of worship. A king who would build a temple to honour ancestors, and have the main statue of that deceased monarch carved to resemble the divinity he had venerated. For example, in each of the 3 towers of the temple of Preah Ko (879 AD.), built by Indravarman I, there was a statue of Shiva, flanked by his spouse, and an inscription mentioning all ancestral royal couples who preceded Indravarman. The king was thus elevated to

⁴Stern P., *Les Monuments Khmeres du Style de Bayon*, 1965 , p .122

⁵ G. Coedes, 1943 edit.1961, p.34

the rank of ancestral protector of the kingdom. Another example is the Ta` Prohm temple (mid.12th-early 13th centuries) in which king Jayavarman VII had a statue of his deceased mother sculpted in the form of Prajñāparamita, the Goddess of Perfect Wisdom; the temple's inscription also carries a lengthy list of ancestors.

The possibility that Angkor Wat was a funerary temple raises the question of how the Khmer people and the royalty perceived death. At the time of Suryavarman II's rule, Hinduism accepted the concept of the transmigration of the soul and the idea of *karma*, assuming that all beings are subject to a continuous round of endless existences, one after the other, the quality of which is determined both by the deeds of the previous lives and of the current life. Perhaps, for the royalty, transmigration could end into the essence of the god mostly venerated by the king, who would assume a divine or quasi-divine aspect after death. I believe that the Khmer rulers surrounded themselves with impressive rituals that assimilated them to gods, presenting themselves as more than human. The *devaraja* cult, instituted by Jayavarman II, was once seen as a cult in which the king himself turned into a god⁶. The royal cult of the *linga* started in early 9th century, implied that the royal *linga* would contain the essence of the king, thus elevating him to a divine or quasi-divine state. With regard to Suryavarman II, Coedes⁷ was of the opinion that, at his death he would rejoin the god who was his protector, Vishnu; hence his posthumous name of *Paramavishnuloka* (he 'who is in the realm of the Supreme Vishnu'). According to Le Bonheur⁸, in his lifetime Suryavarman II was regarded as an *avatar* of Vishnu (his manifestation on earth), who returned to heaven at his death.

Glorification of the king's function. In 1933 Bosch⁹ proposed a theory on the sequence and meaning of the large reliefs of Angkor Wat's gallery of the 3rd enclosure based on an analogy between the cycle of the sun and the life of the

⁶ Modern scholars (C.Jacques, 1990), however, believe that the 'god' of this cult is unlikely to be the ruler but rather an indigenous divinity elevated to a similar rank as king ('the god who is king') and supreme protector of Khmer land.

⁷ G.Coedes, 1961, p.31

⁸ Le Bonheur A., *Of Gods, Kings and Men*, Serindia Publications, 1995, p.18

⁹ BEFEO, 32, 1933, p.7-21

Vishnu¹⁰. All the relief panels followed a ‘gradation’ sequence in which the sun moving in the sky is equated to events in the life of Vishnu, the sun-king, the king who is a solar god. Since Angkor Wat was dedicated to Vishnu, the creators of the reliefs glorified the Khmer king by identifying him with the Vishnu, and at the same time attempted to make eternal his terrestrial events through Vishnu’s own legends.

This cycle would start with the ‘Churning of the Ocean of Milk’, when Vishnu entered in possession of the of the jewel Kaustubha which would allow him to govern on earth as a *chakravartin*. This event would be symbolic of the beginning of the rule of the Khmer king as a *chakravartin*. Then followed the victorious battles of the sun-god, alone or with the gods, against the forces of darkness and the dispersion of the devilish *asura* (panels of the ‘Victory of Vishnu over the *asuras*’, ‘Victory of Krishna over the *asura* Bana’, ‘Battle between the *devas* and *asuras*’). These great battles are comparable to the one the Khmer kings had to sustain against hostile kingdoms or principedoms, and against the fierce Chams. The climax of the cycle would be the Battle of Lanka, reflecting the military prowess of the King, while the decline has to be seen in the sinister and fratricide battle of Kurukshetra. The natural end of the cycle will have to be found in the ‘Historic procession’ which is the march towards the kingdom of the dead. From here the King will re-emerge deified as Vishnu and adored at the Vishnuloka (main Vishnu’s shrine) in the central tower of Angkor Wat.

I find this theory interesting because it is the first effort to construct a narrative cycle for the 8 large panels of the 3rd enclosure. However, Bosch himself was aware it has two weak points. Firstly, that it is difficult not to consider secular the content of the relief of the ‘Historic procession’, unless it is seen as an idealised procession ordered by the deceased king (hence the inscription of his posthumous name Paramavishnuloka under his image) going towards the last judgement represented in the next panel, that of the ‘Heavens and Hells’, which ends the cycle. The other problem was the contemporaneity of execution of the 8

¹⁰Vishnu is the Vedic god of solar light, energy and expansion, whose quality the king was regarded as embodying in his person and activities.

reliefs. Bosch admitted that if 2 of these reliefs were not contemporaneous to the rest, having been completed in the 16th century by Chinese artisans as Goloubew had hypothesised¹¹, then his interpretation would collapse. However - he argued - it was possible that the original drawings had been done at the time of the building of the temple. It is well known that Goloubew's intuition proved correct by the epigraphic study of Coedes, who was able to date accurately the completion of the 2 reliefs of the NE quadrant to the year 1563/64 of our era¹².

Decorative function. Gilberte Coral de Remusat¹³ had a much simpler conception: she believed that the 'low-reliefs with scenes', equivalent to what I call narrative reliefs, had a purely decorative function, like the reliefs with ornamental motifs taken from animal and vegetal kingdoms, and from jewellery. Furthermore, in the author's opinion, they were conceived by themselves, without taking into account the architectural elements to which they belong.

Religious function. Maurice Glaize¹⁴ was of the opinion that Khmer temples were not places of public cult (like in the West), but personal monuments of kings or aristocrats, pious foundations aiming at obtaining 'merits' for those who contributed to its building. In Glaize's quite fantastic vision, the Khmer faithful, assembled in the exterior enclosures, would bow down at the passing idols and the relics shown by the priests. They could then walk in procession around the sanctuary in the ritual direction of the '*pradakshina*', by keeping to the right, or in the opposite '*prasavya*' direction, reserved for funerary processions.

From Glaize's opinion one could assume that the famous reliefs of the galleries of the 3rd enclosure may have had a religious function - being visible to the pilgrims - a fact not mentioned in any Khmer inscriptions and of which we do not have proofs. However, considering that they were sculpted on the exterior walls of the gallery, facing the outside of the temple and the large surrounding

¹¹ Goloubew V., *Artisans chinois a Angkor Vat*, BEFEO, 14, 1914, p. 53

¹² G.Coedes, *La date d'execution de deux bas-reliefs tardifs d'Angkor Vat*, J.A., 1962, fasc.2, p.235

¹³ Coral de Remusat G., *L'art khmer, les grandes etapes de son evolution*, Vanoest, Paris, 1951, p.75

¹⁴ *Les Monuments du groupe d'Angkor*, 1944, 1993 edition, p. 33

courtyard, it is possible that they were meant to be seen and studied by the faithful. Perhaps the access may have been possible only during festivities or special occasions, and under the guidance of brahmins, as in modern practice. It is more likely, however, that the pilgrims were not allowed to go beyond the 3rd enclosure, inside the temple, and get closer to the main sanctuary. In the past, in India the devotee was not permitted to enter the shrine, nor did he need to do so: when the priest invoked a deity in the image that stood inside the *garbhagrha* ('sanctum sanctorum'), the layman stood at the threshold to witness the god's presence. This experience of the divine was called *darshana* = seeing¹⁵.

Astrological/numerological function. The first author to perceive the significant numerological meaning and possibly astronomical function of Khmer temples has been Filliozat¹⁶ in his study on the Bakeng, the central monument of the first town of Angkor founded by Yashovarman at the end of the 9th century.

The architecture of this temple followed a numeric plan with the result that there are 33 towers at each cardinal point, recalling the 33 gods (*Trayastrimsha*) which inhabit M. Meru. Furthermore, seen from any side, the monument presents 33 divine residences like M. Meru. The total of all the temple's towers is 109 and refers to the central tower in the axial pole and 108 surrounding towers representing the cosmic revolutions around this axle, resulting from the product of 27 lunar houses multiplied by 4 lunar phases. Moreover, 108 is the basic number of the Great Year, and the sacred number of Indian tradition. In general, the function of the monument conforms to the Indian ideal of royalty and the exaltation of the merits (panegyric) of Yashovarman (see the inscription from Sdok Kak Thom, for example).

In 1976, a group of American scholars, Stencel, Gifford and Moron¹⁷, published a paper revealing a cosmic symbolism between structures and meaning in the design of Angkor Wat. The theme was considerably expanded by

¹⁵ T.S. Maxwell, 1997, p.15

¹⁶ *Le symbolism du monument de P.Bakeng*, BEFEO, 44, 1947-50, p.527

¹⁷ Stencel R., Gifford F., and Moron E., *Astronomy and Cosmology at Angkor Wat*, Science, 1976, p.281.

Mannikka (married name of Moron) in her already mentioned work of 1996¹⁸. There, on the basis of the study of a very large number of measurements of architectural elements of Angkor Wat, Mannikka reached the conclusion that numbers have been encoded with several meanings of Indian cosmology and numerology. She also noticed that some alignments of the monument's structures are related to astronomical events. On this basis, she assumed that the temple is a sort of religious and astronomical text represented in its architecture, a text that could be read by learned people who walk along its main paths.

Following an extensive analysis of the measurements of the Khmer temple, and its relationship with Indian sacred numerology, Eleanor Mannikka put forward theories to explain their astronomical, cosmological and symbolic significance. Although it seems to me that some of her conclusions are unsubstantiated or pushed to the limit, most of her basic assumptions are a positive contribution to the study of Angkor Wat. In particular, her treatment of the stellar origin of Vishnu¹⁹, in which, at an unspecified point in Indian history, Vishnu became associated with the star Altair in the constellation of the Eagle (Aquila). From these, it follows that Garuda, who looks like an eagle, had to become his mount. The history of the Eagle constellation, which goes back to ancient Mesopotamia, explains why Vishnu and the eagle are joined together. Moreover, because the great constellation of the Eagle symbolises the afternoon sun, Vishnu has an astronomical solar connection. At the same time, in Brahmanical cosmology, Vishnu is the highest of all solar gods (*Vishnu Purana*, Book 2, chapter 11), and his mount is the eagle-like Garuda. Putting all this together, it seems as though that in 12th century Cambodia, Vishnu ruled supreme over the day, as the 'Eye of the sun', and over the night, as the 'Living Eye' of Altair.

¹⁸ Mannikka E., *Angkor Vat, Time, Space, and Kingship*, 1996

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, pg.60

This is relevant to this study of the reliefs because, according to the Mannikka, as the sun progresses on its annual round, it illuminates in a specific way the great continuous series of panels of the 3rd gallery, revealing a most intriguing relationship between the passage of the sun and the content of the reliefs. In the first part of the year, it illuminates the creation ('Churning of the Ocean of Milk'). During the autumn equinox, on the side of the setting sun, the reliefs depict the terrible battle of Kurukshetra. During the dry season, the north gallery loses the sun, while the reliefs on the south gallery, lit up by the sun, take as their theme the kingdom of death. Also to be noticed is the fact that, given the harmony between Angkor Wat and the sun, it is hardly surprising that the name Suryavarman meant 'protected by the sun'.

In conclusion, the views of the previous authors contain, to a great or smaller extent, an element of truth. Bosch and Mannikka's theories have the good point of stressing the importance of astronomy and cosmology, of which the Khmer seem to have had great knowledge. On the other hand, the decorative and religious functions, in my opinion, were more relevant to the reliefs of the corner pavilions. It is clear that the king would acquire further merits if his temple were ornate with decorative and narrative reliefs of which the symbolism would enhance and evidence a religious belief. It was also making concrete his extraordinary power as a king. I believe that sculptural low reliefs had the function of enriching the monument with signs of sacredness. They transformed a terrestrial building into a godly palace on a mythological mountain, and each of the narrative reliefs further contributed to the building-up of a sacred discourse permeating the entire temple of Angkor Wat.

2.2. ARCHITECTURAL SYMBOLISM

I assume that in ancient Cambodia, as in India, the sacred concepts on which the temple was based had been formulated by the highest religious authority, the brahmins, and its construction carried out by the main architect, who was also a religious teacher, and his specialist assistants. The importance of the role of the architect/s is attested by an Indian tradition reported by T.S.

Maxwell²⁰. According to him, in India, for the chief architect and his 3 assistants, a divine genealogy was provided by the invention of a myth narrating the descent of their ancestors from the four sons, by daughters of the gods, of the faces of Brahma. The myth would gather spiritual power from all directions of space, and endow with it the builders involved in the enterprise of erecting the temple. The ceremonial nature of temple-building became a minor religion in its own right, complete with a set of deities, a mythology and a system of rituals unique to the science of sacred architecture (*vaṣṭu-vidyā*).

The Khmer temple was conceived according to the Indian tradition of a temple-mountain, of being the image of the mountain where the gods lived, Mount Meru. This mountain was located north of the Himalayas, surrounded by the four water extensions (seas or rivers) which separate the four continents where many different creatures lived. Mt. Meru was floating over the primordial ocean, symbolically represented by moats or the barays surrounding the temple (or the city as clearly shown at Angkor Thom). Since this mountain had four peaks with a higher fifth at the centre, the central sanctuary of Angkor Wat had to have a similar configuration. Moreover, since Mt. Meru was the centre of the universe in Indian cosmology, Angkor Wat too had to be the centre of the cosmos. This centre of the world was 'the centre' by definition, the infinitesimal point through which the cosmic axis passes; it did not represent a profane geometrical space, but a place charged with sacred meaning. It was the idealised 'centre' of the Khmer empire and the residence of the god with whom the king had an intimate affinity. The mythological mountain is a motif that reappears in the narrative reliefs studied here, either as Mt. Meru, Mt. Govardhana or Mt. Maniparvata, reflecting the attachment of the Khmers to the cult of the mountain. This cult was initiated in 802 AD. by king Jayavarman II as a royal cult at the top of Mt. Kulen - considered a copy of Mt. Meru - where the essence of royalty would reside into the linga erected at the centre of the temple. Together with the installation of the royal linga came the appointment of the king as *devaraja*; the sacredness of this institution was probably based on the underlying assumption of the holiness of Mt. Kulen.

²⁰ T.S. Maxwell, *The Gods of India*, Oxford University Press, Calcutta, 1997, pp.19-20

Together with the ritual definition of a 'centre' through which passed the axis of the cosmos came the accurate orientation of the temple. Through the application of the formulas in place at that time (cosmological, astrological, geomantic, numerological, architectural, iconographic, and so on), a space was charged with meaning and physically given form, like a *mandala*. The rite of deciphering, decoding, this pattern-space by walking around the temple, either by the *pradaksina* or in the *prasaya* way, would have brought the visitor to discover certain truths and his/her own 'centre'. This trip, as an act of initiation, may be compared to the Tantric trip from an external *mandala* into an interiorised *mandala*²¹. The ascent to the terraces of the mountain-temple as an ecstatic journey to the centre of the perfect Hindu universe, must be seen ultimately symbolic of the perfection of the Hindu world over which Suryavarman II ruled with the blessing of his god, Vishnu.

Besides being at the centre of a town and the capital of the kingdom, as pointed out by Claude Jacques²², Angkor Wat may have been the final destination of a pilgrimage from other parts of the Khmer kingdom. The focus of the pilgrimage would have been its shrine in which was condensed the element of hope which justifies all pilgrimages. However, since there are no inscriptions giving light on the time of Suryavarman, this aspect of the Khmer faith and tradition also remains unresolved.

The orientation of temples has always been an essential feature of Indian architecture. The Brahmans believed that the whole earth, once floating and mobile, became stable when fixed by the cardinal points²³. The main points, or corners, of earth are those where heaven and the earth meet, where the sun rises and sets, the East and West. The other cardinal points complete the square and each of them has its own regent. According to Sanskrit treatises on religious architecture²⁴, the north-east is also the place where the principle of Shiva is positioned, while the position of that of Surya is in the East, that of Vishnu to the

²¹ See Eliade M., *Images and symbols*, Princeton University Press, edit. 1991, p.53.

²² *Angkor*, 1997, p.152

²³ Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*, Motilal, Delhi, 1976/1991, pg. 29.

west, that of Yama to the South²⁵ and of Brahma at the centre²⁶. The general Indian rule that the temple's orientation must face east was adopted by the Khmer, with the exception of Angkor Wat that is facing West²⁷, because it was dedicated to Vishnu. The west also meant death, in association with the cardinal point where the sun sets and disappears, while the East was considered symbolic of life because it is where the sun rises. It is thus not surprising that a probable funerary function of the temple may be one of the elements explaining the western orientation of Angkor Wat.

Another theory on the western orientation has been put forward by the architect Henri Stierlin²⁸ in 1970. According to the rules of the Indian priests-architects, a temple must be oriented towards the city, never to present its back to it. Considering that Angkor Wat was located within the SE quadrant of the old town of Yashodharapura, it must be opening to the west, towards the city and perhaps Phnom Bakeng. If it were open to the east, like all other temples, it would be breaking the rules, facing outside Yashodharapura and overlooking the eastern moat. By inverting the orientation, its entrance would be oriented perpendicularly to the axis of Yashodharapura and look over the internal part of the old city, following the rules of Indian urbanisation.

That the western orientation of the temple had an intense meaning for Angkor Wat's planners and builders is demonstrated not only by the main architectural elements, which are at the West side (imposing causeway, entrance pavilions, cruciform cloister, main shrine opening to the west, etc.), but also by the fact that the decorative elements were completed first²⁹ in the Western gallery of the 3rd enclosure (the only one which is decorated with reliefs) and its two

²⁴ The *Vaikhyanagama* II, the *Kamikagama* XLIX, the *Dandaka* 109-13, and a few more, in S.Kramrisch 1976, p.234.

²⁵ Claude Jacques, when mentioning the unusual orientation of the Khmer temple of Phimai (eastern Thailand) to the South, or more exactly SSE, considers the South as 'the direction of the ancestors', in: *Angkor*, Thames and Hudsons, 1997, p.149.

²⁶ Stella Kramrisch, 1976/1991, p. 233

²⁷ In the Angkor's area there is another temple facing west, the 'Small monument to the east of the North K^{leang}' described by M.Glaize in his Guide at page 162, and considered being in the style of Banteay Srei.

²⁸ Stierlin H., *Angkor*, Office du Livre, Fribourg, 1970, pg. 146

²⁹ G.Coedes, 1962, p. 235

corner pavilions. Although some walls of the 3rd gallery had probably been decorated at this time, the ones of the NE quadrant were left bare and sculpted only in the 16th century³⁰. There are no signs that relief panels were ever begun in the eastern corner pavilions.

2.3. ANGKOR WAT AND SPACE

To have a complete vision of Angkor Wat one has to ponder over the understanding of 'space' in Khmer culture. The application of H. Lefebvre's notion of space³¹ is very enlightening. It involves that space is perceived, represented and lived as a coherent whole, as the result of a common language, a consensus of codes. Lefebvre distinguishes 3 main conceptual elements: the '*spatial practice*', the space's perceived and experienced by the member of a society, the space society produces and appropriates; the '*representations of space*', i.e, the space conceived by the planners, the urbanists, the architects, as distinct from the '*representational spaces*' which are the spaces lived through images, symbols, and codes. The latter is the space of imagination, of the artists and it overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects.

Since Lefebvre's notion of space can be applied to Khmer culture, I believe that by using the specific signs and codes of their own culture as well as the *shastras*, Khmer architects defined an architectural space ('representation of space') which was likely to have been dominated by its symbolism ('representational spaces') rather than by its use as the 'spatial practice' of its planners and users. In other words, Angkor Wat has been conceived as a project for a symbolic representation. In India and in Angkorean Cambodia - however - a division between representations of space and representational spaces was not experienced like in the West (Lefebvre, 1974)³². At this time the representation of space, the space of the architects (the space created by the temple and its city) tended to closely combine with the representational space of the artists, by fusing

³⁰ G. Coedes, 1962, *ibidem*

³¹ Lefebvre H., *The production of space*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1996,p.40

³² *Ibidem*. At p. 42, the author raises the doubt: "Whether the East....has experienced a contrast between representations of space and representational space is doubtful in the extreme."

the symbolism of a cosmic mandala and of Mt. Meru, with images of Heavens and Hells, of the primordial Churning, of the mythic battles and so on.

Khmer representation of spaces, as shown by temple's and palace's plans, was derived from ancient knowledge and ideologies based on mythological, astrological, astronomical and cosmic space. The worlds were crowded with gods; Mt. Meru was surrounded by oceans, with the axis of the Universe passing through it; below the earth's surface, were the fires of hell and evil spirits (the *rakshasas*). This space was continuously criss-crossed by *devas* and *asuras*. These representations of space are undistinguished from the representational spaces of the temples, pavilions, and palaces (in wood, now disappeared), all richly decorated with statues, low-reliefs and possibly murals which described and interpreted the cosmological and mythological concepts represented above. I am of the opinion that, in their construction of space, Khmer architects must have considered, besides the cosmic symbolism intrinsic in the mountain-temple, the creation of a hermeneutical field within the architectural space, by charging it with meaning through the mythological and secular representations of the reliefs. This close relationship between the representation of space and reliefs facilitates my reading and understanding of the reliefs' contribution to the sacredness of the temple.

For the brahmins and the elite the perception and conception of space was one and the same. Their notion of cosmic space was indissoluble from the space in which they inhabited, and their temples were permeated with religion and cosmology. Khmer architects and sculptors developed a representation of space through the architectural device of building each enclosure on a terrace higher than the previous (external) one. They thus achieved a sort of 'perspective' effect, a technique that promoted the primacy of the gaze in a kind of 'logic visualisation' rich in imaginary and symbolic elements. Moreover, the spatial practice of the Khmers embraced not only the network of local roads close to peasant communities, temples, monasteries and 'cities', but also the roads between towns and the pilgrimage trails. It is reasonable to assume that spatial practice, representations of space and representational space - in other words

perceived, conceived and lived space -contributed, in different ways to the production of space according to the society of that historical period³³.

The site on which the temple was constructed was a space of the landscape, chosen for its uniqueness and for some specific quality like having had significance for the ancestors, or being the only large piece of land available within the precincts of the old town of Yashovarapura, that included pre-existing ancient foundations. It may have been chosen for its proximity, to the NE, to the old site on which the city of Kapilapura was later built. The temple's architecture transformed this natural space into a political realm by means of the symbolic mediation of its shrines' pinnacles, the *gopuras*, the statues of the god and the low-reliefs. Those who produced this space, the brahmins and the kings, also managed it; they were the religious-political forces which occupied this space and controlled it.

³³ *Ibidem*, pg. 46

PART I - Chapter 3

DESCRIPTION OF RELIEFS FROM THE CORNER PAVILIONS

3.1. PREVIOUS AUTHORS

Before entering into the detailed description of the reliefs from the corner pavilions, I present a review of the publications from previous authors that have provided me with a basis for a greater understanding of the meaning of the reliefs. In general, these reliefs do not seem to have stimulated the same scholarly attention that has been focused on their greater counterpart, the enormous reliefs of the gallery of the 3rd enclosure. Comparatively little has been made available after the fundamental work of George Coedes published in 1911¹, based on his analysis of the plaster casts produced in Cambodia by Doudart de Lagree in 1863-66². Coedes did put together - for the first time - the scanty suggestions and interpretations previously put forward by F. Garnier³, L. Delaporte⁴, J. Moura⁵, A. Bastian⁶, and E. Aymonier⁷, based on comparisons with the Sanskrit texts of Indian epics and Puranas. Coedes also noticed that the arrangement of the reliefs' topics did not seem to follow any apparently "logical" order, and that the subjects of the corner pavilions were placed haphazardly. In his analysis, however, the subjects are distinguished by their protagonists: the stories of Rama, of Krishna/Vishnu, and of Shiva, plus a further category of reliefs that can not be interpreted. The great knowledge and insight of Indian and Southeast Asian cultures of this author allowed him to be right from the outset in his interpretations of the stories. This created the basis for subsequent authors to

¹ Coedes G., *Les bas-reliefs d'Angkor Vat*, Bulletin de la Commission Archeologique de l'Indochine, Paris, 1911, p.170.

² They were exhibited at the Exposition Universelle of 1867, then lost, to be re-discovered by A. Le Bonheur in 1973. Now the property of the Musee Guimet, they are stored in the Abbey of St. Riquier. One was exhibited in Luxembourg in September 1997, at the exhibition of Jaroslav Poncar of photographs of the reliefs from Angkor Wat and Bayon.

³ *Voyage d'exploration en Indochine*, Le tour du Monde, 1869-73

⁴ *Voyage au Cambodge*, Delagrave, Paris, 1880

⁵ *Le Rayoume du Cambodge*, Leroux, Paris, 1883

⁶ *Die Voelkter des Oestlichen Asien*, Leipzig, 1886

⁷ *Le Cambodge*, Leroux, Paris, 1901-4

recognise the original texts of almost all the few stories that he left un-named. In this thesis, I propose the completion by identifying the stories of two reliefs which represent the story of 'Krishna and the *gopis*' (N.11), and of 'Akrura's vision' (N.4), as it will be amply demonstrated in the following chapters. The proposed interpretation of 'The betrothal of Shiva' (S.2) is still questionable.

After Coedes, scholarly contributions to the interpretation of the reliefs of the corner pavilions were limited to critical assessments of the elements of a few panels. In the previous pages I have discussed the opinions of Jean Przyluski⁸ (1921) and of Francois Martini⁹ (1938) on reliefs depicting 'Sita's svayamvara' taken from the *Ramayana*. A further contribution was made by Madeleine Giteau¹⁰ (1965) about the reliefs previously reputed by Moura and Aymonier to represent 'Ravana entering Indra's palace', which was doubted by Coedes. For Giteau it refers instead to the story of 'Shiva *Bhikshatanamurti*', when he appears to the *gopis*, scantily dressed, in the Pine Forest, which I believe to be correct, and that I re-name 'Shiva in the Pine Forest' (see relief's description, S.7).

Very little has been written since the 1960s on the reliefs in the corner pavilions. Albert Le Bonheur (at the time ~~Director~~^{Curator} of the Musée Guimet), in his comprehensive work on Angkor of 1989, does not provide any description or critical comments on the various panels (only 4 photographs) of the corner pavilions, which he calls 'cruciform pavilions'. However, he summarises the problem of the arrangement of the themes of the various panels. Firstly, not all the themes depicted in the reliefs have been identified; secondly, if there is a "logic" in the arrangement, each individual pavilion has its own, which is also independent from that of the large reliefs of the galleries. He notices, moreover, a correspondence of subjects between the diametrically opposed arms of the cross, as well as between some panels located on each side of the transversal arms. I will return to this topic later in the conclusions. Le Bonheur added further details to his

⁸ *Art et Archeologie Khmeres*, 1921, 1, p.319

⁹ EFEO, 1938

¹⁰ *Arts Asiatiques*, 1965, XI, 1, p.285

views on the corner pavilions' reliefs in the 1995 publication with photographs by Jaroslav Poncar¹¹.

Chandra M. Bhandari (India's Ambassador to Cambodia in the early 90s) presents some summary descriptions of the corner pavilions' reliefs in his book on "Saving Angkor" of 1995¹². Interestingly, he provides some opinions which are probably based on Southern Indian local traditions; they are critically discussed in the chapters dealing with the reliefs S.5, S.11, N.10.

Recently, in 1966, Eleanor Mannikka¹³ in her controversial book on the astronomical and cosmological meaning of Angkor Wat's architectural measurements, goes through the narrative reliefs of the 3rd enclosure, including the ones from the corner pavilions. In her reading of the latter, she follows the traditional interpretations of French scholars (with the only exception of the relief of the Viradha/Kabandha story, see description of relief S.12). However, she is the first author to believe that there is some logical pattern in the sequence by which the stories are arranged, according to a 'geometrical outline' in the placement of the reliefs. In the NW corner pavilion this would follow two swastika patterns based on the reliefs content, composition and location, particularly when scenes are paired. The arms of the swastika would meet at the centre of the room, where an important statue would 'generate' both patterns. As Mannikka puts it, in the SW corner pavilion the reliefs can be paired also according to their subject matter and - in some cases - by their composition as well, following a lotus or a flower with a 4-petals pattern. The centre of this pattern would have been a *linga* sculpture, considering the abundance of reliefs devoted to Shiva in this pavilion. Although I have many reservations about Mannikka's theories¹⁴, her

¹¹ *Of Gods, Kings and Men*, Serindia Publications, London 1995, p.84

¹² *Saving Angkor*, White Orchid Books, Bangkok 1995.

¹³ Mannikka E., *Angkor Wat, Time, Space, and Kingship*, Univ. of Hawai'i Press, 1996

¹⁴ In Mannikka's challenging work resulting from her 20 years of research, there are some points which need clarification, like the unit of measurements used (the cubit arm of the 16 years old king), the assumption that some measurements had to be taken following paths of circumambulation which include one or three circuits around or along a point where images had presumably been placed by the Khmers, and so on. Her database for detailed measurements is based on plans of the temple published by G.Nafylian in 1960, which do not seem to be 'real plans' reproducing measurements and angles of the monument as they really occur in the temple, but somehow idealised plans (personal communication for Pascal Royere, architect of the EFEO, February 1998).

unconventional approach and interpretation of the thematic program have stimulated my critical attention; I will return to this point in my conclusions.

3.2. THE RELIEFS

The basic technical data of the reliefs that will be discussed in detail in the following pages are as follows. Each pavilion - having a cruciform plan - has 12 panels, some occupying the full wall (c. 4,5 m high and 3,5 m wide), others only the wall over the window (c. 3,00 m high and 3,5 m wide) and the pillar at the side of the window (c. 2,00 m high and 2,00-2,30 m wide; see fig.2, 3, 4). Over the lintel of each of the four doors, the walls are decorated with a horizontal flat **pediment** (c. 2,00-2,5 m high and 3,00 m wide), composed by a flat tympanum framed by the ~~an~~ undulating naga, as in all Khmer pediments. The reliefs are sculpted on the wall's large stone blocks laid over the lintel made of a single massive sandstone slab. The lintel, which has the function of spreading the weight of the overlaying structure on the doorjambs, is itself unadorned. Therefore the mentioning of these reliefs as belonging to the lintel put forwards by some authors (Mannikka, 1996) is wrong.

The technical terms used in my description are explained here below. Khmer reliefs sculptors made use of the most common pictorial device, the ground line, or base line, on which the figures appear to stand. This probably in order to supplement a weak concept of picture space and the adoption of a less systematic perspective system, the bird's eye view. The ground line evolves into a supporting surface, a sort of narrow platform on which images rest and from which they spring. It anchors the figures and objects and links them together on the picture plane, giving them a rudimentary but definite spatial orientation. The use of ground lines leads to a horizontal arrangement of the elements of the relief, and this in turn leads to another important characteristic of Khmer reliefs, the use of registers. A **register** is in effect a strip existing between 2 parallel ground lines. It is used as a means to organise a complex narrative. One of the best examples

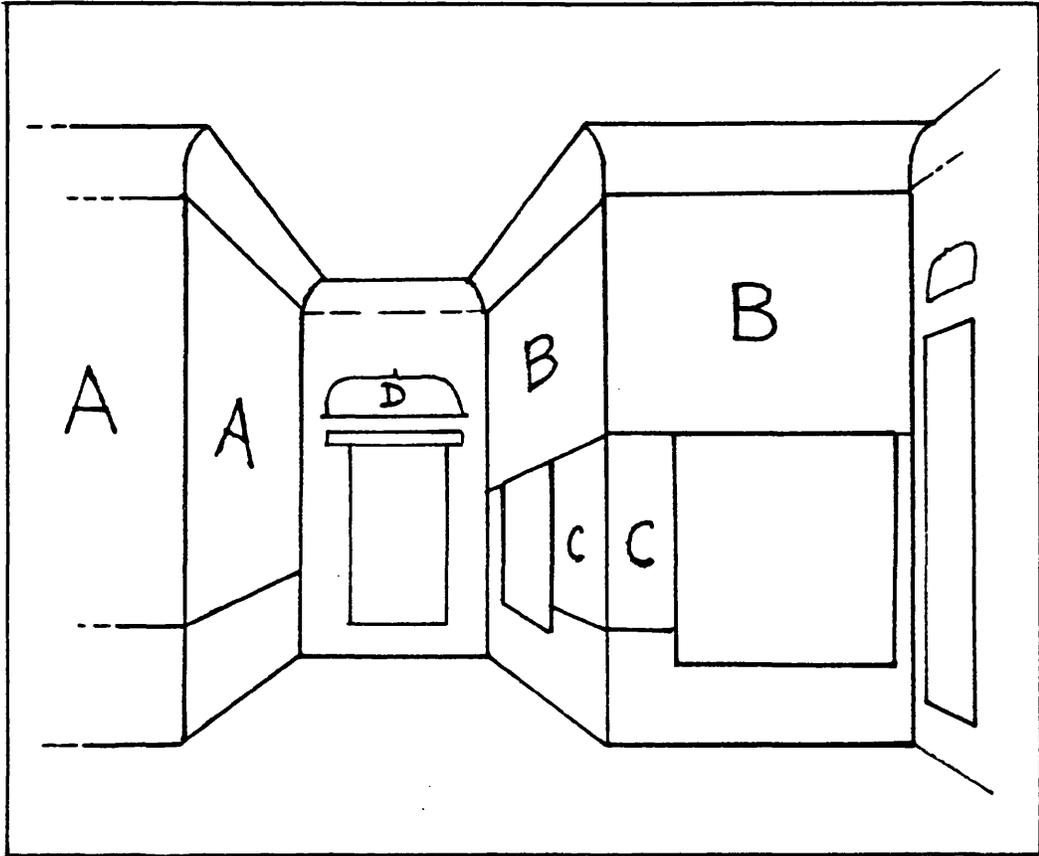


Fig.2 - Nomenclature of the walls with low-reliefs in the corner pavilions.

- A = Full wall
- B = Wall over the window
- C = Pillar beside the window
- D = Pediment over the lintel

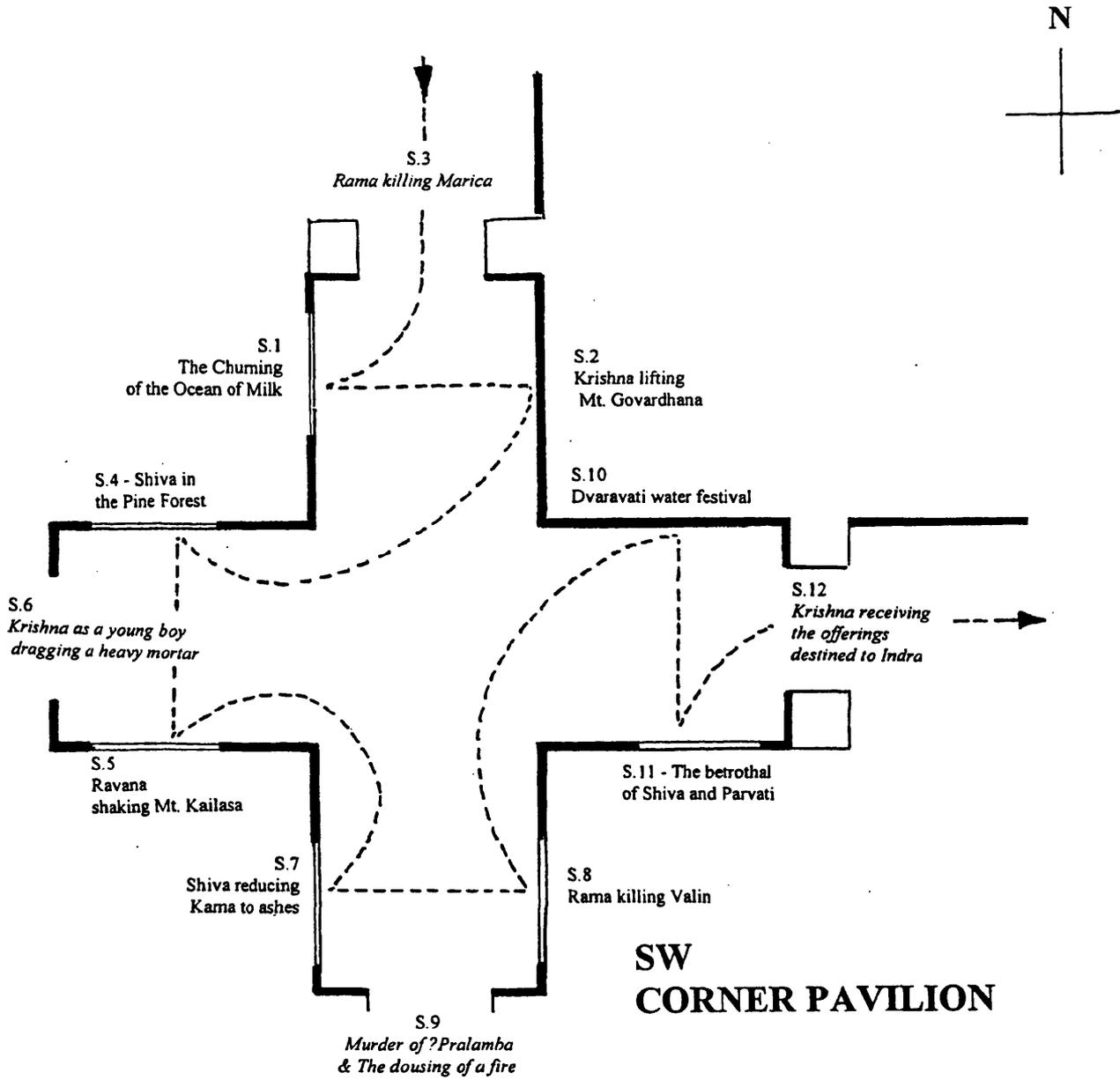


Fig. 3 Proposed visiting order
for the SW corner pavilion

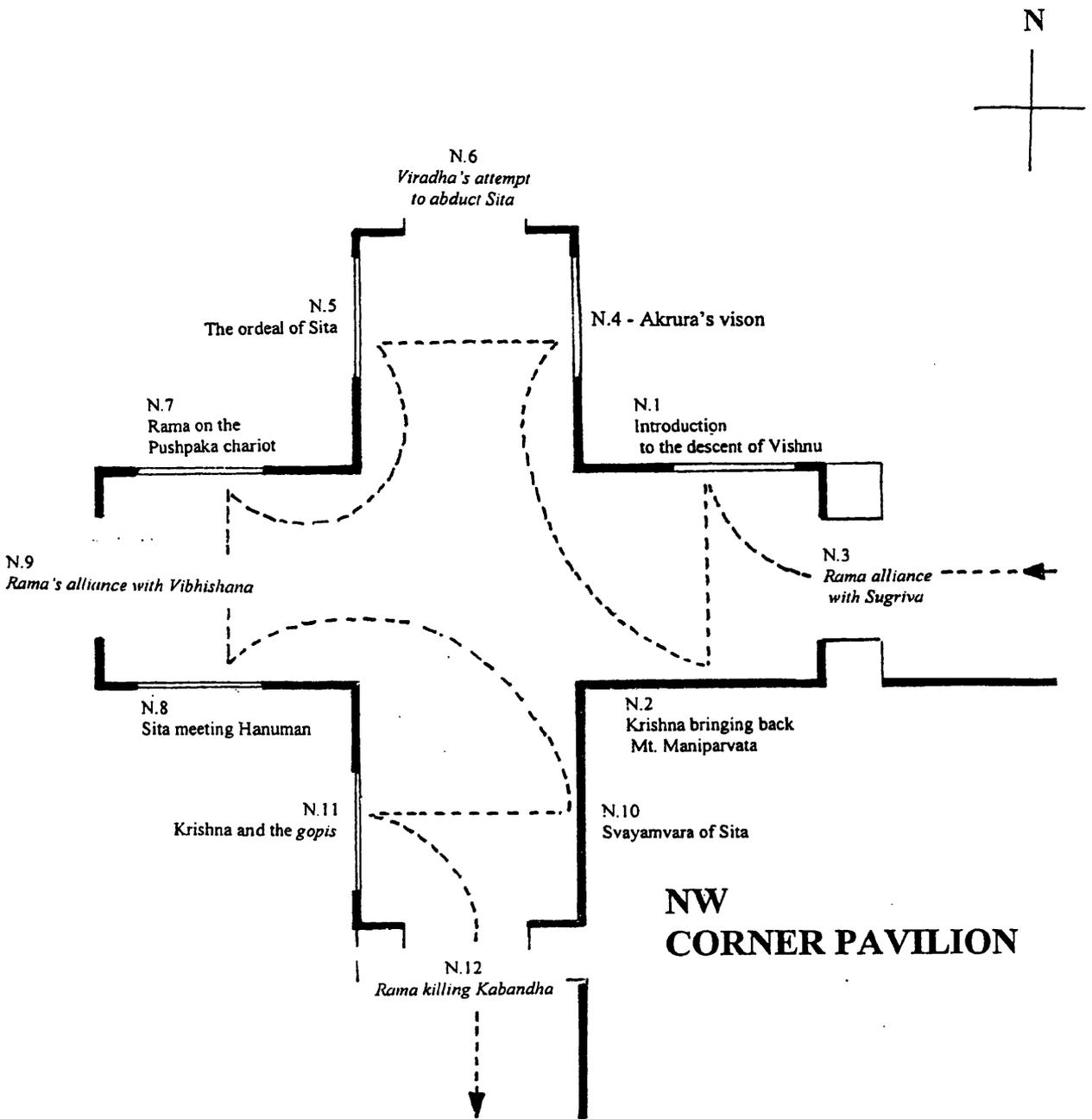


Fig. 4 - Proposed visiting order for the NW corner pavilion

can be seen in the panel of 'Heavens and Hells'¹⁵. Within the registers the personages are organised in groups of figures each performing some characteristic action, so that we read them sequentially like a strip cartoon. But Khmer artists used registers with some freedom and we have principal figures breaking through the ground line and occupying two or more registers (Yama in the 'Heavens and Hells' reliefs). In this thesis, the term **pseudo-register** is used when the ground lines are not sculpted as such, and the scenes are simply overlaid one to another without any indication of a break. In some panels of the western corner pavilion, the stories of Krishna are told in 6 pseudo-registers (Krishna bringing back Mt. Maniparvata N.2, Sita's svayamvara, N.10) or even 8 pseudo-registers (Sita meeting Hanuman, N.8).

3.3. ORDER OF VISITING (see fgs. 3 and 4)

When visiting the western corner pavilions, it is difficult to detect - at first glance - any order by which to proceed in the reading of the reliefs. To the visitor task, I propose below a path to follow when walking around the pavilions. It is a 'visiting order', and not necessarily a narrative order. It does not imply that it corresponds to the visiting or ceremonial order of the Khmer, nor that the corner pavilions have necessarily to be visited by entering from the long galleries. This is the order I have adopted in describing the reliefs of the corner pavilions. In front of the progressive numbers, the letters 'S' and 'N' appear, to indicate if the reliefs are from the southern or of the northern corner pavilion.

SW corner pavilion

| | |
|---|------------------------|
| S.1 - The Churning of the Ocean of Milk | (317/19) Bhag. Pu.8,7 |
| S.2 - Krishna lifting Mt. Govardhana | (290/92) Bhag.Pu.10,24 |
| S.3 - <i>Rama killing Marica</i> | (288/89) Ram. 8 |
| S.4 - Shiva in the Pine Forest | (313/16) Linga Pu. 2 |
| S.5 - Ravana shaking Mt. Kailasa | (310/11) Ram. 7 |
| S.6 - <i>Krishna as a young boy dragging a heavy mortar</i> | (312) Bhag.Pu.10, 9 |
| S.7 - Shiva reducing Kama to ashes | (306/09) Saura Pu.6,25 |

¹⁵ In the relief, the enumeration of 32 hells calls for the use of the plural 'Hells', as does the depiction of several heavenly realms ('Heavens').

| | |
|--|--------------------------|
| S.8 - The death of Valin | (300/04) Ram. 4 |
| S.9 - <i>The Murder of? Pralamba & The dousing of a fire</i> | (305) Bhag.Pu.10,18 |
| S.10 - Dvaravati water festival | (293/96) no ref. to text |
| S.11 - The betrothal of Shiva and Parvati | (298/99) Vamana Pu.25,26 |
| S.12 - <i>Krishna receiving the offerings destined to Indra</i> | (297) Bhag.Pu.10 |

NW corner pavilion

| | |
|---|------------------------|
| N.1 - Introduction to the descent of Vishnu | (325/28) Vishnu Pu. 5 |
| N.2 - Krishna bringing back Mt. Maniparvata | (330/31) Bhag. Pu. 8,6 |
| N.3 - <i>Ram's alliance with Sugriva</i> | (329) Ram.4 |
| N.4 - Akrura's vision | (321/24) Brahma u.10 |
| N.5 - Sita's ordeal | (349-50) Ram.6 end |
| N.6 - <i>Viradha's attempt to abduct Sita</i> | (320) Ram.3 |
| N.7 - Rama on the Pushpaka chariot | (346/48) Ram.6 end |
| N.8 - Sita meeting Hanuman | (343/44) Ram.5 |
| N.9 - <i>Rama's alliance with Vibhishana</i> | (345) Ram. 6 |
| N.10 - Svayamvara of Sita | (332/37) Ram.1 |
| N.11 - Krishna and the <i>gopis</i> | (339/42) Bagh.Pu.10 |
| N.12 - <i>Rama killing Kabandha</i> | (338) Ram. 3 |

In the above list, italics refer to the flat pediments over the lintels, and numbers in brackets refer to photographic plates from the monograph on Angkor Wat by Finot, Coedes, Goloubew, 1927-32, which remains the classic reference book. The Sanskrit texts and the number of the book from where the stories have been taken are also listed (Bhag. Pu = *Bhagavata Purana*, Ram. = *Ramayana*).

I suggest that the visiting should start from the south to follow a convention established by the early scholars of Angkor. Puzzled by the apparent lack of narrative order of the large sculptural panels of the galleries of the 3rd enclosure, they agreed with Coedes¹⁶ hypothesis that the panels must be read while circumambulating the 3rd enclosure in an counter-clock wise order because Angkor was the funerary temple of Suryavarman II. This is the *prasaya*¹⁷ order, 'de rig^heur' in India for funerary processions. Other scholars, like Bosch¹⁸ and

¹⁶ Coedes G., *Angkor*, Oxford University Press, 1961 edit., p.34

¹⁷ as opposed to *pradakshina*, the ceremonial way

¹⁸ BEFEO, 32, 1933, p.1-71

Mannikka¹⁹, were of the opinion that this same direction is needed to follow the symbolic cycle of the life of the sun-king Vishnu equated to that of the Khmer king. In this case the visitor must begin from the panel of the Churning of the Ocean of milk, which is symbolic of the start of order on earth.

All the above are working hypotheses, because there are no proofs from inscriptions that the *prasaya* order was actually followed by the Khmers, nor - even more important - that any procession may have taken place. On this awareness, I proceed in the description of the relief of the two corner pavilions in isolation, considered outside the visiting / reading order of the large panels of the 3rd enclosure, because the 12 stories narrated in each of the pavilions do not seem to follow a narrative sequence. That the western corner pavilions are to be visited by themselves, as I suggest, is supported by the absence of any reliefs in the corner pavilions of the eastern side of the temple; this fact precludes the full reconstruction of a possible narrative sequence. It is reasonable to assume that the Khmers originally intended to decorate also the eastern corner pavilions, and that they had to leave them incomplete - for historical and economical reasons - like the walls of the long galleries of the NE quadrant of the 3rd enclosure.

Although no interpretative elements should be involved in establishing the above 'order of visiting', I am attributing more importance to the texts which deal with events of Vishnu and Krishna (*Puranas* and *Harivamsa*) rather than those of Rama or other personages (*Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*), in consideration of the fact that the main temple's divinity is Vishnu²⁰. I also believe it is significant to have Vaishava stories, important to the Pancharatra belief, as the starting points of the visiting order. None can be better than that of the Churning of the Ocean of Milk for the south-western pavilion (Fig.2), and of the Invitation to the descent of Vishnu for the north-western pavilion (Fig.3).

¹⁹ 1996, p.120

²⁰It must be noted that, at Angkor Wat, there is no clear visual indications of the separation between the way Krishna and Vishnu are represented, the latter appearing instead of Krishna in many reliefs (see Part II, chapter 4.4).

3.4. DESCRIPTION OF INDIVIDUAL RELIEFS

In the description of the reliefs that follows I have attempted to describe, for each panel, firstly the story - as close as possible to the original Indian text - and then how it is depicted in Khmer relief. I have complemented my description and photographs with simple drawings obtained from tracing the photographs of Finot, Parmentier and Coedes famous monograph on Angkor Wat of 1927-32. The drawings show only the main elements of the reliefs; often, their disparity in detail presentation is due to the variable state of preservation of the reliefs. My own comments are then concluding the 'presentation' of each of the 24 panels from the corner pavilions. This is an attempt to confirm previous interpretations of the stories sculpted in the reliefs, or to propose and support my own new interpretations - or their possibility - on the basis of iconography, semiotic and historic considerations. In the conclusions, the interpretation and understanding of the meaning of each corner pavilion, as well as of the two combined together, will be then put within the global context of all the other narrative reliefs of the temple (see Part II, chapter 2).

This chapter is devoted exclusively to the reliefs of the western corner pavilions. The following chapter (3.4.) will conclude the description of reliefs from Angkor Wat, by presenting a general description of the reliefs from other sites of the temple.

SOUTH-WESTERN CORNER PAVILION

S.1 - THE CHURNING OF THE OCEAN OF MILK

Location: south-western corner pavilion, northern arm, west wall (Pl. 1).

1 . THE TEXT

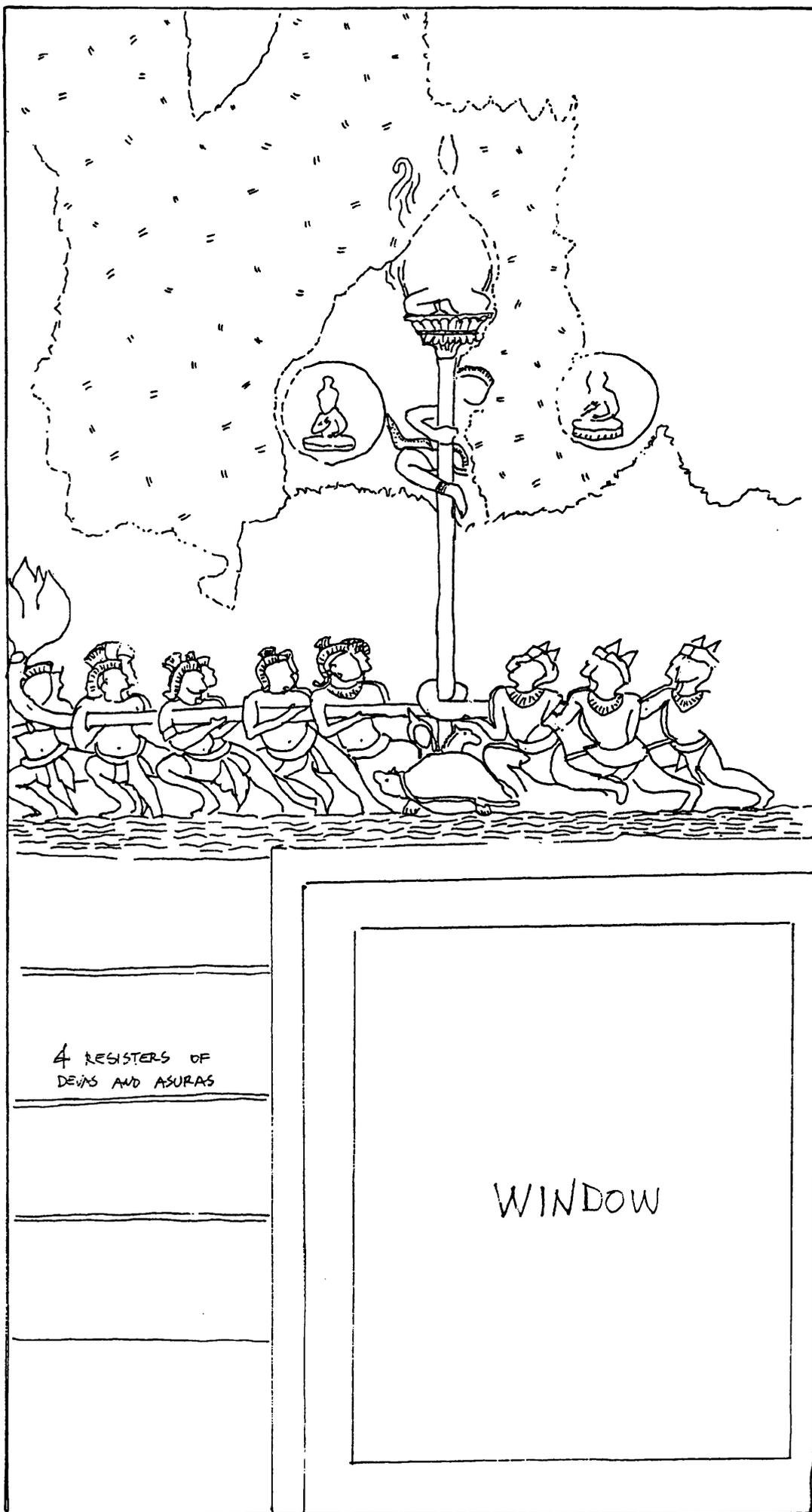
This very popular story is narrated in the *Mahabharata* Book I, chapters 15-17; in the *Ramayana* (Book I, chapter 45); in the *Bhagavata Purana*, book 8, chapters 6-8, and in the *Vishnu Purana*, book 1, chapter 9. There are small discrepancies amongst the various versions, particularly with regard to the products of the churning and the order in which they appear. It is not possible to ascertain which text has been illustrated in the relief, being different only in the order and list of people and objects created. In my opinion, the *Vishnu Purana*'s story is probably the most adequately represented in the relief.

1) *Vishnu Purana*, Book 1, chapters 9. 2-116.

In the beginning, the ill-tempered mad sage Durvasas, a portion of Shiva, offers a heavenly garland of flowers to Indra, the Lord of the Three Worlds. Indra takes it and puts it on Airavata's head, which, however, throws it on the ground. Durvasas takes this as an insult, and, furious with rage, curses Indra that his prosperity will come to naught. And so it is; the Three Worlds become desolate, people neglect sacrifices, ascetics do not practice penance, and the law is ignored.

At this point, the Daityas (a class of *asuras*) and Danavas (another class of *asuras*), full of greed, decide to attack the gods. The Daityas make war on the misfortunate Indra, defeating him, and forcing him to take refuge with Brahma together with his 30 gods. The latter advises that they must seek shelter with Vishnu, the greatest of the gods, and joins them in the trip to the shore of the ocean of milk. After being praised by the prostrate immortals, Vishnu tells them what to do to regain their power. They must go to the ocean of milk together with the Daityas and Danavas, and throw in all the herbs in order to obtain the *amrita*, the magic ambrosia. Then, using Mt. Mandara as a stirring stick and Vasuki as a twirling rope, churn the ocean in order to produce the nectar with his help. To enlist the Daityas, they have to tell them they can share it. However, he will make sure that eventually only the gods will get the *amrita*, so that they can put an end to their suffering.

So directed by Vishnu, the gods (*devas*) join with the demons (*asuras*) to produce the ambrosia. Vishnu himself is at Vasuki's tail, while the Daityas are at his head. Then the *asuras* lose all energy because of the heat coming from the



S.1 - The Churning of the Ocean of Milk

hissing mouth of the snake, while the gods are invigorated by rain clouds blown towards them by the wind coming from that hissing mouth. Vishnu himself appears in the form of a tortoise to support the rotating mountain while it is churned. At the same time he appears in his divine form to encourage gods and *asuras*, in a gigantic invisible form to sustain the mountain, and also as strength infused into the body of Vasuki. Out of the churning comes:

- Surabhi, the cow of plenty, source of oblation
- Varuni, the goddess of liquors, with eyes rolling with intoxication
- The Parijata perfumed tree
- A throng of *Apsaras*
- The Moon, which Vishnu takes for himself
- Poison, taken by Vasuki (drunk by Shiva in another version of the story)
- The god Dhanvantari, clad in white, carrying the jar full of *amrita*
- The goddess Sri (Lakshmi) of vibrant beauty, who went to Vishnu's chest.

At this point, the Daityas, dismayed to be ignored by Lakshmi, steal the jar from Dhanvantari's hand, but Vishnu assumes the body of a woman, and regains it to give to the gods. They all drink it, including Indra. The *asuras* attack them, but are defeated by the gods who have just been invigorated by the ambrosia, and flee in all directions entering the netherworld.

2) *Mahabharata*, Book I, chapters 15 -17

After some time, when tired and unable to achieve their goal, the *devas* and *asuras* ask Vishnu for help. He appears and orders them to work together, not against each other. They agree and organise themselves, the *asuras* to the left headed by 3 generals, with Bali holding the snake's head, and the *devas* to the right commanded by a god holding the tail. They continue then to churn the primordial Ocean of Milk by using Mt. Mandara as the pole. However, this suddenly starts to sink. Vishnu intervenes in his incarnation as the tortoise Kurma, enters the waters and offers the back of his shell as a support for the mountain. Vasuki, the divine serpent with 5 heads, offers himself as the rope and curled himself around the pivot. Many gods are also assisting, including Indra, by keeping the pivot in position. The spinning of Mt. Mandara creates such a violent whirlpool that the mythological creatures and fish around it are torn to pieces in great numbers.

The Ocean of Milk is churned for another 1000 years. Then, from the ocean arises Soma, the moon, and the sun. Immediately after, Dhanvantari (god of the physicians) appears, followed by the *apsaras*, the goddess Lakshmi (Sri Devi, Vishnu's wife), the elephant Airavata, the white horse Uccaihsravas, the gem Kaustubha, and finally, the much-desired elixir.

A bitter confrontation takes place between the *devas* and the *asuras* as to who would have the *amrita*, and another great battle takes place. Vishnu has to intervene, and with the help of the *devas*, wins the battle and gains possession of the *amrita* which he kept safe from harmful use.

3) A later account⁰ of this story is presented by the Swami Tapasyananda¹ in the *Srimad Bhagavata*, which differs in several details. In book VII, chapters 5-11, the narration starts when the gods give instructions to the *devas* and *asuras* to

¹ *Srimad Bhagavata*, Madras, Third edition, 1981

churn the Ocean of Milk to obtain the amrita. The latter argue endlessly about their tasks until Brahma and Shiva intervene to establish peace among them, and have them re-start the churning. To do so, the *devas* and *asuras* lift Mt. Mandara from its base and try to take it to the sea, but drop it because it is too heavy, injuring and killing many of them. The compassionate Vishnu intervenes and recovers the mountain with a single arm; he puts it on Garuda, and himself mounting him, carries it to sea, surrounded by the *devas* and *asuras*. On arrival, Garuda unloads them both from his shoulders on the seashore and flies away with Vishnu's permission.

At this point the *devas* and *asuras* request the snake Vasuki to act as a rope; they wind him around the mountain and resume the churning. But suddenly the Mandara, unsupported, starts to sink. Vishnu transforms into the tortoise (Kurma), dives into the water and jacks up the mountain, allowing the churning to continue. He then appears in the form of *devas* and *asuras* respectively to encourage them to intensify the churning; he also enters into Vasuki to make him insensitive (as an anaesthetic) to the torture of the churning. He has to intervene again, when the action of the churning seem to upset the balance of Mt. Mandara, by assuming a huge shape and with one of his 1000 hands, presses the mountain to its proper place. For this Brahma showers him with flowers. When the *amrita* finally appears, Vishnu starts himself to churn vigorously, causing all sorts of aquatic creatures to be reduced to pieces, until the poison Kalakuta (or Halahala) emerges fuming.

Again the desperate *devas* and *asuras* beg the gods, and Shiva comes to their rescue by collecting the poison with his hands and drinks it. Even this god was no immune to the poison's power, and his throat turns blue, but without ill effects, as a decoration, a sign of his zeal in the welfare of others. Scorpions, serpents, poisonous plants and other venomous creatures take what has dropped from his hands while drinking. The churning continues and firstly the sacred cow comes out, followed by Kamadhenu, Ucchaishvara, Airavata, Kaustubha, the tree Parijata, the Apsaras, Rama embodied as Sri, Varuni (god of liqueurs) as a girl, and the amrita carried by a strange blue man. At the end of the churning, Vishnu changes his form into that of the woman Mohini.

2 . THE VIEWING

In the relief the story is represented in two pseudo-registers,

The **upper pseudo-register** is in very poor state of preservation, particularly its left part, which badly affects the figure of Vishnu hanging from the pole, and the one in an almond-shaped area at the very top of the pole, presumably Brahma. To the sides of the vertical rod pivoting on Kurma, are two large discs, placed at the same height. In the one to the left of the viewer is a seated personage in royal attire representing the Moon (Soma); in the one to the right, the Sun.

In the **lower pseudo-register**, below the scene described above, the Moon and the Sun are represented. They are separated by a thick forest (with climbers on some

tree trunks), from a row of powerful *devas* and *asuras* in the action of pulling the snake Vasuki around the pole which is pivoting on Kurma's back. The personages are easily identifiable: the *asuras* wear the crown of the *rakshasas*, while the *devas* the usual royal crown with the conical end. Also neatly sculpted is the head of Lakshmi and of the horse Uccaihsvara. There are no signs - however- of the other creatures that were generated. The ocean's water has many fish swimming, mainly from right to left. The serpent Vasuki is represented with the required 5 heads and a scaly body.

Topmost part of the relief. In here, the usual storms of *apsaras* are part of the conventional decoration sanctifying the relief, is sculpted. However, since they too have been generated by the Churning, some might be part of the story and - as such - are flying around the Moon and the Sun created at the same time as them.

The **pillar to the left of the window** is sculpted with rows of seated *devas* (23) and *asuras* (22) represented in 4 superimposed panels, symmetrically arranged, facing each other. The *asuras* are holding clubs in their right hands, while the *devas* have their arms resting on their chests.

3. GENERAL COMMENTS

1) The episode of the Churning of the Ocean of Milk is one of the most popular in Khmer iconography. It is therefore important to analyse some variations of the story as they appear in various original texts. In the *Ramayana*, Book I, chapter 44, it is clearly stated that *devas* and *asuras* "took Vasuki for their rope and Mt. Mandara as their churn and began to churn. The first thing to appear was the physician Dhanvantari, followed by the resplendent *Apsaras*² (600 million of them) which nobody accepted, thus belonging to everyone. On this account they were also called Sadharanas (prostitutes). After this came Varuna's daughter Varuni (or Sura). The sons of Diti would not accept her, but the sons of Aditi did. Because of this, the *Daityas* (Diti's sons) became known as *asuras*, while the sons of Aditi, became *Suras* (*devas*). Then came Uccaihsravas, foremost of the horses, followed by Kaustubha, most precious of gems, and lastly the elixir".

In Shastri's translation of the *Ramayana* (1994 edition, chapter 45), the Churning is narrated in a detailed way fitting the one illustrated in the relief. In fact the text

² Their name ~~comes from *apsv* = water, and *rasa* = dance~~ means water nymphs

says that when the rod began to sink, Vishnu assumed the form of a tortoise to sustain Mandara's peak and allow the churning to continue. At the same time, in his divine form, he placed himself between the *devas* and *asuras* to incite them to continue the hard work. According to the text, the *naga* Vasuki, with five heads full of fangs, vomited floods of black venom due to his mishandling by the *devas* and *asuras* during the churning. This was enough to poison everybody had it not been for Shiva, who drank it all, his mouth remaining stained with a black line forever as a result. This episode is not part of Khmer iconography.

2) With regard to the compositional layout of the relief, the main elements of the story are arranged within a triangle, with the top-end in the image of Brahma, ideal for directing the viewer's gaze towards the central action of the churning. Amongst the main personages there is a semantic hierarchy: at the top, on the post, supported by a lotus-shaped base is Rama, below, at the centre is Vishnu and at both sides the Moon and the Sun. To notice that also in here, like in the larger relief of the Eastern Gallery, southern wing, the jar containing the *amrita* and his carrier, Dhanvantari, are missing; but this relief was left unfinished.

4) There is some controversy about the personage hanging on the pole. In my opinion he is more likely another of Vishnu's manifestations (the main one being the Kurma incarnation), contributing to the churning activity. The alternative, that he may be Indra, is justified by the knowledge that he took for himself Airavata immediately as it was created by the churning. We know from the *Vishnu Purana* that he was not actively involved into the churning. Furthermore, he is represented below Brahma, which is unlikely, since he is the old Vedic God of Gods. In the larger relief of the Churning of the Eastern Gallery, southern wing, there is a small personage, possibly Indra, flying in the sky over Vishnu's head.

3) The *apsaras* depicted at the very top of the relief – as in all the reliefs of the corner pavilions – may be considered to be there to praise and to marvel to the dazzling brilliance of the gods and their actions.

S.2 - KRISHNA LIFTING Mt. GOVARDHANA

Location: south-west corner pavilion, northern arm, eastern wall (Pl.1).

1 . THE TEXT

The story is narrated in the *Bhagavata Purana*, Book 10, chapter 25, as well as in the *Vishnu Purana*, Book 5, chapters 10-11, and the *Harivamsa*, Book 2, chapter 15.

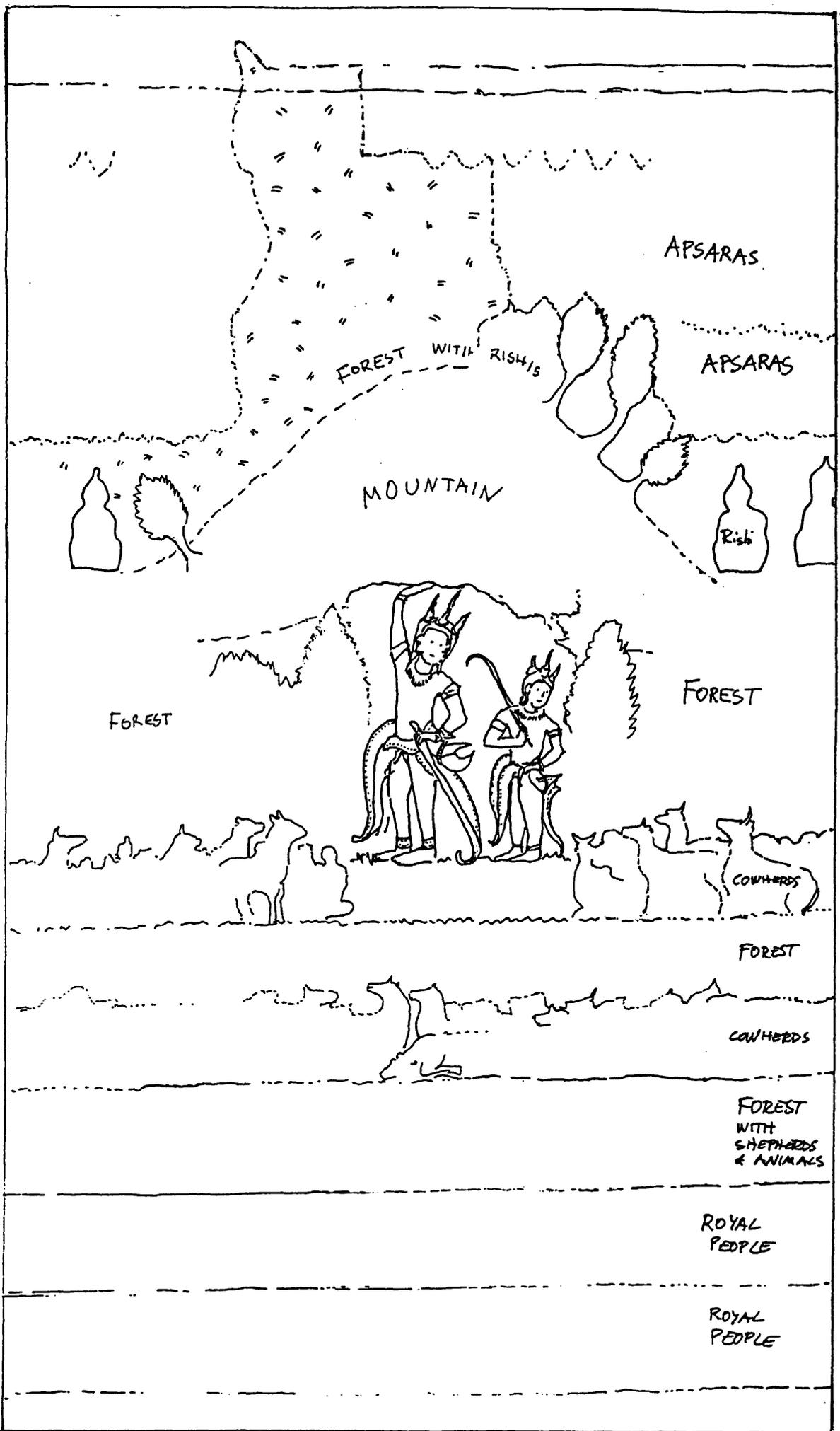
In the *Bhagavata Purana* we are told that Krishna does not approve that the *gopas* (cowherds) are presenting offerings and making sacrifices to Indra, doing the so called *Indra-yaga*, and advises them to make them - instead - to Mt. Govardhana (the top part of Mt. Kailasa). The cowherds, headed by Nanda, oblige and make the offerings by circumambulating Mt. Govardhana, by keeping it to the right. At this moment, Krishna announces that Mt. Govardhana is himself, that the mountain can take any forms he likes. In seeing this, Indra gets enraged and directs down to earth a host of the terrible *Samvartaka* clouds that brings about the destruction of the Universe. He declares that he wants to annihilate Nanda's friends and their cattle, and will follow them with his elephant Airavata together with his troop of *martus*³ of enormous prowess. The terrified cowherds beg Krishna for help. At once Krishna, like a child, easily uproots Mt. Govardhana with one hand (left hand) and holds it up sportily for seven days without moving his position. Noticing this miraculous event, Indra - his pride broken and plans shattered ("shorn of pride and thwarted of his design") - refrains his *Samvartaka* clouds. Noticing that the sky is cleared of clouds and the sun is out, Krishna pacifies and preaches his crowd, who thereafter happily return to their camps, full of praise for the Lord.

Later (chapter 27) Indra admits his perversity, ignorance and stupidity, and asks pardon from Krishna, who he crowns as the Supreme Ruler by proclaiming him as the "*Govinda*" in this world (divine 'cow-keeper').

2 . THE VIEWING

The relief occupies a full wall, and the story is presented on several pseudo-registers.

In the **top pseudo-register** Krishna, in the company of Balarama, is depicted pushing up the mountain with his arm to protect the shepherds and their flocks from the torrential rain released by Indra's fury. The scene takes place in a park, in between shepherds and domestic animals. Despite their rich dress, the two



S.2 - Krishna lifting Mt. Govardhana

protagonists are shepherds themselves, as indicated by the herdsman's crook (or staff) that Krishna holds with his left hand and Balarama, with his right arm over the shoulder. Krishna's headgear is made of a *mukuta* surmounted by long hairs tied up in 3 knots from which pointed tufts emerges; the one of Balarama differs only in not having the tiara. These hairstyles typify Krishna and Balarama as youths before manhood, when they are closely associated with the cowherds. Above them, the sculptors have represented the mountain by the conventional use of groups of small lozenges. Ascetics, sitting in the conventional crossed-leg position inhabit all the surrounding forest behind and above the two main personages. Wild animals are scattered around the forest.

The **middle pseudo-register** is composed of 3 smaller pseudo-registers, in places overlapping, all representing cowherds and their animals squatting and sitting on the rocky ground with scattered trees. Some shepherds are sitting close together, arms tight on their chests; others affectionately hold their animals. Amongst the bovines, some have a hump on the back, and others seem to be looking up in the direction of the mountain; others are sleeping.

The **lower pseudo-register** is sculpted with 2 well-delimited registers of squatting royal personages, all wearing the pointed crown. They are arranged in a symmetrical way, the one to the right of the reliefs are sculpted facing left, in contrast to the ones on the left side of the relief. The majority has one arm on their chest.

The usual row of flying *apsaras* symmetrically arranged is represented in the **topmost part of the relief**; an additional row appears at both sides of the forest.

3. GENERAL COMMENTS

1) In dissuading the cowherds to stop venerating Indra, Krishna wants to override the old Vedic gods and local divinities, and introduce the Vaishnava cult which would involve him personally. In another part of the original text, it is written that in this occasion Krishna makes a sermon which emphasises that it is the Supreme God who decides the *karma* of people, that secondary divinities like Indra cannot be mistaken for the Supreme, and that one should perform his duties prescribed by the caste (*varṣa*ⁿ) and stage in life (*ashrama*).

³ The *maruṭs* are the Forty-nine Lords of the Tempests
maruṭs

2) The way the elements are depicted in the relief give the impression that really Krishna lifts mount Govardhana “like a little boy picks a mushroom” (chapter 25), and emphasises the calmness of the cowherds and their cattle. There is some doubt if the small personage depicted behind Krishna is his brother Balarama because he is not mentioned in the text. However, in Hindu iconography, the two are almost inseparable.

3) Concerning the layout, it has to be noticed that the vertical line defining the centre of symmetry passes through the left hand of Krishna and the centre of the rows of royal personages of the bottom registers.

S.3 - RAMA KILLING MARICA

Location: south-western corner pavilion, over the lintel of the north door (Pl.2).

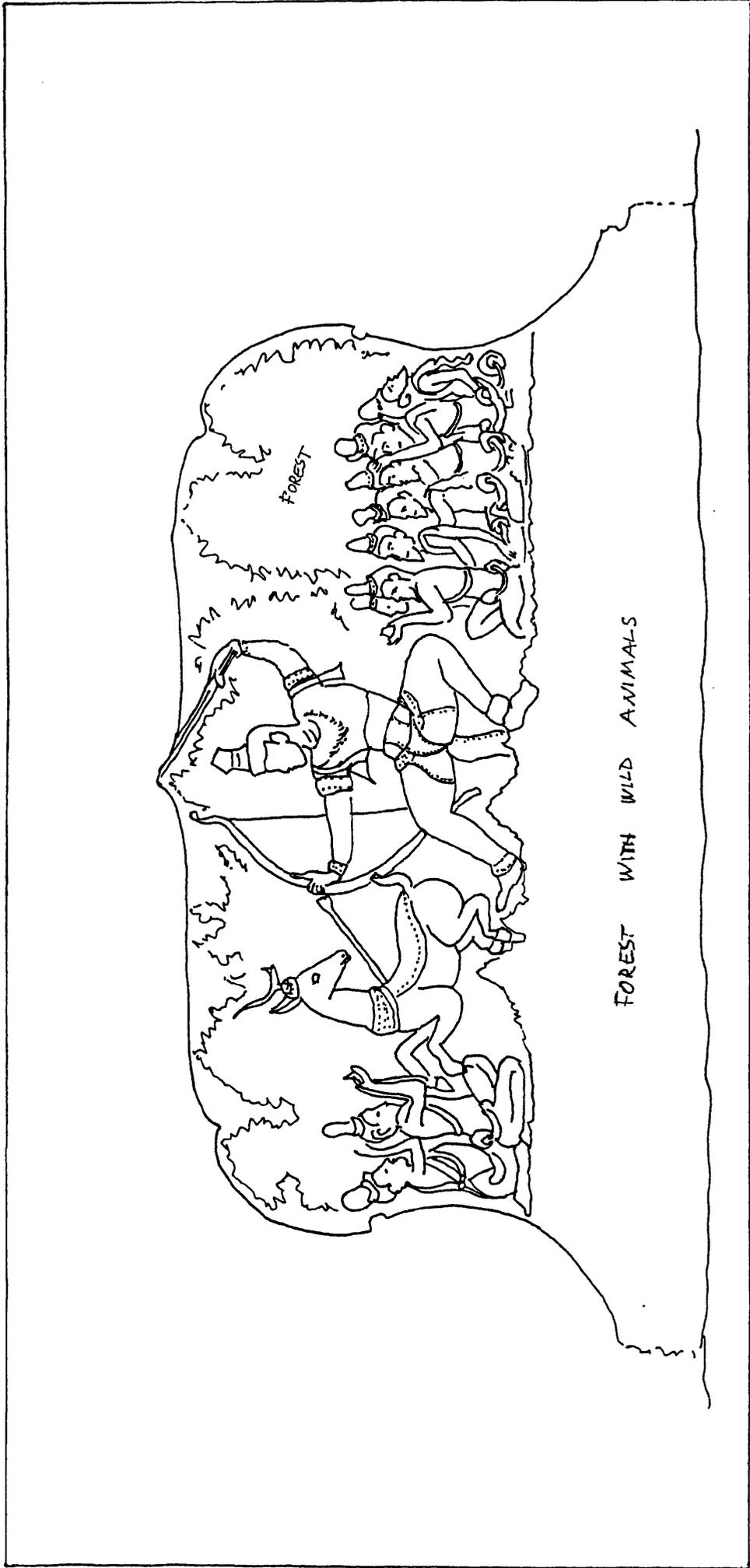
1 . THE TEXT

The story is narrated in the third book of the Ramayana (*Aranya Kanda*), chapters 42-44, and goes as follows.

As they enter the forest, the exiled Rama, Lakshmana and Sita go through many strange adventures. The first is the meeting with Sūrpanakha, sister of Ravana, who attempts to seduce the brothers but is mutilated by Lakshmana who cuts her ears and nose, on Rama's order. When this outrage comes to the ears of Ravana, he plans to kill Rama and kidnap Sita. For this he asks the help of the *rakshasa* Marica, and takes him to Rama's hermitage on the magic Pushpaka chariot. Here Marica, in an instant, transforms himself into a wonderful young deer of charming proportions, ornate with colourful jewels. The fawn strays here and there to capture the attention of Sita. As a matter of fact, at first glance, Sita becomes infatuated with it and calls Rama and Lakshmana to show them the graceful animal. Lakshmana is the first of the brothers to suspect it is the product of trickery. But Sita insists and begs them to capture the fawn. Rama, also amazed by its beauty, decides to follow it in the forest either to "slay it or bring it back alive", but first makes Lakshmana promise never to leave Sita alone.

Marica, by using magic, keeps appearing and disappearing, leading Rama away from the hermitage. Eventually Rama releases his flaming arrow, like a lightening flash, piercing the heart of Marica, who, on the point of death, returns to his monstrous aspect. He still has the strength to call "O Sita, O Lakshmana!" imitating Rama's voice, remembering that the objective of his disguise was that of separating also Lakshmana from Sita, not only Rama. Sita, in hearing the call, sends Lakshmana to Rama's rescue, forcing him to break the promise he had made, remaining thus alone.

Immediately Ravana appears to her, disguised as a venerable brahmin. He approaches her, becomes enchanted by her beauty, and struck by Kama's arrow (love), asks her to go with him away from a place where ruthless monsters could assume different forms at will, and was infested by wild animals. Sita offers him the traditional hospitality and the two enter in lengthy conversation during which Ravana reveals his godly origin and asks her to prefer him to Rama who was only a mortal and not even worth one of his fingers. Sita, flashing with anger, defies him with strong words. Hearing this, striking one hand on the other, Ravana resumes his original gigantic monstrous form, resembling death itself. With his left hand he grasps the hair of Sita and with his right, her thighs; he ties her up and abducts her away on his Pushpaka chariot.



FOREST WITH WILD ANIMALS

S.3 - Rama killing Marica

2. THE VIEWING

The relief is sculpted in a flat pediment, within the *naga* frame that delimits a horizontal area where the story is narrated in a single register.

In the **top pseudo-register**, at the centre of the composition stands the figure of Rama, in the characteristic position of an archer in action, with flexed legs. He is depicted a few instants after having shot the arrow, holding the bow in his right hand, and one or two arrows in his raised left hand. His costume is the usual with which he appears in the forest scenes in Khmer reliefs, i.e., the *sampot*, a sort of a thin vest, complete conventional jewellery, and the hairs arranged with a chignon ornate with jewels. To his right is Marica metamorphosed into a beautiful fawn with large eyes, in a jumping position; the animal has a small floral cloth on its back, and is wearing a necklace and has horns studded with gems. An arrow is piercing its back at the base of the neck.

To the left of the viewer are 3 ascetics squatting on the ground, of which 2 are with raised arms. To the right, is a similar, but larger group of ascetics. Trees with comparatively large trunks compose the surrounding forest.

Lower pseudo-register. The ground below the scene depicted within the lower part of the pediment is composed of a thick band of rocky forest with wild animals, mainly deer with sparse elephants and a feline resembling a tiger. Strangely, no birds are depicted here nor in the overlying forest.

3. GENERAL COMMENTS

1) In the *Ramayana*, Marica appears earlier (*Bala kanda*, chapter 23), when Rama is told that the dreadful forest is inhabited by Tataka who had been cursed, becoming a terrifying *yakshini*, and who gave birth to a son, Marica, also exceedingly powerful. Because of her monstrous behaviour, the sage Vishnavitram commands Rama to kill Tataka. Rama does so with his lethal powerful arrows. The killing of Marica takes place later in the *Ramayana*, after Viradha's attempt to kidnap Sita, illustrated in the relief N.3, and before the successful abduction by Ravana.

2) Concerning the compositional layout of the relief, the symmetric of the composition is striking, emphasised by Rama's arrows/s pointing to the apex of

the central indentation of the lintel, and by three identical trees on each side of Rama.

S.4 - SHIVA IN THE PINE FOREST

Location: south-western corner pavilion, western arm, north wall

1 . THE TEXT

The few iconographic 'clues' of the main personage allow identification with Shiva in an episode narrated in the *Linga Purana*, Book 2, chapter 29, known under the title 'Victory over death'. It is - however - commonly known as the story of 'Shiva in the Pine Forest'⁴, also mentioned also in the *Vamana Purana*. M.Giteau⁵ has described the god appearing in this scene as *Shiva Bikshatanamurti*.

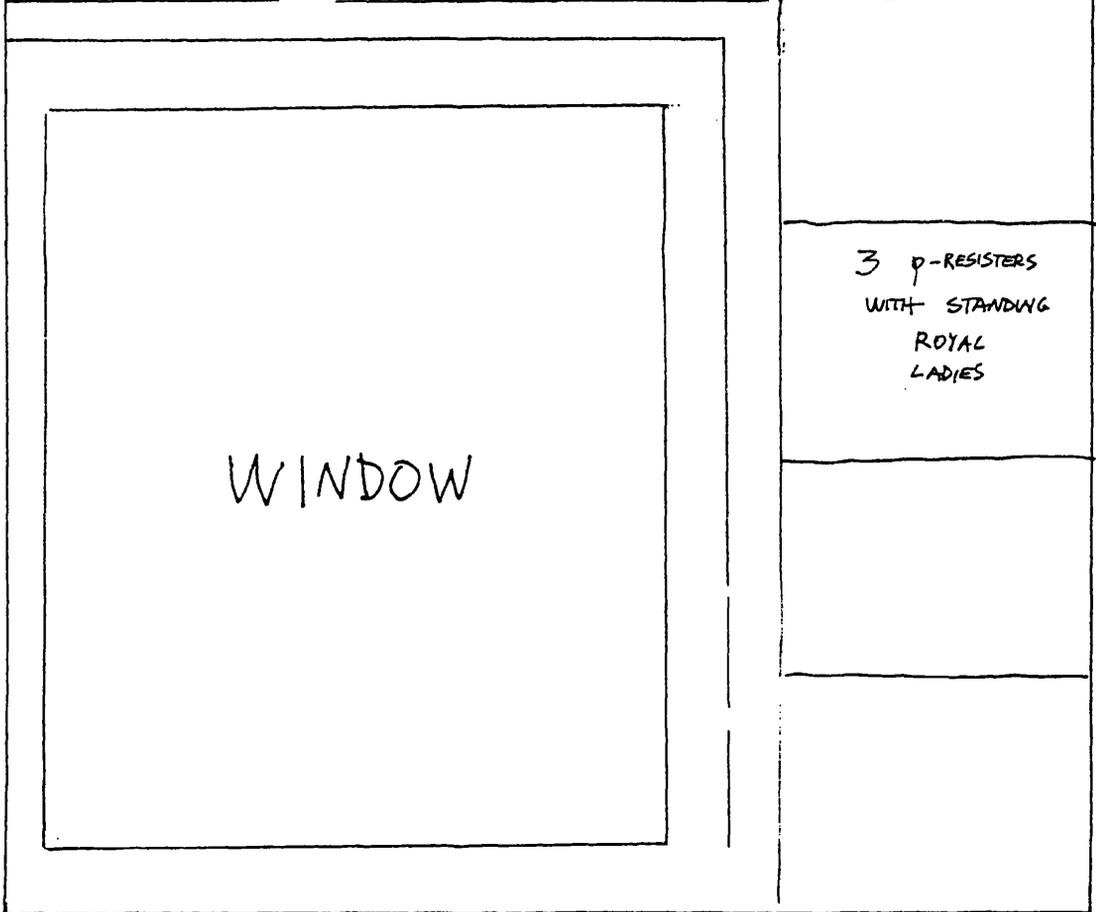
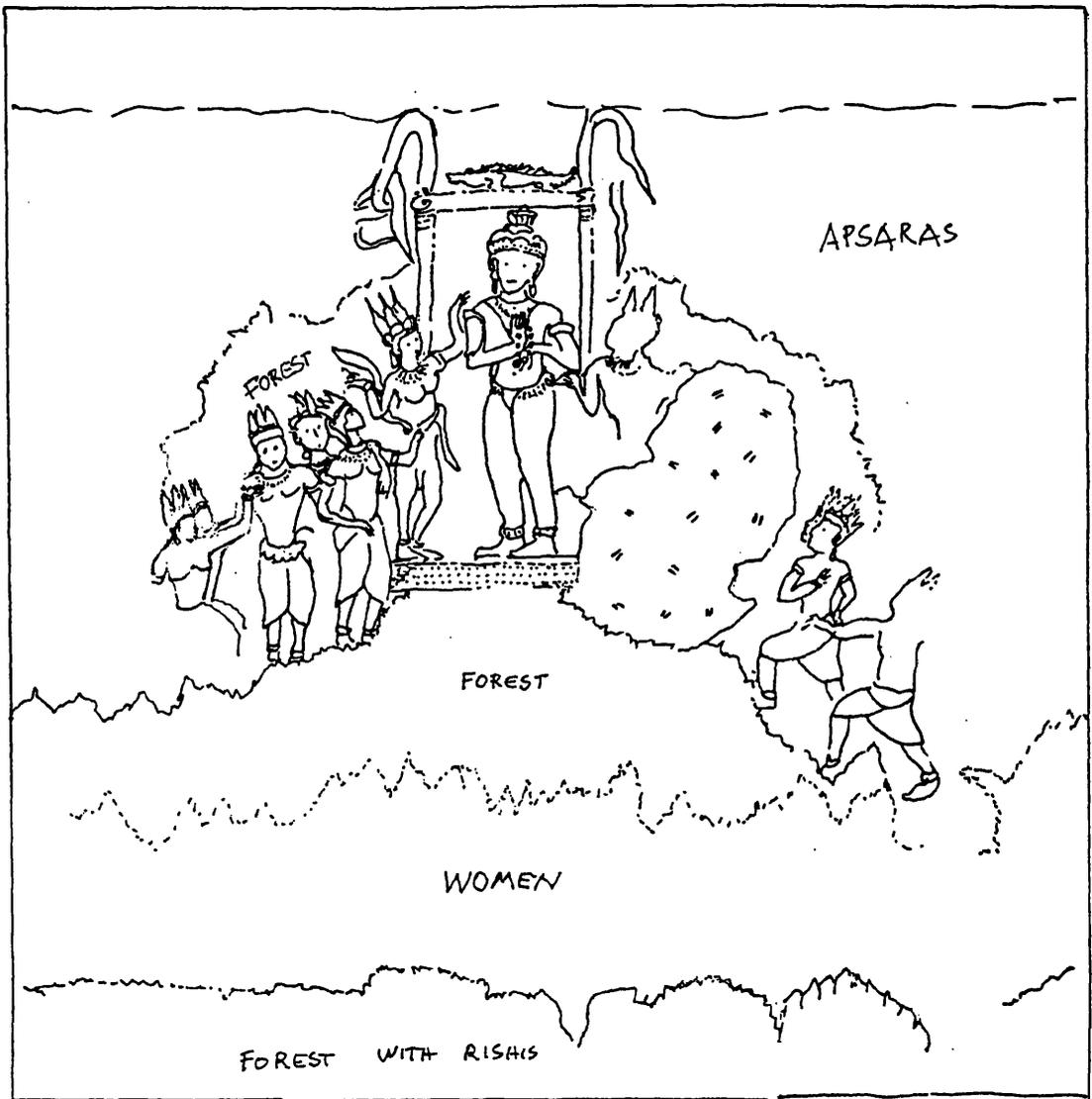
In order to propitiate the Shiva, the sages perform a terrible penance in the Daru forest (or ^{Debaduravana} ~~Deraduvana~~), accompanied by their wives, sons and sacrificial fires. Shiva is delighted, but wants to test their sincerity and turn their mind from the observance of sacrificial rites towards the path of pure devotion.

Therefore, in order to test their faith, he assumes playfully a deformed but attractive appearance, with three eyes and two hands, nude, of dark complexion; even in this form, he is extremely handsome, sexually arousing the women. On seeing him, all the women of the village stop their activities (like in the story of the *Rasalila*; see N.11) and follow him singing, not caring for their loosened garments and ornaments. Some brahmins' wives (*rishi patani*), finding that their own garments get loose, cast off their bangles and join in. Some sing, some dance while others roll on the ground; some talk loudly, other embrace themselves. Even caste ladies fall down in awkward posture with their clothes loosened and their tresses dishevelled; all in the presence of their husbands. After stopping Shiva on his way, they start to show shrewd gestures, and ask him who is-he, where is-he going and why would-he not stay with them. But the god remains silent.

On seeing this scene, the brahmins start to insult and criticise him, but without results because their power of austerity is completely ineffective against Shiva. Therefore, they go to seek Brahma's help. He hurriedly tells them that the intruder is none other than lord Shiva himself, and that they should not dishonour guests even if they happen to be deformed, dirty or illiterate, this being a way of self-expiation. Brahma quotes the perfect example of Sudarshana who with a single act of piety towards a guest has conquered death. He advises the brahmins to do the same and return at once to the forest and seek refuge in Shiva. The brahmins ask Brahma the procedure for renunciation in order to become acceptable to Shiva, to which the god obliges by listing all the tasks. One endowed with devotion may attain immediate liberation, because it is only by means of devotion to Shiva that death can be conquered.

⁴ In Doniger O'Flaherty W., *Shiva, the Erotic Ascetic*, Oxford University Press, 1981 . p.172

⁵ In *Ars Asiatiques*, XI/1, 1964



S.4 - Shiva in the Pine Forest (S.4)

2 . THE VIEWING

In this relief the triangularly shaped upper pseudo-register stands out from the middle pseudo register with crowded personages, dominating its composition. A large patch of damaged rock surface is evident when looking at the right of Shiva.

The **top pseudo-register** includes the representation of 2 symmetric rows of women, the wives of the brahmins (*rishi patani*), rising towards Shiva. The god appears standing at the centre of the door, leaving thus space for a woman to be at his right side and touch his hairdo, or reach him with a twig. Also to his left, another woman is very close to him and at his same height, attempting to touch his loincloth. Both the women's gestures may be common in acts of veneration and perhaps of dance (*rasa*). Also the remaining women seem to be gesticulating, and some have their face raised in the direction of the god, with body gestures directed towards him, moving quite agitatedly in the forest. Many have one hand on their belt that holds the flowery sarong, as if they were releasing it. Others are embracing each other. The hairdo of the women to the left of the viewer, ending with a three-pointed conical crown, is different from the one to the right, with large hair's locks below the crown; this may reflect the hierarchical importance of their husbands.

Shiva appears majestically at the door of a construction at the mountaintop, a temple or a palace, with a richly decorated base and long banners at the top. In between is the image of a reptile. Judging from the large scales on both sides of his tail and the long mouth, it is a crocodile and not a chameleon or a lizard. Shiva has a serene and happy expression on his young face. His *sampot* is of minimal size, without extending flaps, just with two short ends at the front. A forest on a hill makes the background.

A thin horizontal strip representing a thick forest in which are animals and groups of 2-3 ascetics is sculpted in the **lower pseudo-register**. To the right of the viewer, two groups of the ascetics (see note 3 below) seem to be running towards a group of gopis (notice the typical hairdo of the cowherds women), creating their own story within the main story.

The usual storms of *apsaras* symmetrically flying at the sides of the building where Shiva appears, is sculpted in the **topmost part of the relief**.

On the pillar to the right of the window 3 high registers are sculpted, instead of the usual 4-5 registers. This in order to give room to the standing women wearing very high pointed crowns. In the top register they are all arranged in the same direction and looking up towards Shiva's apparition. In the other two registers they are symmetrically facing each other, gesticulating.

3. GENERAL COMMENTS

1) The following considerations have to be made on the texts that may have inspired this relief. Firstly, the name *Bikshatanamurti*, which is attributed to the image of Shiva in this episode, refers to *Bikshu*, a religious mendicant who subsists entirely on alms. It does not refer to his nakedness because in this case he should be a *Ksapanakam*, a religious mendicant who wears no garment (see *Linga Purana*, book 2, pg. 623).

2) In 'The sages of the Pine Forest' episode taken from the *Shiva Kotirudra* (12.6-54), Shiva incurs in the wrath of the sages for having exposed himself to their wives. Because of the wrath, his penis falls off, and blazing like fire, roams through the Three Worlds. Gods and sages, not having recognised Shiva, seek refuge in Brahma who advises them of the remedy. They must worship the mountain-born goddess, and when she assumes the form of a vulva (*yoni*), they must place the *linga* on top, reciting mantras and casting a spell. With this Shiva is placated and peace and prosperity return to the world.

3) In the *Linga Purana* (Book 1, chapter 7) is briefly mentioned that Shiva cut off one of Brahma's five heads, leaving him with only four faces (*Caturmukha*). In more detail, the story goes that there had been an argument between Shiva and Brahma on whom was the real creator of the Universe and Brahma told a lie. This impelled Shiva to behead one of Brahma's five heads, earning thus the sin of murdering a brahmin (*brahmahatya*). To expiate this sin, he has to become a beggar (*bhikshatanamurti*), naked, for 12 years. This story, however, does not account for the frenzy and excitement of women, the most striking feature depicted in this relief; therefore it is most unlikely.

4) Another episode during which women are in frenzy, creating great confusion, is the one when Shiva is in transit towards the mountain to marry Parvati

(*Vamana Purana*, 27.1-71). However, the god is described mounting a bull, bearing the trident and robed in tiger skin.

5) George Coedes has quoted another interpretation of this story, by which the personage may be Ravana when he appeared as a handsome young man at the entrance of the chamber of Indra's wives, after having taken the shape of chameleon (or lizard) to sneak under the door of the gynaeceum. This story, not found amongst Indian legends, is narrated in a modern Cambodian text named *Traiphet*.⁶

6) There is a puzzling element in this relief: the image of a crocodile amongst banners over the door where Shiva appears. In Hindu iconography, the crocodile is the emblem on the banner of the God of Love (*Shiva Purana*, chapter 16-19) in another story focused on Shiva, that where Shiva reduces Kama to ashes (relief S.7). The crocodile (not a lizard or a chameleon) occurs in 2 specific occasions in Khmer iconography: one related to Shiva and the other to Vishnu. In the former, it is depicted of comparatively small size placed at the top of a door (like in the relief under consideration) and always in association with Shiva *Bhikshatanamurti*. It appears in one of the Bayon's inner galleries, in one medallion of the tapestry relief of a door of the Western Gopura of Angkor Wat, and in rock sculptures of the K'bal Spean in the Kulen mountains⁷. Scholars have yet to understand its meaning, but it seems to me there is a link to both Kama (love) and Shiva (fertility). Bruno Dagens⁸ believes that the reptile, a chameleon, depicted at Bayon (eastern inner gallery) and at Beng Mealea (south-western annex) may be related to an episode of the *Mahaumagga jataka* symbolic of charity of which a Shaivite counterpart may have been known to the Khmers.

Another example of the close inter-relationship Shiva/crocodile, is told in the *Brahma Purana*, Part I, chapter 23. One day Krishna assumes the form of a brahmin boy who is caught by a crocodile when playing in a lake, with the intention of distracting Parvati, who, dispirited, is sitting on the shores. On hearing the laments of the boy, she begs the crocodile to let him go in exchange

⁶ Coedes. G. *Note sur l'iconographie de Ben Mala*, BEFEO, XII, 2, 1913, pg.26

⁷ Boulbet J. & Dagens B., *Les sites archeologiques de la region du Bhnam Gulen*, Arts Asiatiques, 27, 1973. During my visit to the site in December 1998, I observed that vandals or thieves have chiselled the image of Shiva out from the rock. The crocodile and the small rishis are still preserved.

⁸ Dagens B., *Etude sur l'iconographie du Bayon*, Arts Asiatiques, 19, 1969, p.144

for all the penance she had performed. The crocodile replied: “there wont be any wastage of your penance over a small boy. I shall release him”. The crocodile tells Parvati to take back her penance as well as the boy, and grants her a boon. But she refuses on the ground that she meant to give the penance away for the release of the boy, and once this intention is expressed, the penance cannot be taken back; she will therefore go on making new penance. After this, both the boy and the crocodile vanish away, and Shiva appears before her and asks her not to perform penance; he grants her 1000 more penance in return. She happily agrees and waits for the *svayamvara*. The morale of this story is that one cannot be too proud of his/her *karma* (deeds) and feel to have reached total detachment from earthly things, from illusions. Only through an absolute devotion to the god can one achieve victory over the senses.

In Vaishnava iconography the crocodile, usually of larger size, appears in reliefs depicting Krishna *Trivikrama*, where, together with other animals, it stands as symbol of water. It appears at Bantey Samre western gopura I (S face), in a half pediment of monument “Y” of Prah Pithu, and in the lintel of the temple of Suan Taeng⁹ (Buriram province, Thailand). However, in the central tower reliefs of Prasat Kravan the crocodile is sculpted over the eight-armed Vishnu, on top of rows of worshipper within a pattern reminiscent of a temple’s door (C.Jacques, 1997, photograph at p.88).

7) The fact that the main personage of the relief under study is bigger than any other one in the relief, and that he is framed within the empty door’s space, at the top of a pyramidal composition of agitated personages, confers to the scene an almost magical atmosphere. The *rishis* have an almost insignificant role. Exceptionally, the banners flying from the sides of the temple are higher than any of the *apsaras*, semiotically suggesting the presence of a very important god. This relief gives the impression of the apparition of a god in all his splendour that causes great excitement to all the other personages. The wives of the *rishis* are all running up towards him, emphasising their joy by their body movements. The husbands, small things, are still meditating in the forest, unaware of what is going on. The story unwinds in a series of different temporal situations giving rise to a

⁹ Smitthi S. & Veraprasert M., *A comparative study of Khmer lintels in Thailand and Cambodia*, Special publication by the Siam Commercial Bank, Bangkok, 1990, p.143.

short narrative: Shiva appears, the *rishis*'s wives move towards him, while, at the same time, the *rishis* meditate in the forest. The gaze-directing attitude of the ladies of the top panel to the right of the window underlies the vectorial direction of the viewer's attention to the central pyramidal composition of the main panel. This is further strengthened by the finger-pointing gesture of some of the women in the direction of the god.

8) In Khmer iconography, the ascetics are represented within an indented ogival frame that is usually symbolic of the cave in which they practice penance. In several other instances, the same ogival frame has very pointed, flame-like contours which I interpret as the flame generated by the *tapas*. It has been demonstrated¹⁰ that asceticism (*tapas*) generates heat, a form of power that can be symbolised by fire. The name *tapas* comes from the Sanskrit root *tap*, "to burn", "to be hot", "to suffer". Subsequently, *tapas* came to refer also to the generation of magic heat or power by ascetic practices, and hence the performance of any ascetic practice.

9) The layout of this relief is dominated by the triangular shape of the arrangement of personages in the upper pseudo-register. The personages around and below the central figure of Shiva are quite disorderly placed, visually strengthening the combined devotion and passion of the *gopis*. Shiva's crown is the tip of the overall pyramidal composition.

¹⁰ Doniger O'Flaherty W., *Siva, The erotic ascetic*, Oxford University Press, 1973, p.58

S.5 - RAVANA SHAKING Mt. KAILASA

Location: south-western corner pavilion, western arm, south wall (Pl.3).

1 . THE TEXT

The story is narrated in the VII book of the Ramayana (*Uttara Kanda*), chapter 16.

1) One day, the ten-faced *rakshasa* Dashanana (Ravana), Lord of Lanka, is riding on his magic cart, the Pushpaka, over the *Saravana* forest of reeds surrounding Mt. Kailasa. Suddenly, his cart comes to a stop at the base of the mountain where Shiva is frolicking with Parvati. Nandi (Shiva's guardian) appears to inform Ravana and friends that the mountain is a forbidden area. Ravana becomes furious and ridicules the situation and the simian look of Nandi. In hearing this, Nandi feels provoked and curses him prophesising that one day monkeys will destroy him and his race (of *rakshasas*). Enraged by this prophecy, by being denied access to the mountain, and - not least - by Shiva's great power to continuously being able 'to sport' with Parvati, Ravana decides to uproot Mt. Kailasa. He then seizes the mountain in his arms and shakes it violently causing the mountain to tremble. The attendants of the god (*ganas*) shiver and Parvati, terrified, clings to the neck of Shiva. Then Shiva, with his toe pushes the mountain as in a game and crushes the arms of *rakshasa*, who emits a terrible cry causing the Three Worlds to tremble. Having heard this in the skies, the gods supplicate Shiva to release him. Shiva obeys and lets him go, but declares his name to be Ravana, "the one who causes the worlds to cry out". Ravana then preys Shiva to grant him the boon that no gods, anti-gods or monsters will ever kill him; he would not consider men because they are insignificant¹¹. Shiva condescends. Ravana leaves on the Pushpaka after paying obeisance to him, and returns to the worlds where he will spread misery and death.

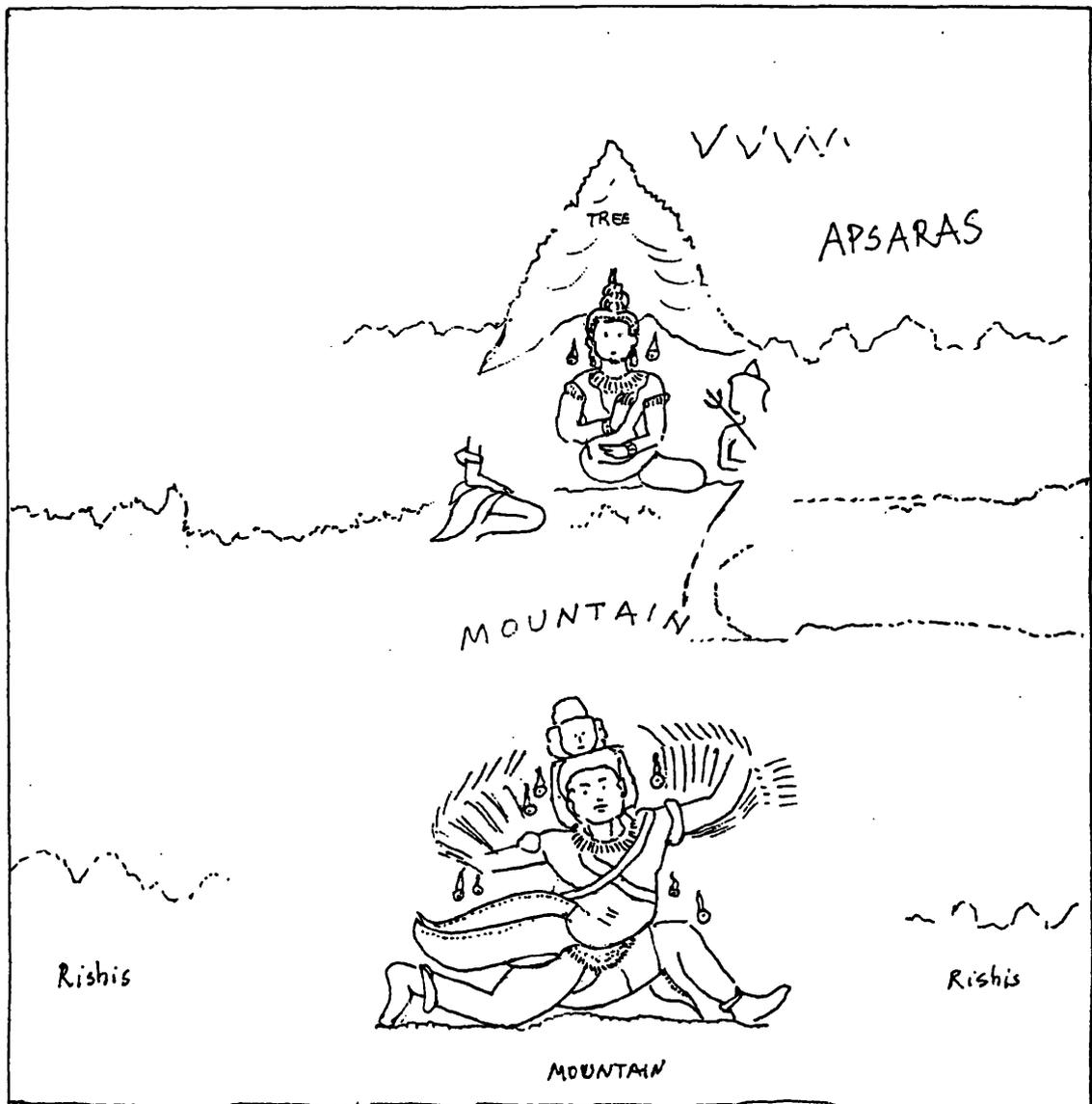
2) A totally different interpretation is provided by C.M. Bhandari¹², which may originate from Southern Indian local traditions. Ravana, although king of the *rakshasas*, was a great scholar and devotee of Shiva. He desired Shiva to live in his kingdom in the isle of Lanka instead of on Mt. Kailasa. Since Shiva would not move, Ravana tried to lift the entire mountain to transfer it to Lanka.

2 . THE VIEWING

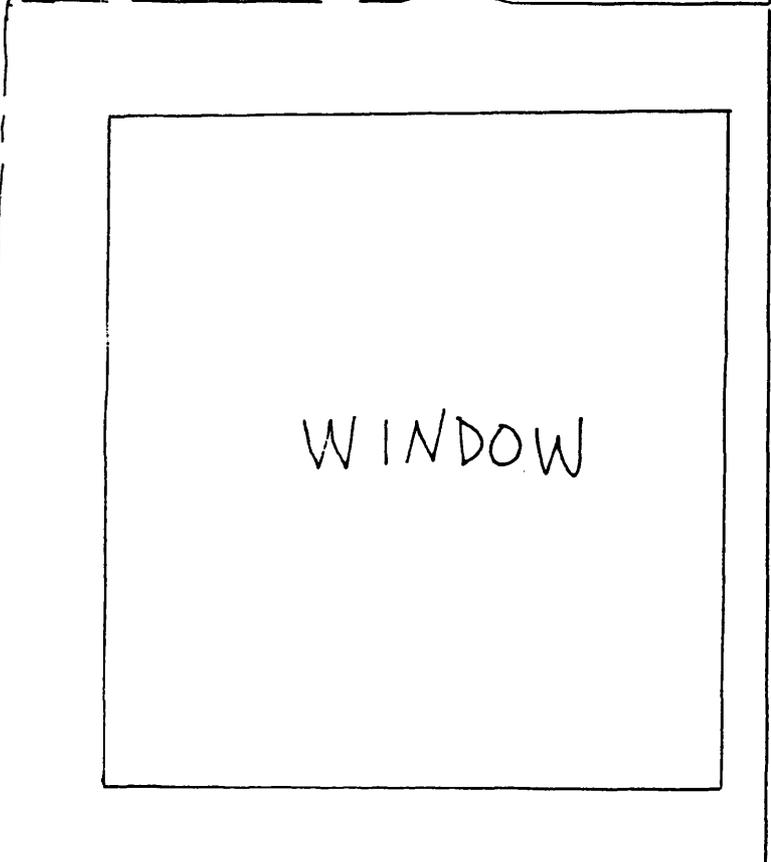
In this relief the story is displayed in two main pseudo-registers on a rectangular wall area; a small part of the wall to the right below Shiva has crumbled away, unfortunately affecting Shiva's image. In the **top pseudo-register** Shiva is placed

¹¹ Ravana's boon excluded the possibility of being killed by men. In fact, only Vishnu's human incarnation, Rama, will be able to kill him.

¹² Bhandari C.M., *Saving Angkor*, White Orchid Books, Bangkok, 1995



4 p-REGISTERS
WITH ROYAL
MALE PERSONAGES



S.5 - Ravana shaking Mt. Kailasa

at the centre, seated in a yoga position on a low plinth, under a large tree. His right hand is on his chest, the left resting on his lap. He does not appear holding a rosary, and is wearing the customary jewellery; a tiara surmounted by a peculiar lobate mukuta from which 2 thin plaits. He is meditating in the forest at the top of the mountain, which is surrounded by flying *apsaras*. The degradation of the relief's stone does not allow a reading of the position of Shiva's legs, i.e. if his toe is pushing down the mountain to squash Ravana.

To the right side of the God, one can barely see the image of a female figure, possibly his wife Parvati, holding a lotus by the stalk, while to his left is a male figure holding a trident (*trisula*). This arrangement is closely reminiscent of the one in the relief of Kama attempting to disturb Shiva. Therefore, also in here, this latter personage is either another form of Shiva himself, the Shulandhara Shiva, or a human form of his door guardian Salaidi.

The **middle pseudo-register** is the largest of the relief, where the representation of Ravana is overwhelming. He is sculpted with many arms, 10 on each side, and with multiple heads: 4 very large, attached to the neck, then 4 of medium size, then 2 smaller at the top, for a total of 10, as described in the text. His face has bulging eyes, continuous eyebrows, large grimacing mouth, and the stylish moustaches that are common to Khmer sculpture of the time. His legs are spread apart in a weight-lifting attitude. Because of his large size - much bigger than Shiva - the details of his dress are clear: heavy earrings, necklace, armlets, anklets and belt finely chiselled; a floating *sampot* with extended floral flaps, and two decorated cloth bands crossing his chest, ending, at his back, with flagging points. The set of 5 arms at each side closer to his head, are clearly supporting the rock (indicated by imbricated lozenges) of Mt. Mandara, while the others seem to grasp the vegetation of the forest. Closely surrounding his body, in the empty space between him and the forest, are strange round objects, with a flower sculpted at the centre, with a single small tail in the shape of a flame or leaf¹³. For Henri Marchal¹⁴ this is a flying flower symbolic of the magic power emanating from gods and heroes. It may be one of the flowers that the gods are showering on earth to bless some actions, as we are told in the Puranas. In some cases, it may also

¹³ These fire's sparks appear in several other reliefs like the one of Krishna killing Kamsa in the central tower, and of Krishna on Garuda of the Northern Gopura of the 4th enclosure.

represent a flying flame, symbolic of concentrated energy, or sparks of the fire of *tapas*; we know that Ravana had accumulated so much *tapas* energy from prolonged acts of penance that he dared challenge the gods. All around Ravana is a dense forest with a great number of wild animals, all frightened, including snakes (*nagas*) and small mammals. Also present are some terrified running ascetics, a few holding a javelin in defence from the wild animals. At the sides, are ascetics in the act of praying (2 to Ravana's left and 3 to his right), squatting under trees.

In the **lower pseudo-register** is represented a long thin band of forest is depicted below Ravana; however it can be considered part of the overlying pseudo-register because some of the trees extend into it, as are the figures of *rishis* in almond-shaped frames, sitting at both ends.

In the **topmost part of the relief** the usual storm of *apsaras* is represented. Some occur as low as the sides of the mountain where Ravana is, contributing thus to the pyramidal layout of the relief.

On the **pillar to the left of the window** 4 superimposed register are sculpted with rows of seated male personages in royal attire, all wearing crowns and the customary jewellery. They do not seem to be concerned with what is going on above them.

3. GENERAL CO_MMENTS

1) It is impossible to specify if the scene depicted in this relief has taken place before, during or after Shiva has taken action to punish Ravana. The god is represented sitting quietly in the Indian manner, without showing any sign of exercising pressure on the mountain with his foot to squash Ravana. It might be that even in this position, the god could make enough pressure on the ground with his toe to cause the mountain to collapse on the *rakshasa*. In the relief Shiva is not shown extending a leg towards the ground, as in the relief from Banteay Srei.

According to Przulski¹⁵, the artists may have represented the moment after Ravana had disturbed Shiva, when the Gods, together with Yaksa, Vidyadhara

¹⁴ Marchal H., *Le decor et la sculpture Khmeres*, Vanoest, 1951, p.31

¹⁵ Przulski J., *La legende de Rama dans les bas-reliefs d'Angkor Vat*, AAK, I, 1921-23, p.319.

and Siddha exhort Ravana to propitiate Shiva by singing hymns and reciting sacred texts. Therefore Shiva is relaxed, and immobile. However, according to the text, at this point Ravana's arms must have been crushed under the mountain, a thing that the relief does not show. On the contrary, Ravana is shown actively shaking the mountain. So it is more likely that the artists have depicted the very beginning of the story, when Shiva is still absorbed in meditation.

2) Its pyramidal shape typifies the composition of this relief, with Shiva's image at the top beneath a single large triangular tree. Below, the figure of Ravana is standing out in a powerful way. Curiously, the fact that he is represented with 10 arms gives the false impression that his arms are in movement shaking the mountain, like in modern comic strips. There is a noticeable contrast between the peaceful atmosphere of the upper pseudo-register and the violent action depicted in the lower one. The seated warriors of the four superimposed registers to the left of the window are symmetrically arranged, but - unusually - facing the viewer.

S.6 - KRISHNA AS A YOUNG BOY DRAGGING A HEAVY MORTAR

Location: south-western corner pavilion, over the lintel of the western door (Pl.3).

1 . THE TEXT

The story is told in many Sanskrit texts, including the *Harivamsa* (64), *Vishnu Purana* (Book V, chapter 6), and *Bhagavata Purana* (Book 10, chapters 9-10).

The latter, in the translation by Shastri (1994 reprint), is reported here.

It narrates one of the most popular anecdotes of Krishna's youth. Yashoda, Krishna's stepmother, tired of the mischief of the young boy (Bala Krishna), ties him with a rope to a heavy wood mortar (not of stone). In this state, Krishna notices two *arjuna* trees but only he can perceive that they are the two *gāuhyakas* (celestial musicians) sons of Kubera (the god of wealth), known as Nalakubara and Manigriva.

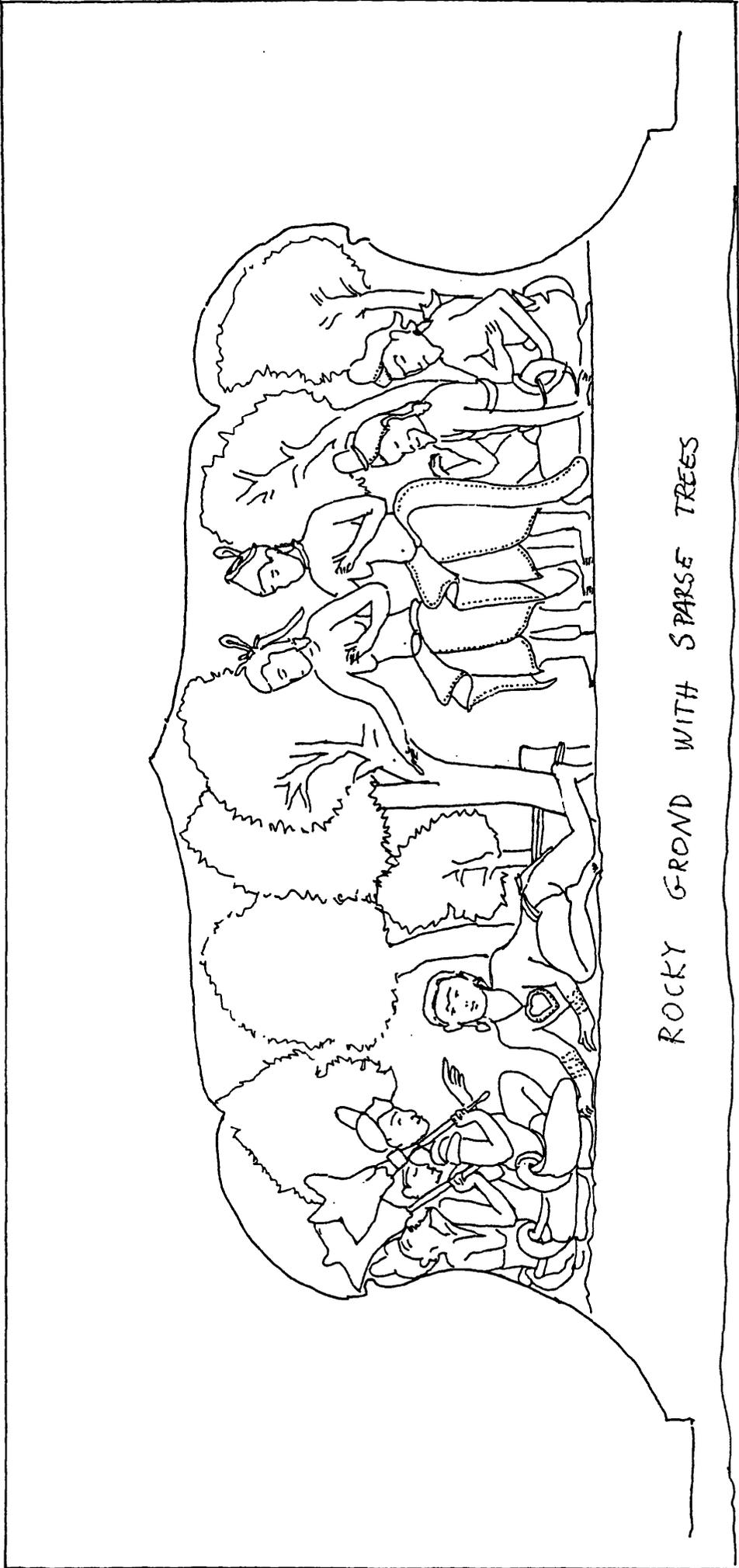
One day, the two, totally drunk, in the company of celestial singing nymphs enter the Ganga's waters for amorous games. But the sage Narada sees them, and the nymphs, devoted to Vishnu, quickly get dressed. Not so the two boys, who remain stark naked despite the persistent regrets of the celestial girls. Noticing that Kubera's two sons were so inebriated with wine not to be aware of their nudity, Narada decides that they deserve to remain naked and immobile as trees, but retain the memory of their guilt. After 100 celestial years, they would regain their original celestial status. Having pronounced his curse, Narada goes to the hermitage of Narayana, while Nalakubara and Manigriva are transformed into twin *arjuna* trees.

Krishna goes to the spot where the two trees are, and decides to fulfil the prophecy. He then crawls in between them, and with the rope tied around his hips drags the mortar crosswise violently uprooting the trees. They fall down with a terrible crash and, amongst a dazzling light, the two brothers emerge. Immediately they bow down to Krishna, and - freed from egoism - promise to profess unswerving devotion. Then, both circumambulate the Lord tied to the wooden mortar, and leave in the direction of the North.

2 . THE VIEWING

The relief is sculpted in a flat pediment, within the *naga* frame that delimits a horizontal space in which the story is narrated in a single register.

The layout involves, to the viewer's right side, a main group of four figures, two standing and two seated. The first are women wearing only a long *sarong*, with a curious hairstyle with a long vertical loop, similar to the one of the ascetics. They



ROCKY GROUND WITH SPARSE TREES

S.6 - Krishna as a young boy dragging a heavy mortar

are looking at the young Krishna, one pointing at him with her hand. Also the other two figures of seated ascetics seem to gaze in the same direction; they are seated in the ceremonial fashion, one knee raised.

At the left side of the viewer is the main personage, the young strong Krishna crawling on the ground. The rope holding him to the mortar is clearly visible in between two trees; of the mortar itself, only one part is observable behind the right tree, with the rope around it. Krishna is wearing a low crown, and is carrying heavy earrings, a necklace with a large heart-shaped pendant, finely chiselled, and several thin bracelets and anklets. His *sampot* is not visible, being eroded by weathering. His face is childish, with thick lips, oriental eyes and continuous eyebrows in the Khmer style of the time. He stares at the viewer, in an act of pride. In front of him are three ascetics seated in the ceremonial fashion, the nearest finger pointing to Krishna. They are carrying delta-shaped fans made of peacock's feathers.

Below this main scene is a pseudo-register depicting a rocky landscape with scattered trees and animals (deer,? horses).

3. GENERAL COMMENTS

Exceptionally, in this relief the figures are not arranged in the usual symmetrical way, Because Krishna has to be represented horizontally on the floor, the empty space above him has been filled with trees. This, however, is not enough to completely balance the scene and a sense of asymmetry is dominant.

S.7 - SHIVA REDUCING KAMA TO ASHES

Location: south-western corner pavilion, southern arm, west wall (Pl.4 and 7)

1. THE TEXT

The details of the story of Kama, the god of love, are narrated in the *Shiva Purana*, chapter 16-19 (used here), in the *Saura Purana* (chapters 53-54) and mention of his misfortune is also made in the *Ramayana* (Book I, 23).

The demon Taraka, having propitiated Brahma by means of asceticism, obtains the boon that he could not be killed by any of the gods, but only by someone who was born from the seed of Shiva. He brings havoc amongst the gods, including Vishnu.

In order to restore peace, Indra summons Kama, the god of love ('who is born in the mind'), and tells him to go to Shiva, shake his mind and make him unite with Parvati.

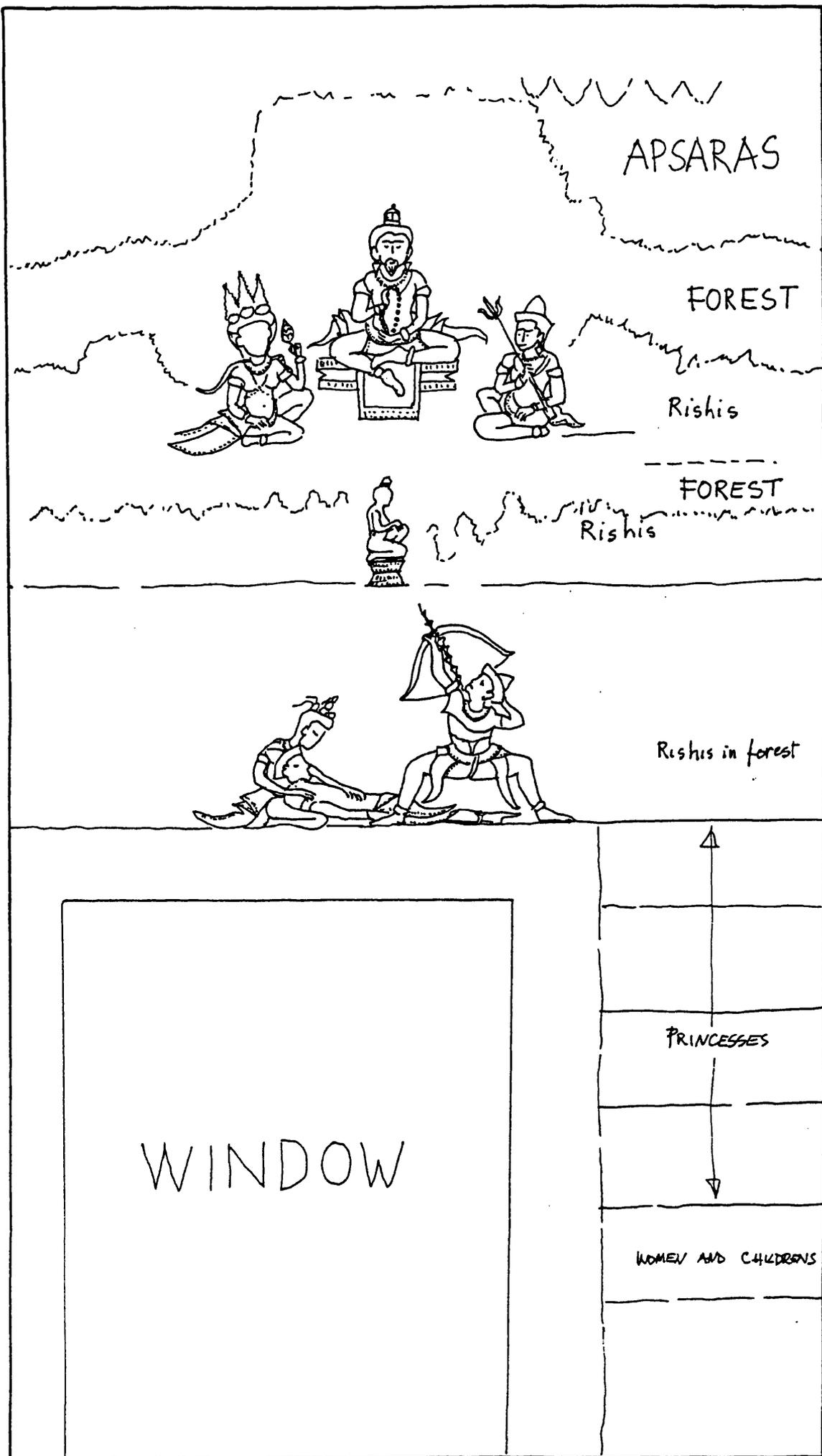
Kama armed with his flower-bow, and crocodile-bearing banner, reaches the place where the Great Lord is deeply absorbed in meditation. At the door stands the guardian Salaidi¹⁶, a figure holding a trident, adorned and resplendent like a second Shiva. To bypass him, Kama transforms himself into a fragrant breeze, gentle and cool.

Finally he comes into the presence of Shiva. Standing on his left side, with his bow fully drawn, he is ready to discharge the arrow of mango blossoms. Shiva notices this and is instantly angered. Kama discharges the arrow, but the infallible weapon becomes futile on the great Lord; Kama trembles, frightened. A great flame of fire springs up spontaneously from Shiva's third eye and Kama is reduced to ashes.

Parvati faints, and when she regains consciousness, she asks to let Kama live and heat the world, because without Kama there will not be any emotion between man and woman, no happiness. Shiva makes Kama arise from the ashes in a disembodied form, indefinable, 'going here and there like the wind' with his bow and arrow.

2. THE VIEWING

The personages of this relief are sculpted in pseudo-registers, of which two are salient. The first is the **top pseudo-register**, where Shiva is depicted at the centre, with, at his right (left of the viewer), his consort Parvati, and to the right a male personage holding a trident (*trisula*). Shiva is represented as a richly ornate ascetic, a king amongst the gods, sitting on a plinth (base) decorated with sculpted



S.7 - Shiva reducing Kama to ashes

floral motifs. With both hands he is holding a rosary. His face, with closed eyes, seems to be absorbed in deep meditation. It is difficult to see, on the relief, if the third eye is sculpted on his forehead. Parvati, wearing the royal three-pointed crown, is holding in her left hand a stem ending with a lotus bud. The personage with the trident is sitting at a lower level than Shiva, slightly higher than Parvati. The three personages are in a thick forest, surrounded by *rishis* arranged in small groups, at different heights on the ground. Over this landscape fly storms of *apsaras*, as usual in all the reliefs, to glorify the action.

The second important **pseudo-register** is the **middle** one. It is a comparatively thin register occurring in between the one with the large image of Shiva, above, and of Kama below. The most puzzling fact is the presence of another image of Shiva, of a much smaller size than the one depicted above, unadorned as a *rishi*, standing on a high stand finely decorated with floral motifs. The flames of the *tapas* surround him. In his right hand he holds some elongated objects, while the left is extended to receive (?or give) a round gift held by a worshipper kneeled in front of him. To both sides are series of *rishis*, some facing each other, others facing the centre of the panel, in various gestures. The background is made of rocks (indicated by vertical lozenges) with scattered trees, indicating the mountain at the top of which Shiva is meditating.

The **lower pseudo-register** contains the illustration of two 'culminant' events of the story, from left to right:

- 1) The dead Kama, lying inert on the floor, his head tenderly supported by his wife Rati.
- 2) Kama, having armed his bow, standing in a flexed position of power, ready to shoot the arrow in the direction of Shiva.

Both events occur in the forest at the base of the mountain where Shiva is meditating, surrounded by a small group of *rishis*, some of which are arranged at a higher level on the mountain, usually in pairs, behind trees, creating thus the effect of another pseudo-register. The flames of *tapas* surround the ones to the left of the viewer.

¹⁶ In the *Saura Purana* (Doniger O'Flaherty, p.157) Salaidi is described as a human being standing at the door, as high as a peak of Mt. Meru, adorned of all ornaments, three eyed and four armed, like another Shiva. Salaidi is also the name of Nandi, Shiva's bull.

In the **pillar to the right of the window** are sculpted 5 small registers; the top four illustrate female royal personages wearing high crowns, symmetrically facing each other. The fifth register, at the very base, depicts groups of women with their children. Since they are modestly dressed, do not wear crowns but have their hair simply arranged, it seems evident they belong to the common people.

3. GENERAL COMMENTS

1) The presence of a male figure holding a trident sitting to the left of Shiva is problematic. Although he could be the door's guardian Salaidi described in the original text, he may also be interpreted as another image of Shiva, the Shiva Shuladhara¹⁷ (or Shulin Shiva), so called because he carries the trident, symbol of his functions of Creator, Preserver and Destroyer. This last hypothesis is corroborated by the fact that he sits higher than Parvati, an unlikely position if he was only a door guard. It may be that in their love for symmetry, the Khmer needed a figure to balance the presence of Parvati, resorting thus to the little known figure of Salaidi or to a lesser form of Shiva.

2) It is important to notice that Kama's arrow is not in vectorial alignment to the large image of Shiva of the top pseudo-register, but to the lesser image of the middle pseudo-register. Therefore, the action occurs between the middle and the lower pseudo-registers, with the top register depicting the beginning (Shiva in meditation) or the end of the story (the triumph of Shiva over desire and love). The episode of Kama shooting at Shiva depicted in this relief is not the only one. In the *Vamana Purana* (edited by Varanasi; book 6. Chapter 25) we are told that there were two antecedent occasions in which Kama attempted to hit him and driving him mad. The final episode, however, is the above one.

The epithets of Kama are remarkable: Madana, 'the one who brings madness'; the one who can not be conquered by gods or demons; the one who is born in the mind; the one who is impossible to delimit, going here and there like the wind, with his bow and arrow.

3) It is interesting to note that the text narrating this episode mentions three times that Kama's banner is bearing the image of a crocodile. In the comments to the

¹⁷ Danielou A., *The myths and gods of India*, I.T.I. Rochester, 1985,p.217.

relief of Shiva in the Pine Forest (S.4), the occurrence and significance of this animal's image are discussed in detail.

4) Concerning the layout of this relief, it has to be noticed that the arrangement of the various personages closely respects a hierarchical order. The more important they are, the higher from the ground. In the upper register, the various groups of ascetics are placed at 3 different levels, reflecting thus an internal order of merit. Also in the 5 registers to the right of the window with female figures, the common women are at the very bottom, below the ladies of the court. The women with their children depicted in the lowest register convey an area of family life and happiness with children. This seems appropriate to the main theme of the story that was to encourage Shiva to procreate the child that would destroy the demon Tataka.

5) Narrative technique and temporal progression. The relief of this wall narrates the episode in 4 events, or scenes, according to the 'elliptic method'¹⁸, by which the story is not entirely developed, but visually depicted through the use of one or two scenes. These give a synthesis of the elements that allow us to identify the source of the narrative. The visual sequence is woven into one organic entity with a clear sense of continuity of time and space. Details of the narrative scheme are discussed in detail in the chapter dealing with narratology.

¹⁸ Ellipsis is a canonical narrative tempo (or speed), occurring when one or more components in a situation that is being recounted, are missing. See Prince G., *Dictionary of Narratology*, no editor's name or date available.

S.8 - THE DEATH OF VALIN

Location: south-western corner pavilion, southern arm, east wall (Pl.4 and 7)

1. THE TEXT

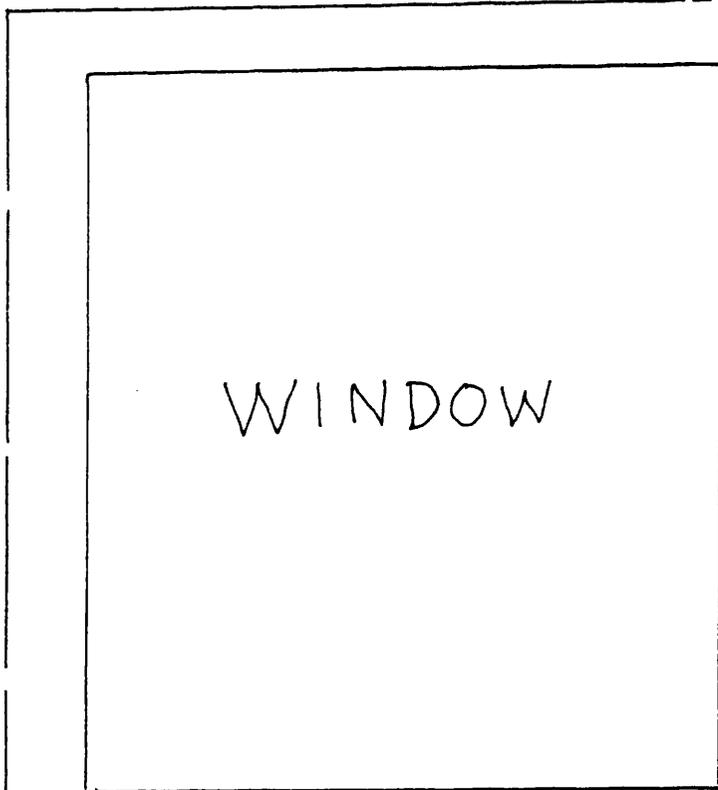
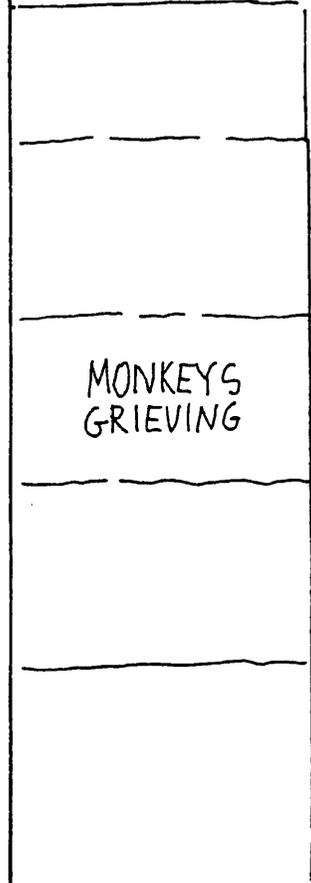
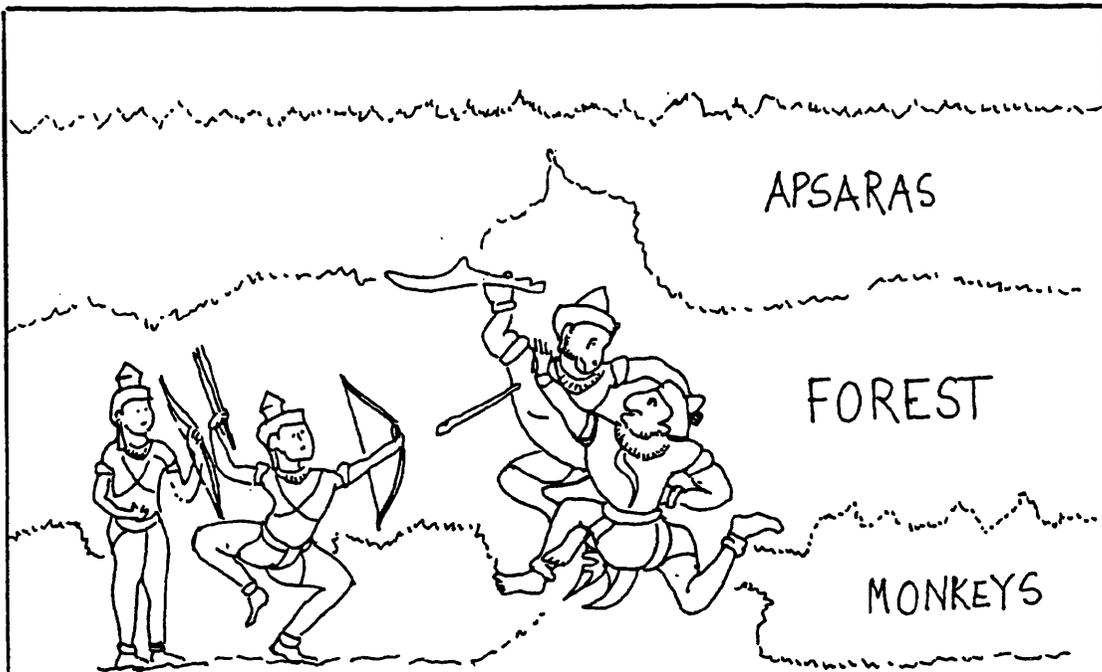
The episode referred to here, also known as 'The duel between Sugriva and Valin', or "Rama's murder of Valin", is taken from the 4th book of the *Ramayana*, the *Kishkindha Kanda*, because it is set largely in the monkey citadel of Kishkindha. It continues the fairy-tale atmosphere of the preceding book. The story of Valin and Sugriva occupies almost half of the book (26 chapters out of the 76).

From the day Sugriva has been exiled (chapter 11), he lives in constant terror of being sought and murdered by his brother Valin, who is so powerful that nobody ever defeated him in combat. He admits to being a coward and unacquainted with the skills of a warrior. At this Rama incites him to trust his courage and be confident. Sugriva, however, begs Rama to show him a test of strength. Rama obliges by piercing with his arrow a series of seven *sala* trees and buries the arrow into the mountain (chapter 12). Encouraged by this, Sugriva decides to confront Valin. A frightful fight between the two brothers follows but Sugriva is defeated and, wounded, runs to the mountains where he meets with Rama and Lakshmana. He is upset that Rama did not keep his promise to kill Valin, but Rama explains that he was unable to distinguish the two brothers as they fight and therefore refrained from shooting. Later, Sugriva, strongly encouraged by Rama, challenges Valin again to fight, this time wearing a flower garland that will identify him

The two formidable monkey brothers become engaged in a fierce combat (chapter 16), furiously searching for each other's weak point, inflicting fierce blows and becoming covered in blood. Rama and Lakshmana, concealed behind trees, can see Sugriva becoming weaker and losing his courage. When Rama realises that Sugriva is exhausted and on the way to being overcome, he selects an arrow to slay Valin, stretches his bow and discharges the formidable arrow into Valin's breast. The valiant king of the monkeys falls to the earth, his voice strangled with sobs which gradually fade away.

Valin reproaches Rama for striking him from behind when engaged in a combat with another, who was unaware, by asking 'what merit do you hope to earn by this?' (chapter 17). He concludes that Rama is a perverse creature, outwardly virtuous but in reality a scoundrel, a man who has killed him without reason. Moreover, Valin asks why a member of the warrior caste would commit such a wicked deed, break the laws of the virtues, disregard justice, and become covered with the guilt of infamy. He also tells Rama that, if he had confided his purpose to him, he would have brought back Sita in a day and destroyed Ravana. He would also allow Sugriva to obtain the throne legitimately after his death.

Rama (chapter 18) justifies himself by telling Valin he was ignorant of his *dharma*, that he accused him in a 'simian folly', that he was a heedless monkey surrounded by irresponsible simian counsellors. Also that he was perverse in



having marital relations with Ruma, Sugriva's wife, lust with a sister-in-law, being an offence punishable with death. It was not for personal impulse that he killed Valin "while engaged in combat with another" but in conformity to the ancestral tradition. Rama adds "there are Gods who, assuming human form, dwell on earth!" and he, Valin, has insulted him in anger. The dying Valin admits Rama is right, and after recommending Rama to protect his son Angada, falls into coma. His wife Tara, in great distress laments the death of her King (chapter 19 and 20), and embraces her dying husband, deciding to die of hunger together with the other beautiful wives of the king. But the astute Hanuman tells her that she is now the protectress of all leading monkeys (chapter 21) and she has to ensure that prince Angada (her son with Valin) should be installed king. Valin faintly mentions his last words (chapter 22) to his brother and to his son, and dies (chapter 23) when general Nala draws out from his body the lethal arrow; then Tara washes the corpse with her tears. Following this commotion, Sugriva feels remorse (chapter 24) that he does not merit the throne and is no longer worthy to live; after the funeral rites (chapter 25) he is eventually installed as king (chapter 26). He will then pass his time in dalliance with Tara, in "drunken stupor and sexual indulgence" (chapter 31) to the point that he has to be severely reprimanded by Lakshmana for having forgotten his promise to Rama. He had allowed four months to pass towards the rainy season, without making ready for the expedition to find and release Sita (chapter 30).

2. THE VIEWING

The relief illustrates the event in two main pseudo-registers that are described in detail below.

Top pseudo-register, left side. Two personages are represented here: Rama and Lakshmana holding bow and arrows, standing amongst seated monkeys. Both are dressed in the usual royal attire, with chest crossbands and cylindrical crowns with a cone at the top. Lakshmana is standing erect holding his bow in the left hand and arrows (relief damaged) in his right hand. To his left, Rama is standing with flexed legs because he is in a position of effort to discharge (? or to arm) the bow. Since we know the story from the text, we assume he has just released an arrow from the bow he is holding in his left arm. It is interesting to note that in his right arm, Rama holds more than one arrow as if he was on the point of arming the bow.

Both brothers are represented as left-handed, because they are depicted on the left side of the wall, facing Valin/Sugriva to their left side. Since their torso is shown frontally to clearly reveal the archery action, the sculptors had to put the bow in their left arms.

Top pseudo-register, right side. Two personages are represented here: Valin and Sugriva in a hand-to-hand fight with powerful interwoven limbs. We know that Valin is the one to the left because he has an arrow in his chest. He is jumping high from the ground, with his left arm holding Sugriva by the conical end of the crown, while grasping a piece of an uprooted tree (with branches and crests) in his right. Sugriva is shown, to the right, with his right arm holding Valin's left leg, while his left arm is on Valin's right shoulder, powerless, in a gesture of defence rather than aggression. The text narrates that at a certain point of the combat Valin, excelling in strength and valour, was going to slay Sugriva who had become weaker and discouraged. At this instant, Sugriva made the signal to Rama to kill Valin, as agreed. Rama releases his lethal arrow that is shown stuck in the right side of Valin's chest. To the right side of the two fighting monkeys there is a monkey wearing a crown (*mukuta*), seated watching the combat: it might be Hanuman who was so interested in the fate of his master Sugriva.

The two fighting royal monkeys are represented dressed and ornate with jewels in an identical way. In the text, Rama had recommended Sugriva to dress differently from his brother in order to be easily recognisable. The only distinctive feature is, perhaps, Sugriva's thin bandoleer (narrow strip of cloth slung across the back).

Lower pseudo-register, left side. Three personages are represented here: Lakshmana to the left, Sugriva seated in the centre and Rama to the right. The two brothers are standing erect, holding their disarmed bows and arrows. Rama is clearly evidencing a pointed arrow, and is looking down to Sugriva (his face is strongly defaced in the relief), who is looking up at him; Lakshmana seems not to be involved. One can conclude that the relief is representing a conversation between Rama and Sugriva. A tree, elaborately depicted with climbers, fills the background.

Lower pseudo-register, right side. Several personages are represented here, but the most salient are the dying Valin and his wife Tara. Valin is shown lying on the ground, stiff, grim faced, the two arms aligned lifeless along the body, Rama's arrow still in the right side of his chest (in agreement with the top right scene). His head is supported by Tara who, kneeling on the ground, supports him on her lap, and extends her left arm on Valin's right shoulder, in a tender gesture of affection. We cannot read the expression on her face because it has been

damaged, but a general sense of desolation can be perceived; she is wearing the three-pointed crown of the queen. Several personages kneel around the royal couple; most are recognisable as females from the conical pointed high crown (with flowers at the base), and refer to Valin's harem wives and court ladies. The ones at the feet of Valin hold and caress their dying Lord, lamenting with open mouths.

The **pillar to the left of the window**, below the large relief described above, is decorated with 4 rows of kneeling monkeys in grief. We are told by the text (Chapter 22) that after Valin expired, a great tumult arose amongst the monkeys who lamented the loss of their valiant king and leader, and that without his protection they were not going to be safe in the animal-infested forest anymore.

3. GENERAL COMMENTS

1) This *Ramayana's* episode is generally known as that of 'Rama's murder of Valin', and Khmer sculptural reliefs illustrating it are referred with the same name. I believe, however, that its appropriate title should be that of 'The death of Valin', because it is the death of Valin, and his words when dying, that are the main topic of the event. Furthermore, Valin always has the predominant visual position.

2) In this episode, the behaviour of Rama, elsewhere exemplary being the ideal model of virtue, is the source of considerable discomfort to the readers of the *Ramayana*, because he had concealed himself, and without warning or challenge, shot Valin while he was engaged in hand-to-hand combat with Sugriva. Perhaps the most serious issue, as Valin repeatedly points out while dying, is not why he killed him, but the way he killed him.

Perhaps to defuse the situation, the sculptors have depicted the arrow as being stuck in Valin's chest and not in the back as narrated in the *Ramayana*. Similarly, Przyluski¹⁹ has pointed out that Rama is holding his bow (without an arrow) in one hand and a bundle of arrows in the other. He was in the act of loading his bow, raising thus the doubt that Rama may not have been the one who killed Valin! This departure from the text might have been wanted by the sculptors in

¹⁹ Przyluski J., *La légende de Rama dans les bas-reliefs d'Angkor Wat*, AAK, I, 1921-23, p.319

order to visually attenuate the impact of Rama's treachery, and avoid any constative gesture.

3) The tragic event displayed in this relief is underlined by the layout and the attitude of some personages. For instance, Valin's higher than Sugriva position is semiotically that of superiority, of a fighter overpowering his contestant. Altogether his body gives the impression of being more massive, stronger, and his jumping reveals more energy at that point of the fight. Definitively, it looks as if Valin is having total power superiority and on the way to slaying Sugriva. In the layout of the lower register, the long arrow sticking out from the chest of the dying Valin is aligned almost exactly with Rama's left hand on the bow, and the central jewel of his necklace (the most important part of the ornament.

It has a performative function insofar it tells us to look at a specific point within the relief (the relationship between Rama and Valin), performing thus perlocutionary²⁰ act.

4) Many of the figures depicted show body gestures revealing a close participation to the event. The best examples are the following:

- The hands of the 3 female personages holding Valin's feet are aligned in the same direction, emphasising the action. The hands of the other grieving female personages seem to be indexing towards Valin's face; only one lady has her hand on her chest.
- Also noticeable is the finger indexing of many the monkeys in the registers to the left of the window is up in the direction of their dying king. A few of them (second row from the bottom) have one arm over the head in a gesture of desperation, while others have one arm, or both, bent on their chest. There is another perlocutory element, the gazing of several monkeys in the direction of Valin, which provokes the observer to focus on Valin as well.

5) Narrative technique and temporal succession. In this relief one can detect the complex narrative technique which follows the ellipsis method. The sequential reading presents some problems and will be discussed in detail in the chapter

²⁰ A *performative* element is that which makes the observer to do something, like looking at a specific point within the picture; *perlocutionary* stands for discursive (Gandelman W., *The gesture of demonstration*, 1988)

dealing with narratology. Suffice to mention here that we cannot tell from the relief when this conversation between Rama and Sugriva took place. We know from the text that there is a discussion well before the fight and another just after it. The first (chapter 11) is the one that brought Rama to commit himself to kill Valin; the other – after the murder – when Sugriva expresses his remorse (chapter 24). In the reading of the relief, 2 interpretations are possible:

- The depiction of Sugriva seated on the floor, his right arm on the chest, might suggest a person in a physical and emotional state of distress, which follows such a fierce fight with a tragic ending. In this case the conversation depicted here took place after the fight.
- Alternatively, one might consider the body language of Sugriva squatting on the ground, the indication of his sadness of having been exiled and lost his wife. He is represented in similar attitude in two occasions in the panels of the Bapuon temple (11th century). In this case we may be dealing with the dialogue which takes place at the first meeting of Sugriva and Rama, when Sugriva tells Rama his lengthy story of enmity with Valin.

In tune with this interpretation is the gesture of Rama evidencing his supernatural arrow by placing it in front of his face (the pointed tip in front of the eyes) and in direct line with Sugriva's gaze. It is obstructing the eye contact between the two, making sure that Sugriva notices it. Rama reaffirms thus that the arrow is the material pledge of the alliance. In this case the conversation has taken place before the fight.

S.9 - ? PRALAMBA & THE DOUSING OF A FIRE

Location: south-western corner pavilion, over the lintel of the southern door (Pl.5).

1 . THE TEXT

The interpretation of the story, single or double, from this panel over the door's lintel is controversial because its reference to a text has not yet been found. French scholars²¹ have put forward the possibility that it deals with two episodes: The murder of Pralamba, and The dousing of a fire.

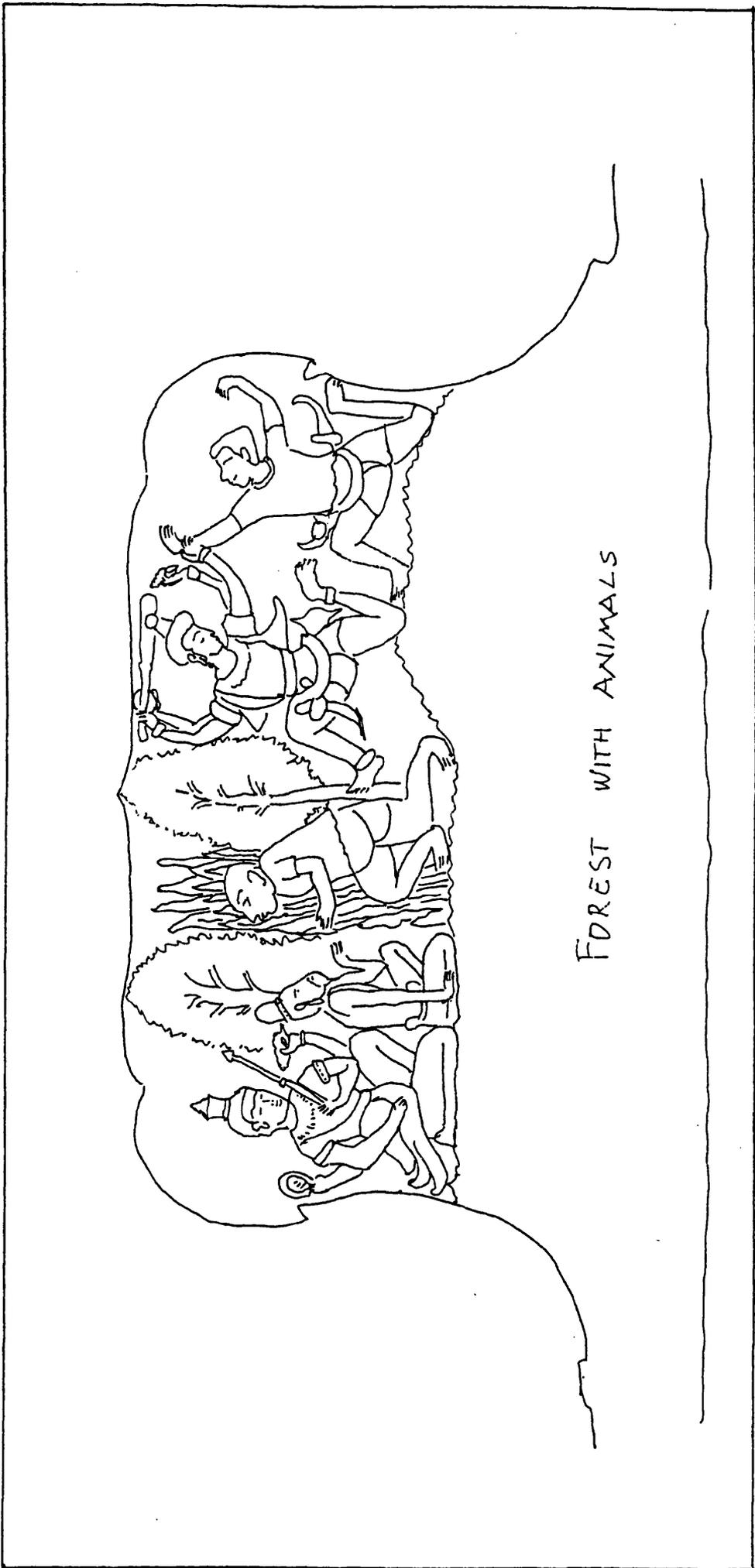
1) Events dealing with Pralamba and the dousing of a fire are told in the 10th Book of the *Bhagavata Purana*, chapters 18-19, and in the *Brahma Purana*, Part 2, chapter 78.

In the former, at chapter 18, we read that Krishna, Balarama, and their cowherds' friends enter the forest and indulge in playing, wrestling, singing and dancing. One day, the demon Pralamba, having assumed the guise of a cowherd, joins the group with the view to kidnapping the boys. Although Krishna knows about this, he lets him join-in with the intention of getting rid of him. During a game, Pralamba irritated by Balarama, assumes his original demonic form "like a cloud illuminated with flash of lights", soaring in the sky with crashing speed. While Pralamba is carrying him away, Balarama deals a heavy blow with his fist on his head, shattering the monster to pieces, who, vomiting blood profusely and giving out a terrifying roar, falls dead. Balarama is praised by his friends as well as by the gods who shower him with wreaths of flowers.

While Krishna, Balarama, the cowherds and their cattle are in the forest (chapter 19), a fire breaks out, spreading assisted by the wind, causing havoc amongst the local inhabitants. Everybody runs to Krishna asking for help. "Don't be afraid. Please close your eyes", he says, and as they do so, the Supreme master of Yoga, swallows the menacing fire saving them all from calamity.

2) *The Book of Beginning* of the Mahabharata²² narrates the story of Krishna and Arjuna being approached by a brahmin who asks for food, a special food, fire! He is a god of fire and gives Krishna the discus, and the magic bow to Arjuna, making them mad with power. He is greedy to eat all the Khandava forest with Krishna's help, since Indra has been frustrating his wish to make fire by casing the rain fall. When he sets the forest on fire, bringing terror, Krishna is un-moved and Arjuna repulses Indra's clouds with his newly obtained magic arrows. At this point the gods have to intervene by bringing the two heroes back to reality; immediately, Krishna douses the fire and punishes the wild brahmin.

²¹ Glaize M., *Les Monuments du groupe d'Angkor*, 1944, 1993 edit. p.85



S.9 - Murder of ? Pralamba & The dousing of a fire

2 . THE VIEWING

In the relief the main events of the story are depicted in the top pseudo-pediment; in the lower, only rocks, vegetation and some animals are represented.

Top pseudo-register. To the right of the composition are two personages fighting, more likely on a mountain. Towards the centre of this and located higher, is Krishna in royal attire and with four arms. With one arm he is throwing a mace (or axe) blow to a man who he holds with another hand. Another of Krishna's hands holds a conch, and another, the discus (*chakra*). His victim is not armed, dressed with a short vest, and has a simple hairstyle; he is frantically gesticulating. It is difficult to say if what seems to be in his right hand is a tool or a branch of the tree that he may be grasping.

To the left of the viewer, the same individual has his arms joined in an attitude of respect or prayer. He seems to go through a fire taller than him to arrive in the presence of an ascetic seated in a ceremonial way in front of Krishna. The latter is represented with 4 arms holding the characteristic attributes, majestically seated in the ceremonial way.

In the **lower pseudo-register**, below this entire scene, is a forest with lions, deer and birds, behind a rocky ground.

3. GENERAL COMMENTS

1) The attribution of this relief to the story of Pralamba is quite problematic, although it is undoubtedly a Vaishnava story. To the right of the pediment, Pralamba is shown fighting with Krishna (with 4 arms), while, according to the *Bhagavata Purana*, he should fight Balarama (chapter 18). With regard to the left side of the relief, it is not clear why the man (? Pralamba) is attempting to walk through the fire, and why he is going towards Krishna in what seems to be an act of contrition. Krishna as well is not represented dousing the fire, as he should be according to the *Bhagavata Purana* (chapter 19); the flames are also quite distant from him. Instead, he is represented majestically seated behind a *rishi*.

2) The two events seem almost certainly interrelated in time, one following the other as in the original text (chapter 18 and chapter 19); therefore it is not

²² Book 1, *The Beginning*, chapter 9, pg. 417

surprising that they are represented in the same relief, and that the same personages appear twice.

S.10 - THE DVARAVATI WATER FESTIVAL

Location: south-western corner pavilion, eastern arm, north wall (Pl.5).

1 . THE TEXT

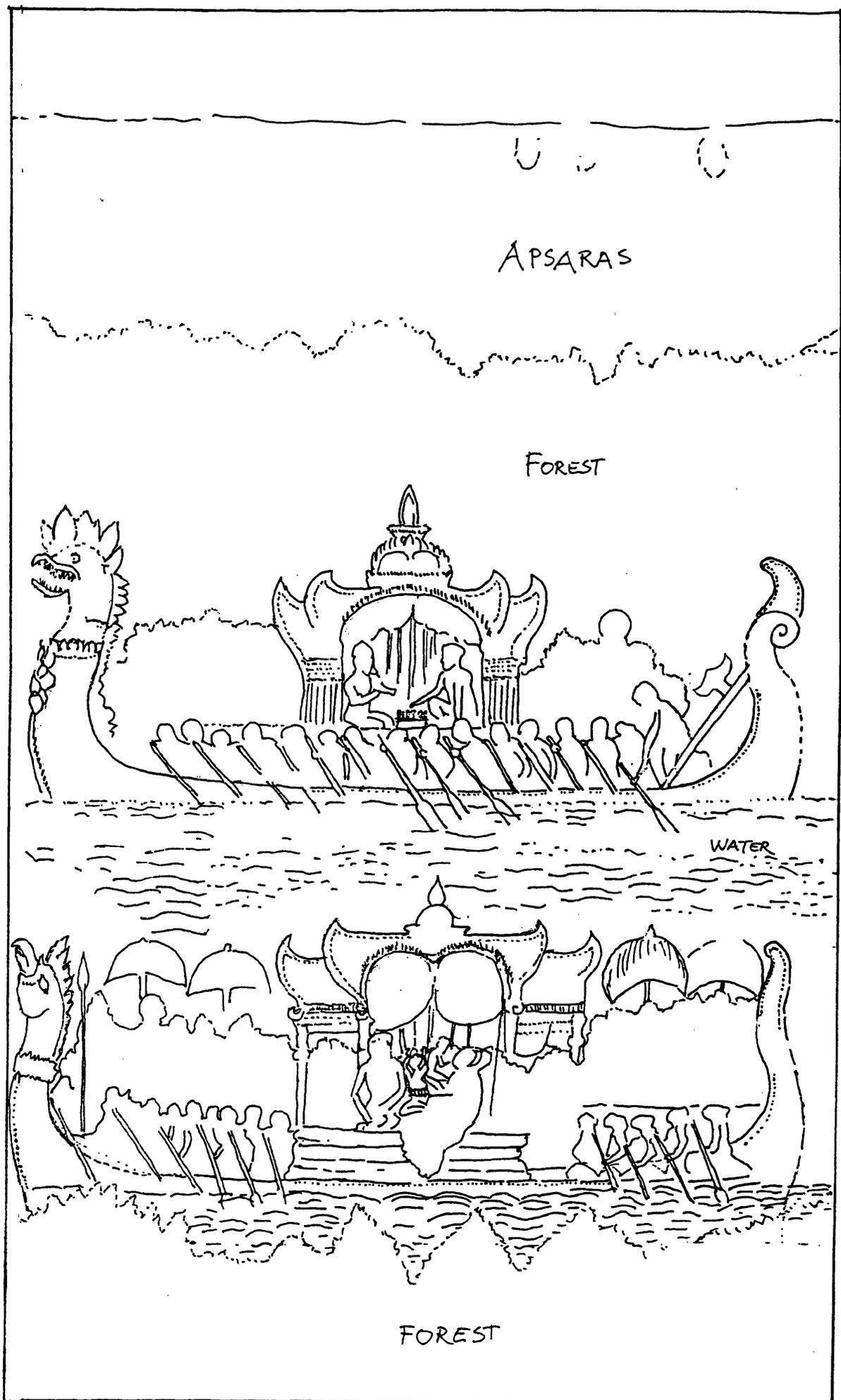
The meaning of this relief, if it refers to a worldly event, to a myth or legend, has not been entirely clarified till now, although French scholars²³ have suggested analogies with the Dvaravati festival. Although this story contains clear references to the Indian texts mentioned below, it includes elements that may be local. The abundance of fish and crocodiles in the water is possible only in a *baray*, a lake (the Tonle Sap) or a large river (the Mekong), precluding thus this scene being a 'maritime' festival. In my opinion, we are dealing with a Khmer version of a classic mythological event. The Khmer sculptors have adapted the 'maritime' water festival to their own concept of water, being that of a lake or a *baray* full of fish and crocodiles, as these were in Cambodia at that time.

Here are some texts that contain several precise references to what is depicted in the relief. The first is that of the *Harivamśa*, Vol.2, chapter 45 and 146, as the 'maritime' festival of Dvaravati .

1) Dvaravati is the city of Vishnu, and from there a maritime pilgrimage (called *Samudrayatra*) takes place to Pindaraca. On this occasion, everybody leaves town, with Krishna's compatriots, the Yadavas, leading their children and wives. Beautiful women of pleasure and singing apsaras accompany Krishna and Balarama. Firstly they enter the forest for love games, and towards the evening, they board marvellous boats to continue to indulge in pleasures. These ships carry large buildings with porticoes, verandas, and gardens with wild animals and birds, in an arrangement that simulates Mt. Meru. All the pavilions are ornate with gold, precious and semi-precious stones, besides being crowned with garlands, birds and swarms of bees; all trees are in bloom. The climate is mild so that nobody is sick, restless, worried or thirsty. The great architect Vishvakarman has created a sort of Nandana, the celestial grove of Indra.

The boats, shaped like geese, peacocks, and sea monsters, are stirred by able pilots, and cut elegantly across the waves of the sea. One boat is only for Krishna, large enough to accommodate all his retinue. Singing and dancing enhance the festival, the *apsaras* praising Krishna's adventures; the orchestra plays without interruption; the guests enjoy all sorts of pleasures. Krishna multiplies his forms in order to please his 1600 wives or women, who, lightly dressed, are abandoned in sensual attitudes; in making love to them, he makes sure to vary their enjoyment.

²³ Coedes G., *Les bas-reliefs d'Angkor-Vat*, BCAI, 1911, and Glaze M., *Les Monuments du groupe d'Angkor*, 1944, 1993 edit., for instance.



S.10 - Dvaravati water festival

Balarama likes to drink *Kadambari* (a liquor obtained from *Kadamba*'s flowers mixed with autumn rain), in the company of Arjuna and his wife Sug^hhadra, Pradyumna and others. Narada acts the clown.

2) In the seventh book of the *Ramayana*, chapters 109-110, one can find another mythological event that may be related to this relief, though not very convincingly: that of Rama's departure for the Mahaprasthanas. We are told that when people heard of Rama's intention to depart from life, "all Ayodhya's citizens, happy and healthy join Rama, and all the men and women with their birds, beasts and friends, purified of their sins" follow him" with great happiness. When Rama reaches the sacred Sarayu river, its waters eddying and rippling, he enters the waters with his younger brothers, yielding up his life. At this time, whosoever enter the waters giving up their life with joy, would attain the region of the Gods; even the monkeys and bears would go to the Third Heaven. Having granted this to his followers, Rama returned at last to heaven as Lord Vishnu.

2 . THE VIEWING

The relief is sculpted with the scenes arranged in two main pseudo-registers, with the usual storm of *apsaras* at the top.

Upper pseudo-register. The full width of the wall is occupied by a large boat made in the shape of a mythological animal with. It has the stem in the shape of the head of a *hamsa* (badly preserved; compare with Varuna's mount in the relief of the 'Invitation to the descent of Vishnu', N.1); it is pushed by a series of fourteen oarsmen and a man at the helm. They row in an orderly way, with the oars arranged in parallel lines. Built over a base is a cabin, with a windowed extension at each side, and a double tiered roof with pointed finials. At the top centre, is a pointed dome. This construction is more likely made of wood, and possibly decorated with gold. Under a canopy are two personages, male judging from the hairstyle, without crowns, playing a game with checker/pawns on a low table, probably similar to chess. They are surrounded by women: the ones to their left, in a small group, are arranging something (? flowers) in a pot. Then, is another group with children and boys, some of the personages seem to fall overboard into the river. Above this last group are four men with blowpipes, of which two are aiming at something hidden in the dense foliage of a tree (alternatively, they may be musicians playing flutes!).

On the other side of the cabin, is a group of seated personages, mostly ladies with high *mukutas*. As a background to this scene are many tall trees on the shore; on

some palm-trees, men are climbing to collect something, and, to the right, to get large coconuts.

In the **lower pseudo-register** another large boat is represented, similar to the above, with the shape of a mythological animal, the stem like a head ending with a beak (? a goose), the tail (stern) with a curl. It is propelled by 10 (?or more) oarsmen, of which some are dressed with flowery shirts. At the stern, above the rowers, is a group of 4-5 personages, two of whom hold parasols and another something resembling a fly-whisker. At the centre is a complex construction on a high and richly decorated plinth, with a central domed cabin with an extension at each side. The two-tiered roof terminates with finials, and is covered by a dome on top of which is a smaller baldachin. In here, under rich draperies made of floral fabrics, are a woman (important, judging from the large size) with a baby on her lap, and, to the right of the viewer, a man holding a child in his raised arms. He seem to have a short beard and the hairs arranged in a single chignon; he is dressed with a long rich gown hanging down to both sides, almost touching his feet. Women in the adjacent rooms surround these two main personages. At the boats aft is again a group of people with two parasols cramped together, watching a cockfight. The boat is floating on waters indicated by weaving lines and rich in fish, and the shore nearest to the viewer is covered with rich vegetation.

This boat, as well as the one of the overlying pseudo-register, is floating over waters (graphically indicated by undulating lines) full of fish and crocodiles, and with some occasional bird at the surface (? mandarin duck). The banks of the river, or lake, have lush vegetation, with some trees with climbers on tree trunks.

The usual row of dancing *apsaras* symmetrically arranged surmounts the main scene in the **topmost part of the relief**.

GENERAL COMMENTS

- 1) There are other less plausible interpretations of the event narrated in this relief.
 - the mixing of the story of Rama's return to Ayodhya as narrated in Valmiki's *Ramayana* with a local belief that this must have taken place by sea, and not by using the magic flying Pushpaka chariot.
 - the story of Vibhishana - Rama's greatest king friend - who, after Rama's coronation (*Ramayana*, book 6, chapter 130), returned to the isle of Lanka

with his wife and entourage. Khmer designers imagined this trip to have taken place by boat.

- the local guides of Angkor temples believe that the scene refers to a sumptuous festive occasion of rich local Chinese merchants on the barays or the Tonle Sap. J. Moura²⁴ was the first to suggest that in this relief the main protagonists were Chinese, but was refuted by Coedes²⁵. In 1973, Bernard Philippe Groslier²⁶ pointed out that the boats and all the occupants are Khmer. Only the orchestra of one boat of the relief is identical to that of the boat of the Bayon's relief (SE outer gallery) presenting a lord wearing a "Chinese" hat and dress (?an ambassador), probably attending a royal ceremony. Groslier also believed that this relief was depicting a scene evoking the pleasures of the celestial city of Dvaravati, symbol of the royal capital. Besides this Chinese boat of pleasure, at Bayon it is also illustrated a large Chinese junk in the reliefs of the great 'marine' battle. This questions the importance and role of Chinese at Angkor, which may have been only of commercial character, and involve the arrival of a Chinese ambassade for important events, like the investiture of a Khmer king.

- The joyful atmosphere of Rama's departure from earth, so well described in the *Ramayana* (book VII, chapters 109-10) refers to a procession that took place on land; however, the Sacred Sarayu river was the ultimate objective of the procession. It may be that the designers and sculptors of the relief transformed a land event into a water event. The boats of the relief, however, seem to be floating eastwards (towards the entrance of Angkor Wat) while in the text we are told the river was flowing westward.

2) None of the above narratives contain a detailed description of the boats and of the sensual feeling narrated in the *Harivamsa* which seems to match quite accurately with what is depicted on the relief.

²⁴ Moura J., *Le Royaume du Cambodge*, Leroux, Paris, 1883

²⁵ Coedes G., *Les bas-reliefs d'Angkor-Vat*, Bulletin de la Commission Archeologique de l'Indochine, Paris, 1911, p.99

²⁶ Groslier B.Ph., *Inscriptions du Bayon*, Publ. EFEO, Memoires Archeologiques, III-2, 1973, p. 172.

4) In the layout of the relief, the orientation and arrangement of the many oars, differing in angle between the two boats, seem to increase the sense of action and movement that pervades this relief. It is evidenced by the action of the oarsmen and boat's people, the multitude of swerving fish, and men climbing trees. By following the laws of spatial representation in use at the time of sculpting, the boats are sculpted as if they were one above the other. From this follows that only one water surface (river, lake, or sea) is depicted here, with two boats floating on it. The boat in the lower pseudo-register is possibly more important than the one in the higher pseudo-register, a fact confirmed by its larger pavilion and by the parasol carriers.

6) In conclusion, if my reading is correct, the larger of the 2 boats is destined for Krishna and his wives, accompanied by a noisy brigade of court maidens and servants, while the other boat to Balarama, playing chess, surrounded by his harem. This interpretation, although tentative, excludes the possibility of a local Khmer water festival because it would be the only secular event depicted amongst the multitude of mythological stories depicted in the western corner pavilions.

S.11 - ? THE BETROTHAL OF SHIVA AND PARVATI

Location: south-western corner pavilion, eastern arm, south wall (Pl.6).

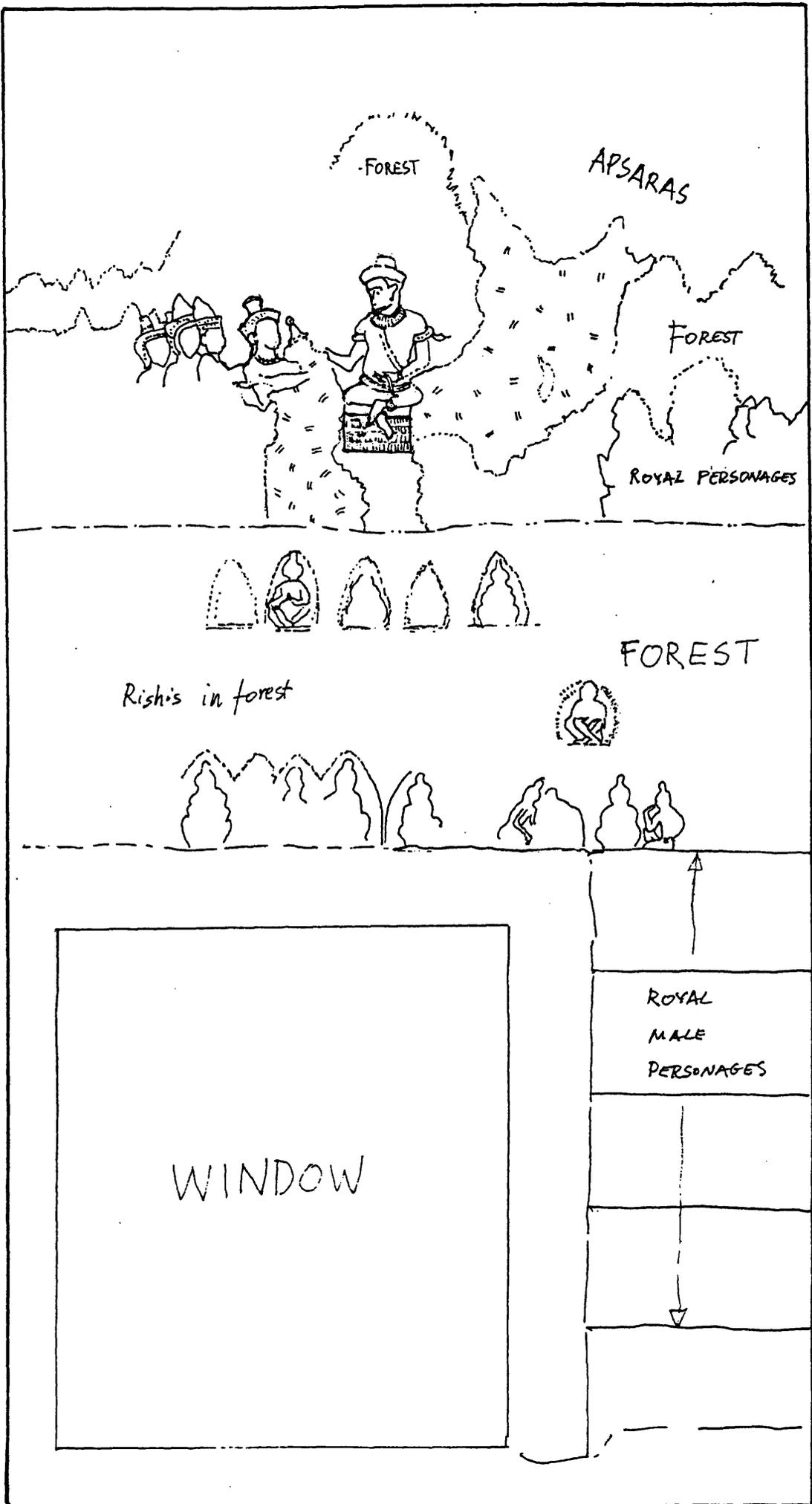
1. THE TEXT

The degradation of the rock has defaced most of the higher part of the relief, including the main personages, with the exception of the central figure of Shiva, of whom the identity is confirmed by the beard visible at close inspection. Because of this poor state of preservation, the relief's reading is quite arduous. Furthermore, the absence of clues on the action that is supposedly taking place, makes the attribution of this story to a specific Indian text quite hypothetical.

The gathering of Shiva with great sages and important personages is recounted in a few Shaivite stories, of which the most popular are that of The birth of Parvati (*Vamana Purana*, 25.1-75, towards the end), and of the Betrothal of Shiva and Parvati (*Vamana Purana*, 26.1-71, beginning). In my opinion, it is the latter which is more likely represented in the relief under discussion, for the reasons I will discuss here.

1) One day, Shiva summons on Mt. Mandara the seven great seers (and Vasishtha, the wife of one of them), and invites them to enjoy the beauty of that fine mountain and wide plateau, whose "lotus-coloured rocks are soft and smooth". Then he addresses the sages - who had sat down on the godly ground - requesting them to go to the king of the Himalayas to ask - on his behalf - the hand of his daughter, Parvati. Known under a variety of names (Uma and Devi being the most common), she was born from the union of the king Himavat and his wife Mena. The last of 3 girls, she had gained such an intense beauty from the practice of *tapas* that the gods could not approach her, overcome by her brilliance. But then, one day she was met by Shiva who repeatedly tested her devotion, before asking her hand in marriage. King Himavat, the lord of the Himalayas, was pleased by the request of Shiva, but would take the final decision only after discussing the matter with the kings of all other mountains. These quickly assembled, aware of the importance of their task; 23 in total, including Mt. Mandara, Mt. Kailasa and Mahendra (Maniparvata)²⁷, well known in the reliefs of Angkor Wat. They sat on golden seats in the assembly hall, together with lesser mountains and hills; after hearing Himavat, they agreed unanimously that Shiva would be a suitable son-in-law to them all. The betrothal was thus arranged.

²⁷ These mountains are respectively represented in the reliefs S.1, S.5, and N.2



S.11 - The betrothal of Shiva and Parvati

2) Previously, French scholars have not come up with an attribution of this relief to any specific mythological story, but refer the relief to a generic “Shiva receiving homage”. Recently, an interpretation has been suggested by C.M. Bhandari (1995), who - without quoting any original text - believes that the relief illustrates an episode of the teaching of Shiva, and in particular when some *rishis* wanted to learn the *vedas*, the old holy scriptures, and went to Shiva for help. He agreed to help them and sat in meditation facing south, hence the name Shiva *Dakshina murti* (*Dakshinayana* is the southern transit of the sun, from Cancer to Capricorn). At once the *vedas* became illuminated on his meditating body, and the *rishis* could learn them by seeing and reading rather than by the verbal teaching of Shiva.

2 . THE VIEWING

The top pseudo-register is very damaged, making the reading very difficult. At both sides of the main personage are rows of male figures from the royalty. Shiva is depicted with the beard of a *rishi* (broken in the relief, but evident at close inspection), and instead of the usual rosary he is holding a piece of fine jewellery in the shape of a lotus bud and a tapering flexible stem. It is almost identical to the object that king Suryavarman II is holding in the relief of the Historic procession²⁸. The god is sitting in the Indian position on a high base, and seems to be addressing people around him; alternatively, he may be in the process of receiving homage from royal personages, or may be teaching a sermon. The scene takes place in a hermitage where several ascetics are sitting in penance and meditation, probably on the mighty Mt. Mandara, with ‘its lovely caverns’. To his left are male personages wearing crowns, possibly at least four of them, ornate with the customary jewellery, some with their hand close to their chest. The one closest to Shiva is offering with raised arms a sort of container with a conical lid ending with a round knob or an ornate disc. Of the figure to the left of Shiva, only one arm is preserved, precluding any identification. While the main personage is sitting on a raised plinth, the others are sitting, or squatting, on the ground, slightly lower. Well below this intermediary row of royal personages, at both sides of the scene, is a row of seated personages with the usual conical crown, but smaller in size.

²⁸ Jewellery of this type is described at p. 82 and illustrated in fig.51 of Groslier G., *Recherches sur les Cambodgiens*, Challamel, Paris, 1921, who considers them as hand insignia or emblems, and as such related to a hierarchy of power.

The **middle pseudo-register** is composed of a horizontal band of trees amongst which ascetics sit with crossed legs and joined hands, possibly in prayer or meditation.

Also in the **lower pseudo-register** trees and ascetics are represented. The latter can be seen also on trees' branches with one climbing higher to escape the assault of a wild animal; others are on the ground involved in various activities, holding fans made from peacock feathers (deltoid-shaped), conversing or sitting in meditation.

The conventional storms of flying *apsaras* decorated the topmost part of the relief.

The **pillar to the right of the window** is sculpted with 4 superimposed registers representing seated royal personages, with the traditional adornments; most have one hand on their chest; others hold the stem of a large lotus bud; a few *rishis* are also present..

3. GENERAL COMMENTS

1) Provisionally I believe that in this relief the Khmer ideators and sculptors have combined the early scene of the Betrothal of Shiva and Parvati, when Shiva summons his great sages, with the scene when the kings of the mountains are assembled around king Hamivat in order to approve Parvati being given as wife to Shiva. The artists have imagined Shiva at the centre of the assembly of the kings of the mountains, represented here in full royal attire, while the great sages are depicted as ascetics in the caves of Mt. Meru.

2) Other interpretations may not be excluded but they would involve iconographic considerations. Bhandari's proposed the interpretation of Shiva *Dakshinamurti* (teacher of knowledge, like Yoga-Dakshinamurti), who, together with Shiva *Nataraja* (lord of the dance), is the most important manifestation of Shiva as a personal god. But in this case one has to look attentively at the god's posture and *mudras*. In India, Shiva *Dakshinamurti* is depicted facing south (*daksina*), his right foot resting on the demon of ignorance and his right hand in the *vitarka-mudra* of explanation. Otherwise, Shiva is usually represented with the *abhaya mudra*, one hand in upright position (indicating protection) and the other downward pointing (indicating liberation for all who trust in him). The poor

conditions of this relief forbid a clear reading of the *mudras*. Although Shiva's left hand seem to be pointing downward, resting on his lap in the *abhaya mudra*; his right one (eroded) is extended towards the personages to his right, precluding thus the possibility of being in the *vitarka mudra*. Bhandari's interpretation becomes thus quite unlikely.

3) With regard to the compositional layout, it is noticeable that the main personage of this relief is placed very high in the relief, on a plinth above the surrounding royal personages. His position well above the two pseudo-registers creates a pyramidal layout culminating in the forest's trees.

S.12 - KRISHNA RECEIVING THE OFFERINGS DESTINED FOR INDRA

Location: south-western corner pavilion, over the lintel of the eastern door (Pl.6).

1. THE TEXT

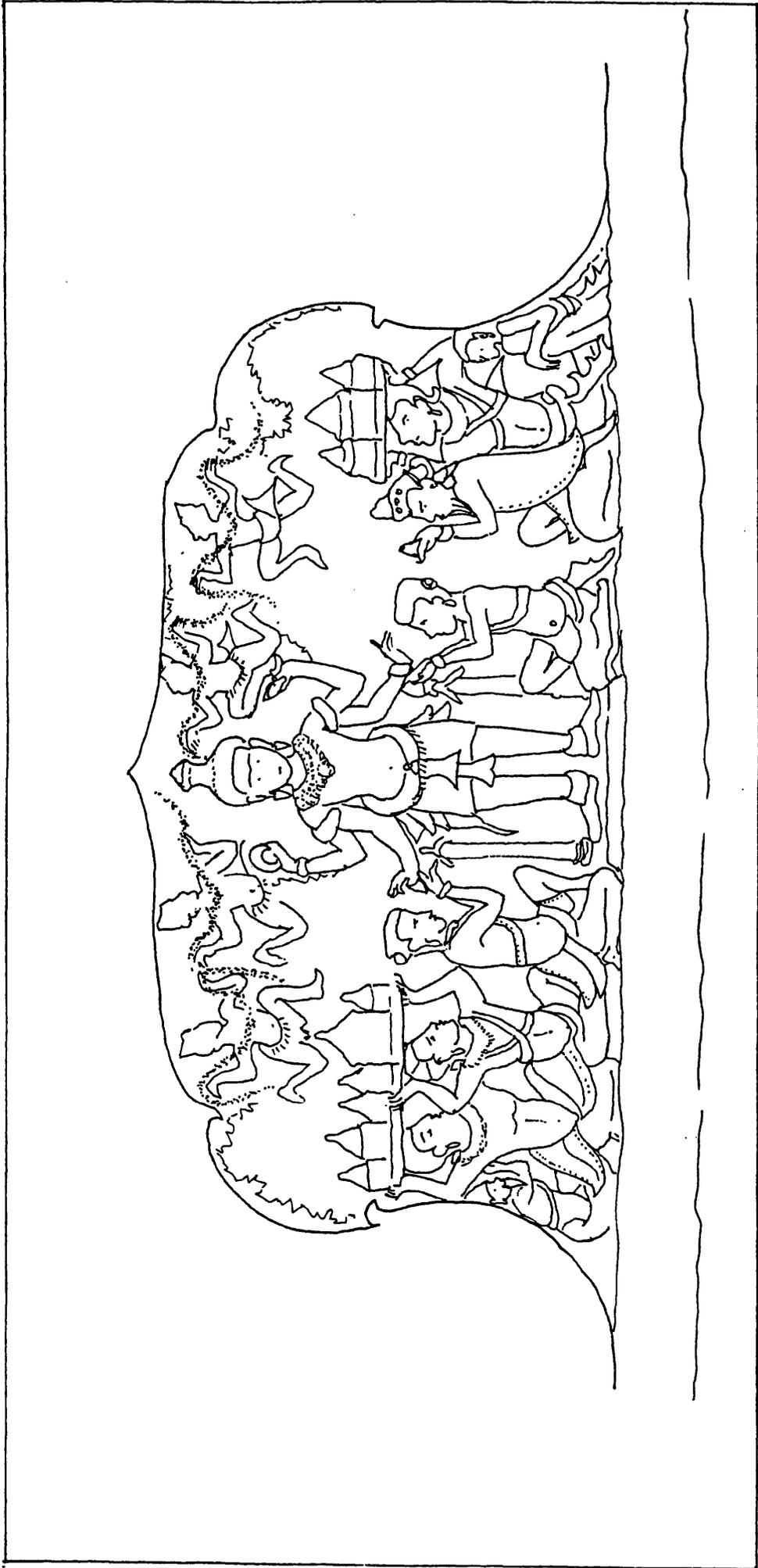
French scholars, with some reservations, have referred the scene illustrated in this lintel to the story of Krishna receiving the offerings originally destined for Indra. The episode is narrated in the *Bhagavata Purana*, Book 10, chapter 24.

One day, Krishna is observing the cowherds on the move to bring offerings and make sacrifices to the god Indra; he questions them "What the great Indra has to do with it? Therefore let a sacrifice dedicated to Mt. Govardhana, the Brahmanas and the propitiation of the cows be initiated"(stanza 23). In other words, Krishna tries to dissuade them from adoring Indra in order to introduce a Vishnava cult, because - he explains - Mt. Govardhana is a form of himself. Having convinced the cowherds to do so, they bring him the offerings that were destined to Indra. Inevitably, Indra gets enraged and releases the famous stormy downpour of rain.

2 . THE VIEWING

The relief is sculpted in a flat pediment, within the *naga* frame that delimits a horizontal space in which the story is told in a single register.

In the **top pseudo-register** is represented the image of Vishnu (or of Krishna assimilated to Vishnu) standing at the centre of the relief, with crown and traditional body ornament. The god is represented with four arms; the upper right holding the disk (*chakra*); the upper left the conch; the lower left a conical object, and the lower right in the attitude of receiving something from a worshipper. To both sides ~~side~~ of the god, is a worshipper seated in ceremonial way, with both hands raised in the gesture of offering something (?a lotus bud) to Vishnu. Behind the one to the left of Vishnu is a personage with a beard and an elaborate hairstyle, wearing a long shirt/vest, offering a small conical object he is holding with his raised arms. At both sides of the god are personages carrying on their heads three pointed containers (or cakes?). A small squatting figure (?a *rishi*) completes the group at both sides of the composition. Out of the personages of these two groups,



S.12 - Krishna receiving the offering destined to Indra

the one with the beard and with a sort of tiara seems to be of superior rank than the young worshippers and of the servants who carry the presents.

In the **lower pseudo-register** the scene is depicted taking place in a forest, or garden, with flying celestial beings in the sky. They seem to be male being wearing a crown who carry strings of jewels (pearls?); therefore they may be identifiable with the mythological *Devaputtas*.

3. GENERAL COMMENTS

1) In the *Bhagavata Purana* it is said that people are carrying offerings to Mt. Govardhana²⁹, and not to Krishna or Vishnu. However, having Krishna declared that Mt. Govardhana was the same one as himself, the offerings are ultimately destined to him. We know very little about the religion originally preached by Krishna; it was probably a strongly monotheistic religion worshipping Bhagavat, the adorable one. It taught *bhakti*, or the single-minded devotion to the supreme deity as the best means of salvation. Krishna was gradually deified and identified with Bhagavat, and his cult spread to different parts of India. There is a precedent to the relationship Krishna-Indra. According to Bhattacharji³⁰, in the *Harivamsa* (Vol.II, 68, 33) Krishna describes himself as a younger brother of Indra, presenting thus himself as the Messiah, the ultimate fulfilment of Indra's manifestation.

2) This relief is almost perfectly symmetrical, with Krishna as the central *axis*.

²⁹ Initiating thus the cult of the mountain, so dear to the Khmers.

³⁰ Bhattacharji S., *The Indian Theogony*, Cambridge University Press, 1970, p.306

NORTH-WESTERN CORNER PAVILION.

N. 1 - INTRODUCTION TO THE DESCENT OF VISHNU

Location: north-western corner pavilion, eastern arm, north wall (Pl.9).

1 . THE TEXT

The story of the conception of Krishna is told in the *Vishnu Purana*, book 5, part 1, chapters 5-33; 56-86; and part 2, chapters 1-6. The *Bhagavata Purana*, book 10, chapter 1 (17-23) narrates a shorter version of the gods requesting Vishnu to incarnate as Krishna, in which mother Earth, when she goes first to ask Brahma for advice, takes the shape of a cow; the detail of Vishnu taking two hairs is omitted (see below).

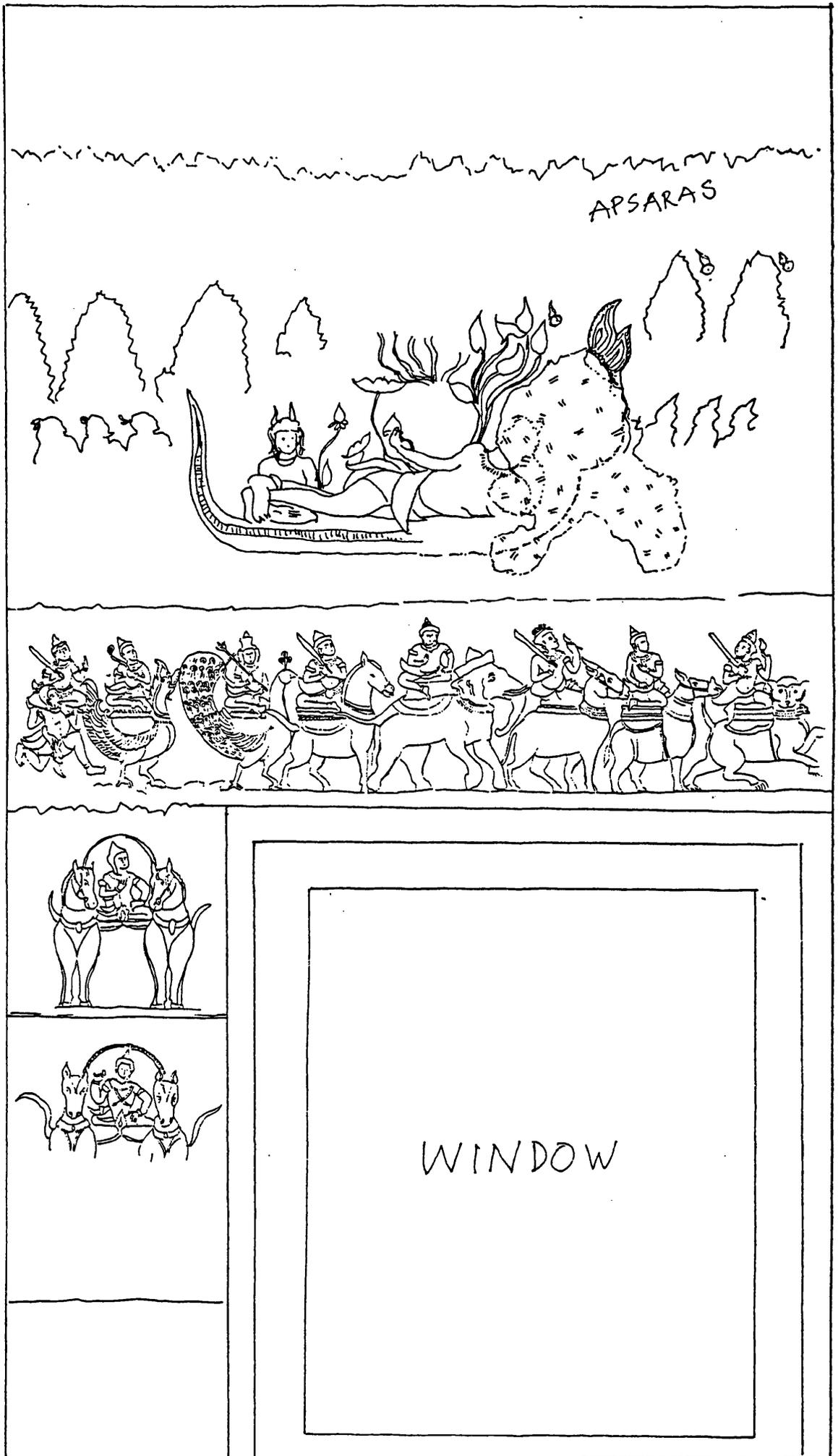
In the *Vishnu Purana* it is narrated that the Earth goddess, oppressed by heavy burdens, goes to see the gods, and complains to Brahma that the Daityas (*asuras*), led by Kalanemi, have overthrown the world of mortals and are oppressing all humans. Kalanemi, once before slain by Vishnu, was reborn as Kamsa, as well as many other evil-souled beings living in his house. Earth begs the gods to release her from the problems caused by these demons. Having heard this, Brahma and the 30 Immortals propose to go to the shore of the Ocean of milk and worship Vishnu in the hope he would hear their request.

The Earth, Indra, Nasatyas and Dashra (the two Aswins¹), Rudras and Vasus, the Sun, the Wind and Fire, ask instructions to the great Lord. Vishnu, praised in this manner, pulls two of his hairs from his head, one white, one black, and tells the gods that these hairs will descend on earth to save the world. One will become the eighth embryo in Devaki's womb and will be born as Krishna who will kill Kamsa. The other hair will be the seventh embryo of Devaki (the previous six being destroyed by Kamsa); although aborted he will survive to become Samkarshana (Balarama), the elder brother of Krishna.

2 . THE VIEWING

The relief is in very poor condition and some of the key elements are not there anymore or are unrecognisable. It is displayed in 2 main pseudo-registers. In the **top pseudo-register** one can barely see the body and the hood of the very large

¹ The Aswins are the twin sons of the Sun, equivalent to the Dioscuri.



AP SARAS

WINDOW

N.1 - Introduction to the descent of Vishnu

snake Ananta (or Sesa)². Reclined on it is Vishnu, whose torso and head have been eroded away, sleeping in the traditional position, the feet in the lap of his spouse Lakshmi. Behind him are large branching lotuses growing sky high; none however, seem to emanate from his belly, as in the myth of the creation of Brahma³. To both sides of Vishnu are two superimposed rows of religious, royal, and celestial personages, amongst a forest of parasols and fans. The great Ananta snake rests on a sea (the Ocean of milk) full of fish and reptiles; trees ornate the more distant shore.

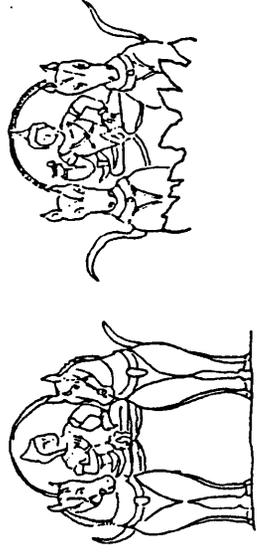
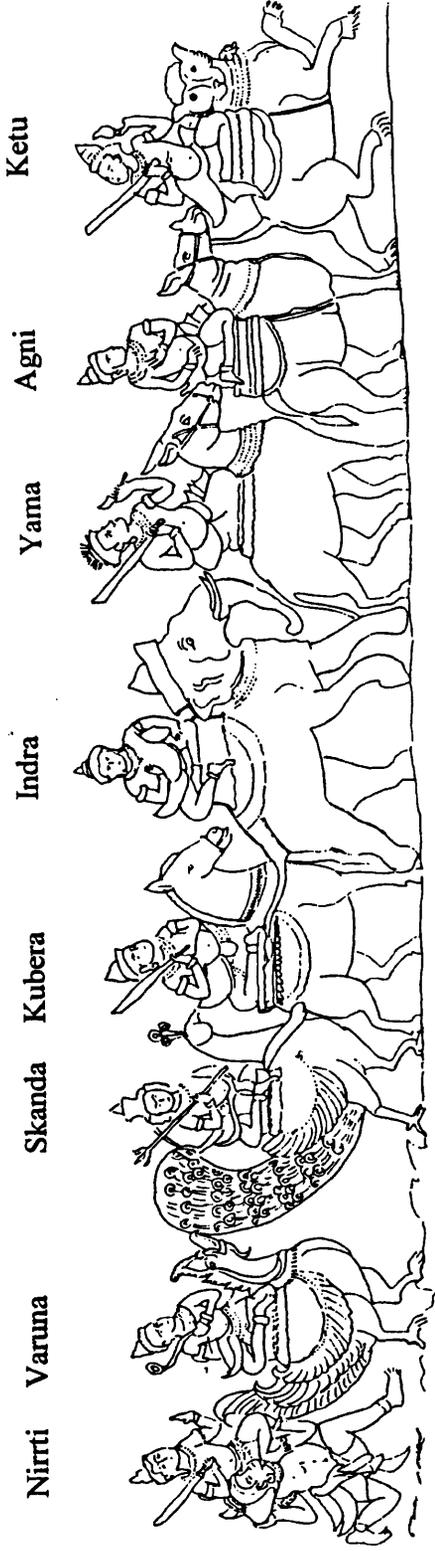
In the lower pseudo-register is displayed a parade of the ~~nine~~^{eight} living gods on the move to visit Vishnu to invite him to descend on earth as an incarnation. They are, from right to left: Ketu (the comet), holding a mace and a lotus bud, riding a lion; Agni with one arm on his chest, mounting his rhinoceros; Yama, also armed with a mace, riding on his buffalo; Indra on his crowned elephant (Airavata); Kubera, holding a whip, mounted on a horse; Skanda with many arms, holding the trident as son of Shiva, on a peacock; Varuna, holding a *pasa* or noose, riding on his *hamsa*, and Nirrti on the shoulders of a *yaksa*, with a mace in one hand and a flywhiskers in the other.

The usual storm of *apsaras* decorates the **topmost part of the relief**.

The reliefs sculpted on the pillar to the **right of the window** are in 2 superimposed registers illustrating the moon (top) and the sun (bottom), depicted as two male gods seated on chariots backed by a large disc. Each chariot is pulled by two horses, unusually represented frontally, riding towards the viewer, amongst flags, parasols, fans, trees, and surrounded by kneeling personages in prayer.

² Vishnu in his incarnations is a killer of demons, especially serpent-demons; also his mount, Garuda, is a sworn enemy of snakes. In contrast, he uses Vasuki/Ananta/Sesa as his serpent-bed. Thus Vishnu's relationship with serpents is ambiguous, unless one remembers that Vishnu was associated with the ocean, and in particular with the Ocean of Milk. The fact that the supreme god dwells at the bottom of the Ocean, passively reclining on the many-hooded Endless serpent, means that he associates the ultimate potential energy with the unfathomable mystery of the Universe (Bhattacharji S., *The Indian Theogony*, Cambridge University Press, 1970, p.299).

³ At the time of this specific episode, not only Brahma was already in existence, but he was the leader of the 30 Immortals who went to visit Vishnu to ask him to descend on Earth.



The Sun

The Moon

N.1 - Introduction to the descent of Vishnu. Detail of deities

3. GENERAL COMMENTS

1) In the *Puranas*, Vishnu is asked to incarnate as Krishna and descend to earth to put an end to the terror and chaos created by the monster Kalanemi⁴. Przyluski has raised the doubt⁵ about the avatar in which Vishnu has to incarnate: it should be Rama rather than Krishna, considering the popularity of Ramayana stories in this pavilion.

2) In the layout of this relief, the vertical axis of symmetry is passing through the middle of Vishnu's body (? the navel), behind which a lotus branches out creating a strong visual feature. In the layout of the gods, 8 of them are arranged in a linear sequence going from left to right of the viewer, while 2 (the sun and the moon) are progressing out from the relief, towards the viewer.

3) Narrative technique and temporal progression. The narrative sequence starts from Vishnu sleeping/dreaming on the great snake, then proceeds to the gods going to ask him to incarnate as Krishna/Rama. The first event is depicted in the upper part of the relief while the gods on the move are illustrated in the lower register and the registers beside the window, in a linear mode of narrative. The procession starts from the sun and the moon, then proceed through the 8 divinities, and end with Ketu, before reaching Vishnu.

Comments on the 10 deities

Louis Malleret has studied the deities of the procession⁶ and, more recently, by Mannikka⁷ who examined their astronomical and calendrical meaning. In here I will summarise their main characteristics taken from descriptions provided by the works of John Dowson⁸ and Alain Daniélou⁹; this is relevant, because some of these gods or semi-gods appear in reliefs from many other sites of Angkor. From right to left, in the relief we have:

1. **Ketu.** When the *devas* and *asuras* produced the *amrita*, by churning the Ocean of Milk, Rahu, insinuating among them drank some of it. The sun and the moon

⁴ In the *Ramayana* Kalanemi is the *rakshasa* uncle of Ravana. In the *Puranas* he is a great *asura*, son of Virochana, the grandson of Hiranya-kasipu (killed by Vishnu in his Lion avatar, Narasinha). He was killed by Vishnu, but was said to live again in Kamsa and Ravana.

⁵ In *Arts and Archeologie Khmères*, 1921-23

⁶ *Contribution a l'etude du theme des neufs divinites dans la sculpture de Cambodge*, AA, 7.3, 1960, p. 205

⁷ *Angkor*, 1996, p.185-191.

⁸ *Hindu Mythology & Religion*, Rupa & Cop, edit. 1995

detected him and informed Vishnu, who cut off his dragon's head and 2 of his 4 arms. Since he had secured immortality, his body ended up in the sphere of the stars, the upper part representing his dragon head, the ascending node, and the lower part, the tail, Ketu, the descending node. Ketu is believed to be the divinity in control of comets; in Cambodian iconography he is riding a lion.

2. Agni. He is one of the 3 great Vedic deities, together with Indra (Vayu) and Surya, respectively representing earth, air and sky. Once, having exhausted his strength by devouring too many sacrificial offerings, he desired to set on fire the entire ^hKāndava forest and devour it as a means of regaining his power. He was prevented by Indra's rain, but having obtained help from Krishna and Arjuna, he baffled Indra and accomplished his objective (see relief S.9: Pralamba and the dousing of fire). He is described as clothed in black, having smoke for his standard and head-piece, and carrying a flaming javelin. He has 4 hands, and travels on a chariot pulled by red horses, with the 7 winds as the wheels. A ram, which sometimes he rides, accompanies him; but his mount varies and in Khmer iconography is seen on a rhinoceros. Agni is considered the guardian of the SE cardinal point, and is equated to Saturn of Western mythology.

3. Yama. He is the god of the dead. With whom the spirits of the departed dwell. He is the god of the departed spirits, and judge of the dead; in his task he is assisted by Citragupta (see panel of Heavens and Hell, 3rd enclosure); after his sentence, the souls are sent into the 21 hells according to their guilt, or are reborn on earth. He is represented as being of green colour, clothed in red; he rides a buffalo, and is armed with a heavy mace and a noose to secure his victims. Yama is the regent of the South quarter, and as such is called *Dakshinasa-pati*. He is equated with Pluto of Western mythology.

4. Indra. Initially, from the Vedas, he was a god of first rank, but later he became less important, one of the triad Agni, Indra, Surya. King of heaven, he sends the lightning and hurls the thunderbolt, and the rainbow is his bow. He is frequently at war with the *asuras*, of whom he lives in constant dread. As a libertine, he enjoys sending apsaras to excite holy men, to distract them. He was known for his sensuality and seductions.

⁹ *The myths and gods of India*, I.T.I, 1991

He slew the demon Vritra, who being a Brahman, forced him to make penance and sacrifices until his guilt was purged away. Indra, protector of heroes, is the father of Arjuna. In the Ramayana we are told that Ravana defeated him in a sky battle and expelled him by his son who ~~acquired~~ for this action acquired the name Indra-jit (conqueror of Indra); see pediment of the 1st courtyard (Pl.18). In the *Puranas* he appears as a rival of Krishna who persuaded the pastoral people of Vraja to cease Indra's worship (see relief S.2: Krishna lifting Mt. Govardhana); Krishna also won the fight against him for the possession of the Parijata tree.

Indra is represented as a white man riding a horse (Uccahishvara) or an elephant (Airavata), bearing the *vajra* or thunderbolt in his hand or a sword (*Pananja*). In Khmer iconography he is usually mounting his 3-headed elephant. He is considered the guardian of the East, and equivalent to Jupiter of Western mythology.

5. Kubera, is the lord of riches, king of men and genies. He is half-brother of Ravana who expelled him from Lanka where he was initially living. Mt. Mandara is his abode, where he is assisted by *kinaras*. Having performed austerities for 1000 years, he obtained from Brahma the boon to be immortal, and the magic aerial chariot Pushpaka.

He is represented as a white man with deformed body, having 3 legs and only 8 teeth, covered with ornaments, holding a sword or a mace, mounting a horse. Kubera is the guardian of the North, and considered equivalent to Venus of Western cosmology.

6. Skanda, he is also ~~known~~^{known} with the name of Kartikeya because he was reared by the 6 Pleiades (Krittikas), developing thus 6 faces to drink their milk. Son of Shiva (or Rudra) without the intervention of a woman, he was born as the god of war with the purpose of slaying the anti-gods Taraka and Mahisha, who challenged the gods with the power they obtained from austerities (*tapas*).

He is represented riding a peacock (Paravani), dressed in red, with one or 6 heads, 2 or 12 arms, holding a bow in one hand and an arrow in the other, or a sword, a thunderbolt and an axe. His spear, which never misses its mark, returns to his hand after killing the enemies. His banner, a gift from Agni, is red as the fire of destruction and burns higher over his chariot. In Khmer iconology he is represented - as in this relief - holding a trident. He is considered to be equivalent

of Mars of Western mythology; in astronomy, the planet Mars is also called Skanda.

7. **Varuna.** He is one of the oldest Vedic deities, the personification of the all-investing sky, the maker and upholder of heaven and earth. As such he is the king of the universe, of gods and men, possessor of unlimited knowledge, the supreme deity to whom especial honour is due. In the Puranas, he is the sovereign of the waters, with a *hamsa* as his mount, with a *pasa* or a noose as his arm, and sometimes an umbrella. Guardian of rites, he dwells in the West. He is considered equivalent to Mercury of Western mythology. Thierry Zephir¹⁰ has demonstrated that Varuna should replace Brahma in previously interpretations.

8. **Nirrti.** Nirrti¹¹ is the regent of the SW direction, representing misery, lord of the elves (*nairrta*), ghosts, night wanderers (*rakshasas*), and of the Lords of directions (*Dikapalas*)¹¹. There is also a female divinity by the name of Nirrti (Danielou¹¹, p.137). She is the goddess of Misery, representing disease and death on earth; embodiment of all sins, she appeared at the time of the Churning of the Ocean of Milk, before the goddess of fortune, Lakshmi (see relief S.1). In this relief the deity (Nirrti, being male) is shown on the shoulder of a *rakshasa* or *yaksha*, holding a mace in one hand and a lotus bud in the other¹².

9. **Chandra.** In Puranic literature, the Moon appropriated the name and some of the characteristics of *soma* (the juice drunk by the Brahmans); he is the son of Atri (detachment, born from Brahma's mind) and Anasuya (benevolence). When the Ocean was churned, the Moon sprang forth joyfully, just after Lakshmi, spreading a cool light (*Mahabharata*, 1.18.34). His chariot has 3 wheels and is drawn by ten horses of the whiteness of jasmine. Together with the Sun, the Moon spotted Rahu stealing some of the *amrita* produced by the Churning and informed Vishnu, who punished him severely (see above). This is perhaps why, in Khmer iconography, they appear at the sides of the pole of the Churning of the Ocean of Milk, like in here and many other reliefs, with the exception of the large panel of the 3rd enclosure. In this relief, Chandra and Surya are holding a lotus flower in their right hand.

¹⁰ *Angkor et dix siècles d'art khmer*, R.M.N., Paris, 1997, p.240

¹¹ Danielou, p.137

¹² The *rakshasa* and the *yakshas* were originally anti-gods, but become accepted amongst the gods because their good deeds; their king is Kubera.

10. **Surya**, One of the 3 main deities of the Vedas, great source of light and warmth, considered, in the Ramayana, the son of Brahma. He is represented in a chariot drawn by 7 horses, or a horse with 7 heads, surrounded with rays, with Arunba (or Vivaswat) as the charioteer.

Further comments can be made on the nine deities:

1) Since Preangkorean times, a group of 9 deities was very popular in temple sculpture. They were supposed to be the 9 *Navagraha*, well known in Indian astronomy and astrology, namely (by using European translations of their names): the Sun, the Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, Saturn, Rahu (the ascending node of the moon), and Ketu (the comets). However, according to K. Bhattacharya¹³, their cult seems to be addressed to the supporters and guardians of space, the *dikpalaka* of the 4 cardinal directions, and of the 4 inter-cardinal directions with the addition of the zenith or nadir.

2) In Khmer sculpture, these personages are usually represented with schematic personal attributes and mounts (*vahana*), and in a variable order of arrangement, so that it is difficult to identify them individually. This would explain why they remain known with the general name of 'the 9 *devas*'¹⁴.

3) Their problematic representation is demonstrated in the relief under consideration. In fact, the generally accepted order (from left to right) of Surya, Chandra, Yama (on a buffalo), Varuna (on a goose), Indra (on an elephant), Kubera (on a horse), Agni (on a ram), Rahu (enveloped in clouds), and Ketu (on a lion), is not respected.

Instead, according to their iconography, we have Surya, Chandra, Nirrti, Varuna, Skanda, Kubera, Indra, Yama, Agni and Ketu. Not only they are 10 *devas*, one more divinity having appeared, possibly Skanda, but also Rahu has been replaced by Nirrti; moreover the sequence does not follow the usual order. Mannikka (p.187) supports the identification of Nirrti on the shoulder of a *yaksa*, on the ground that he is the right *deva* suitable to fill the only gap left amongst the guardians of the cardinal directions, that of the south-west.

¹³ Bhattacharya K, K., *Notes d'iconographie khmère*, Arts Asiatiques, III, 1956, p. 123

¹⁴ Zephir T., in *Angkor et dix siècles d'art khmer*, R.M.N., Paris, 1997, Catalogue No.58

4) For Mannikka¹⁵, this unusual arrangement and number of devas is exceptional, and corresponds to a planetary sequence which rarely happens. It occurred, though, in 1131, during the month of Shravana and under the zodiac sign of Leo which is the sign of Vishnu, and possibly when Suryavarman was 32 year old (of numerological significance). The extraordinary combination of these elements would have been sufficient - believes Mannikka¹⁶ - to convince the king to “take Vishnu as his personal deity and build his royal temple to him”.

5) The series of 9 devas appear on the lintels of each of the 4 doors of the shrine (the *garbhagrha*) of the central sanctuary of the Angkor Wat.

¹⁵ *Ibidem* p.190

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p.191

N. 2. - KRISHNA BRINGING BACK Mt. MANIPARVATA

Location: north-western corner pavilion, eastern arm, south wall (Pl.9 and 15).

1 . THE TEXT

There are two possible interpretations of the generic story of Garuda and Krishna carrying a mythic mountain. In the *Bhagavata Purana*, book 8, chapter 6, we can read perhaps the most popular version. Others are known from the *Harivamsa*,¹²¹ the *Vishnu Purana*, Book V, 29, and the *Srimad Bhagavata*, Book VII, chapters 5-11. In the *Vishnu Purana*, the Mahaparvata is considered the crest of Mt. Mandara.

1) According to the *Bhagavata Purana*, one day Indra pleads for help in subduing the *asura* Naraka who has not only kidnapped almost all the beautiful spouses of gods and kings, but threatens to steal his own three-headed elephant, Airavata. He has also stolen Mt. Maniparvata, the peak of Mt. Mandara. The task to bring it back falls on Krishna who does so while mounted on the powerful Garuda, who, on this occasion, is accompanied by his wife Satyabhama. His army of servants carrying the remains of the defeated Naraka also aids Krishna.

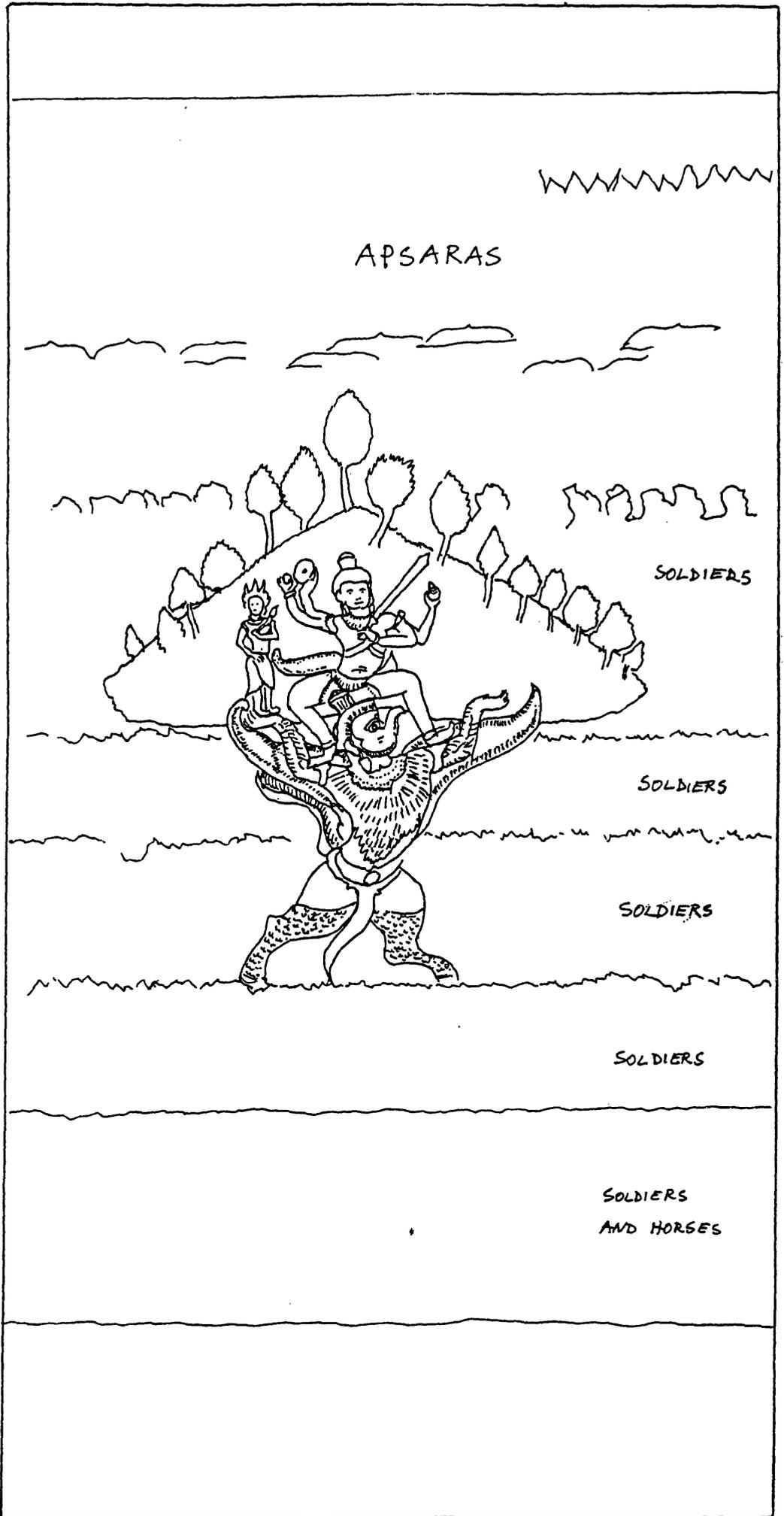
2) The *Srimad Bhagavata* recounts a different story. When the *devas* and *asuras* lift Mt. Mandara from its base in an attempt to take it to the sea to start the churning of the Ocean of milk, they can not bear its weight and drop it, injuring and killing many amongst them. The compassionate Krishna intervenes, lifts the mountain with a single arm, puts it on Garuda, and himself mounting him, carries it to sea, surrounded by the *devas* and *asuras*. Garuda then unloads them both from his shoulders on the seashore and, with the permission of Vishnu, flies away.

3) C.M. Bhandari provides an entirely divergent interpretation¹⁷. In his opinion the procession in the background of Vishnu and Garuda, with soldiers and horse-riders, is that which is entertained in the occasion of the '*ashvamedha yajna*', (sacrificial fire ritual to obtain universal acclaim). In the opinion of this author, such a cortege is related to the one which appears at the base of the relief of the *svayamvara* of Sita, in which two personages (Sita's twin sons) are apprehending the *yajna* horses.

2 . THE VIEWING

The relief occupies a full wall; its intense erosion and staining by atmospheric elements, make the reading of the story in its totality quite difficult.

¹⁷ Bhandari C.M., *Saving Angkor*, White Orchid Books, Bangkok, 1995, pg. 98



AP SARAS

SOLDIERS

SOLDIERS

SOLDIERS

SOLDIERS

SOLDIERS
AND HORSES

N.2 - Krishna bringing back Mt. Maniparvata

The tall **top pseudo-register**, which contains the protagonists of the story is expanding over 3 rows (which could be considered internal pseudo registers) of small personages.

Krishna is depicted standing on the shoulders of Garuda who is carrying a mountain with his extended arms. Vishnu is represented in his divine form of supreme god, with four arms holding, respectively, the sword/mace, the conch, the discus, and a small spherical object (the Earth). He is adorned by the customary jewellery and wears a cylindrical crown. Garuda is represented like an eagle-looking bird of very large size, massive and powerful, with spread wings, and legs apart suggesting a motion towards the right of the viewer; he also has a long feathery tail. He is adorned with the customary jewellery and cylindrical crown. In his right hand he is carrying a minute female personage who wears a three-pointed *mukuta* and carries a wavy lotus' stalk; presumably she is his wife Satyabhana or Lakshmi, Vishnu's wife.

The mountain, the Maniparvata (which is the top of Mt. Mandara) has a squat conical shape; towards its base are seven tiny female personages in royal attire with tall conical *mukutas*, sitting facing the right side of the viewer. A few *rishis* are also present. At the mount's sides are several trees; the largest is at the apex of the mount.

The main protagonists, Krishna and Garuda carrying the mountain are surrounded by three superimposed rows of soldiers and servants on the move: the ones of the highest row carry parasols, banners and fans. Those of the middle row hold mainly fans, while the ones at the base are soldiers each armed with a spear (*phkak*) and a shield. They all move from left to right (of the viewer).

The **middle pseudo-register** is composed by a row of servants and attendants carrying round containers (jars) covered with tall conical lids, walking from left to right. Instead, a dense row of soldiers armed with a spear or sword, marching in a forest from left to right, together with 3 groups of horse-mounted captains is depicted in the lower pseudo-register. The usual row of dancing *Apsaras*, mostly facing right, decorates the **topmost part of the relief**.

3. GENERAL COMMENTS

1) It is more likely that this relief depicts the events narrated in the *Bhagavata Purana*, by which the mountain is the one stolen by Naraka and not the one lost during the churning. In support of this interpretation are the following points:

- The female personages in royal attire at the base of the Maniparvata are Indra's wives stolen by Naraka.
- Krishna accompanied by an army on the move, proves that he is returning from a war expedition; the long file of servants is carrying large jars and containers of various size and shape, containing the treasures taken from the defeated Naraka and other *asuras*.
- The small feminine figure richly dressed, standing on Garuda's right hand side is mentioned in the *Harivamsa* (CXXI) and the *Vishnu Purana* (Book V, chapter 29) as Satyabhama, Vishnu's spouse, who was accompanying him on that specific occasion.
- Although, according to the original texts, it is Krishna who has to carry the mountain back, here it is Garuda who does the hard work.

2) The general layout of this wall panel is characterised by a sense of movement towards the right of the viewer, intensified by the energetic stride of Garuda. Moreover, vertical lines are emphasised through the representation of a multitude of legs and spears surrounding the largely over-sized figure of Krishna standing on the shoulders of Garuda. The mushroom shape of Mt. Maniparvata does not alleviate this effect with his horizontal volume because it is not carved sufficiently deep. Notice that Krishna is represented with 4 arms, like Vishnu.

N. 3 - RAMA'S ALLIANCE WITH SUGRIVA

Location: north-western corner pavilion, wall above the lintel of the eastern door (Pl.10).

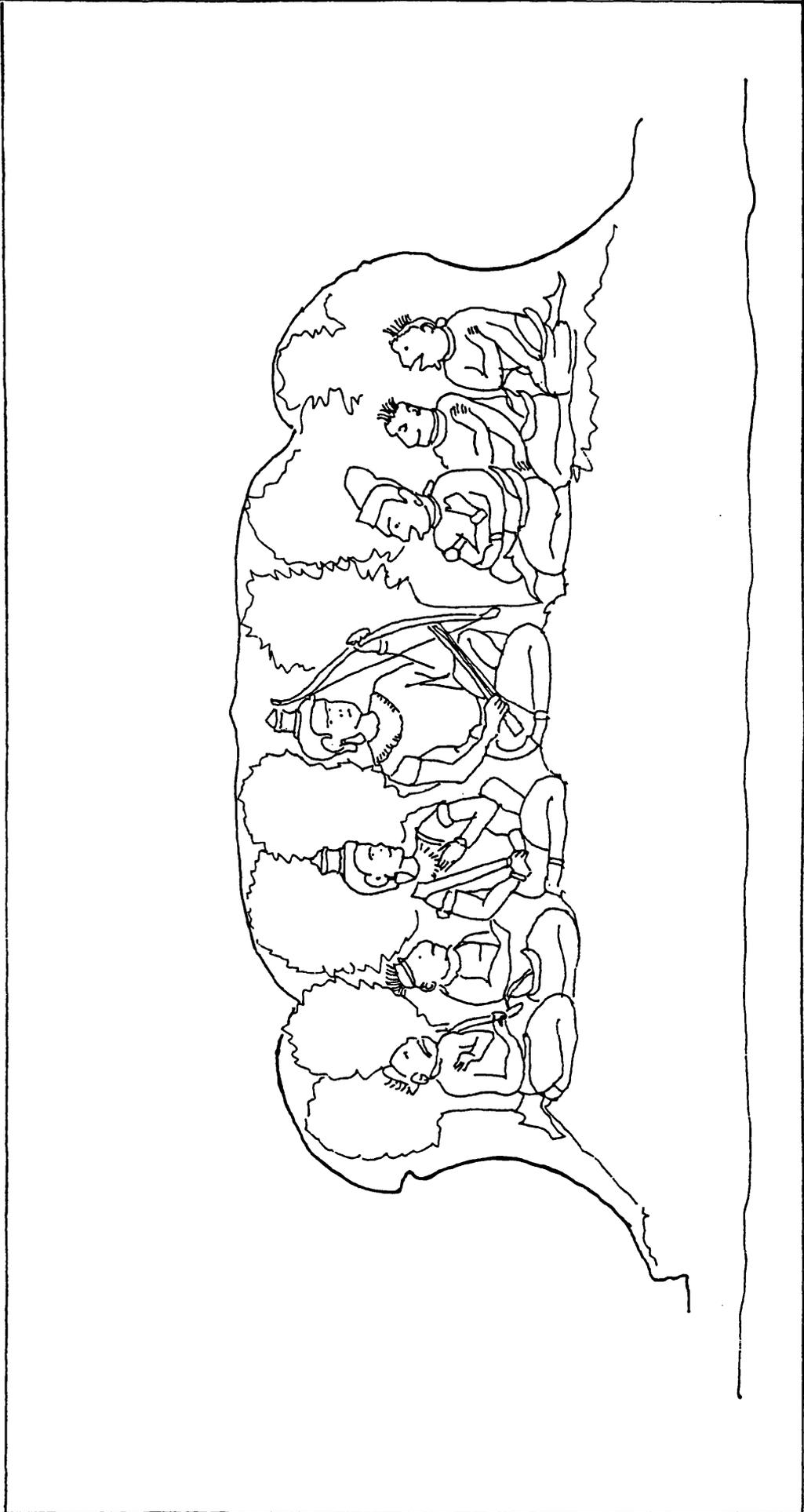
1. THE TEXT

This episode is narrated in the 4th book of the *Ramayana*, the *Kishkindha Kanda* where the story of Valin and Sugriva occupies almost half of the book (26 chapters out of the 76).

Rama and Lakshmana, in their wandering around the forests, one day enter the territory occupied by Sugriva, the king of the monkeys (chapter 1), who had been deprived of the throne and of his wife by his brother Valin. Sugriva, anxious and perturbed, fearing that the two skilful archers were sent by Valin, asks Hanuman to go to meet them to find out their intentions (chapter 2). Hanuman, under the guise of a wandering monk, approaches them (chapter 3) and informs them he is sent by the exiled Sugriva to seek their friendship. Rama and Lakshmana agree to follow Hanuman to meet Sugriva.

In the next chapter (4), Lakshmana informs Hanuman that his father has exiled Rama, and that an unknown monster has abducted his wife Sita. Therefore Rama, overwhelmed with affliction, is coming as a suppliant to Sugriva. The astute Hanuman, realising that Rama could be a tool for Sugriva to regain his kingdom, resolves to bring about an alliance between Rama and his master. At the meeting (chapter 5), Sugriva offers his support and that of his monkey tribe; in return he asks Rama to help him to get justice from the persecution of Valin, who stole his wife, and end his fearful life in exile in the forest. Rama, acknowledging the fruitfulness of mutual aid, promises to slay Valin with his powerful arrows, concluding thus the alliance with Sugriva. Then (chapter 6) Sugriva tells of having seen and heard Sita when Ravana kidnapped her, and that he was holding the cloak and jewels she released to him at the top of a mountain. Rama, after pressing the cherished jewels to his breast, impatiently wants to find out where the monster lives and hides his chaste spouse. Sugriva, however, does not know the whereabouts of Ravana (chapter 7) and consoles Rama by promising to make all efforts to find him, and renews his request to Rama (chapter 8) to help him against Valin.

After concluding the alliance, Sugriva tells his own story (chapter 9). Valin, the elder of two brothers who had become the rightful king when his father died, is one day challenged to battle by the demon Mayavin. Together with his brother Sugriva, he confronts the monster, who runs away and enters into a deep hole in the ground. Valin orders his brother to wait at the entrance till he returns then follows the demon into the narrow cave. More than a year passes, and Sugriva fears that his brother might be dead. Some time after this, blood and foam begin to flow out from the cave, and the screaming of demons could be heard, but no cries of Valin. Sugriva concludes from this facts that his brother has been killed, and proceeds to plug the entrance of the cave with an enormous rock. He then



N.3 - Rama alliance with Sugriva

returns to the city, when the ministers 'force' him to accept the throne of his presumably dead brother. But Valin was not killed, and returns to find his brother occupying his place. He reproaches Sugriva, refuses to pardon him, and binds his ministers in chains. Sugriva attempts to explain what happened (chapter 10), but Valin is enraged and banishes him from the kingdom and deprives him of all his possessions. Valin explains that, after having slain the demon and his entire family, he could not find the exit of the cave because the entrance had been blocked, and that he called Sugriva in vain many times. Finally he managed to roll back the rock that was closing the entrance, emerge and return to the city, to find out that Sugriva has taken the throne and his wife Tara. In his fury, Valin chased him from the kingdom with but a single garment, having ill treated him and carried off his wife.

2. THE VIEWING

The flat pediment defines a confined horizontal space in which the action takes place, all in a single register.

At the centre, sitting higher than any other personage is Rama, holding the bow in his left arm and a set of arrows in his right. He is adorned with the customary jewellery and wears a cylindrical crown. To his right, as per the protocol, seats Lakshmana, dressed and adorned like him, holding a mace in his right hand while his left arm is on his chest. Behind him (to the left of the viewer) are seated two monkeys with their arms folded on their chests.

Rama is turned towards his left to face a seated personage wearing a *mukuta* with the composite conical crown of a king, revealing thus to be Sugriva. He is seated at some distance from Rama, with the mouth open in the act of talking, his eyebrows enhanced; both his arms are folded on his chest. Behind him are seated two more monkeys, in a ceremonial position with one arm on the chest and the other on the lap. The foreground of the composition is a barren rocky ground, while the background is a luscious forest; some trees have climbers on the trunk.

3. GENERAL COMMENTS

1) With regard to the episode of the *Kishkinda Kanda* here depicted, one can refer to the comments made by Rosalind Lefebvre.¹⁸ Central to the narrative is Rama's agreement to kill Valin and thereby re-instate Sugriva as ruler of the monkeys'

¹⁸ Lefebvre R., & Goldman R.P., *The Ramayana of Valmiki*, Vol. IV. *Kishkindakanda*. Princeton University Press, 1994, Pg.41

kingdom in exchange for help in finding Sita. After Sugriva's statement, it is obvious that there are striking parallels between his and Rama's circumstances: each is in exile, each has lost his wife, and each has been deprived of a kingship that has gone to a brother. However, what is totally different is the manner in which they, and their respective brothers and wives behave, and in this lies the difference with the monkeys. Rama has calmly accepted his fate, without resentment towards his brother who has taken his place, as he has no fear or dislike of the difficult life in the forest. He has terribly suffered for the abduction of his wife that, we are assured, remains loyal and chaste even when a captive of the lascivious Ravana. Sugriva, on the other hand, has no true right to the kingship in the first place, since Valin himself was still alive when Sugriva blocked the exit of his cave, and later appropriated Tara, Valin's 'widow'. When Valin returned from the dead, he rejected Sugriva's excuses, denounced him publicly and not only took back his wife Tara but also his brother's wife Ruma. It looks like it was Sugriva that was the usurper, not Valin. Although Sugriva may have known that there was the possibility of his brother coming back, he took his throne because he was madly in love with Tara, Valin's beautiful wife. It is with her, that he continued to be infatuated after Rama has killed Valin, to the point of forgetting his promise to find Sita. Valin was the lawful heir to the throne, and Sugriva should have returned the throne and Tara to him when Valin 'came back from death'. Instead, he asked Rama to murder him. Sugriva was the real usurper, not Valin, and, in his mad jealousy, must have planned to murder his brother Valin even before meeting Rama. This story is even more problematic, when considering that Rama appears to have killed an enemy in an ambush, a very unchivalrous thing for a warrior (*kshaytriya*) to do; this point is discussed in the chapter dealing with the interpretation.

The *Ramayana*'s story depicted in this relief is the continuation of the one narrated in the relief of Kabandha (N.12) which is sculpted in the lintel over the south door in the same corner pavilion.

Finally, a consideration on the monkey's tribe, which is introduced into the story at this point. The alliance with Sugriva, their king, explains Rama's alliance with the *vanaras*, believed to be monkeys, although some scholars are of the opinion

that they are tribal people¹⁹. In general, it can be said that the monkeys are outside the society in which Rama properly belongs and, in a sense, scarcely worthy to be his allies. But even the sharp difference between human and the monkey world (that shows us virtuous Raghavas and murderous *vanaras*) is bridged by Rama's manner in killing Valin, an action, that introduces to the epic issues of moral ambiguity.

2) In the layout of this relief, one can notice that the central vertical axis of symmetry passes through Rama's head, nose, mouth, and - below - the hand holding his terrible arrows. The symmetry is accentuated by the presence of 3 personages at both sides

¹⁹ It has been assumed that the *Ramayana* masks an account of an Aryan king from the Gangetic basin (Rama) who led a military expedition into Central India (Lanka), where he allied himself with tribal people (monkeys and bears) to defeat a local Dravidian ruler (Ravana). In Smith W.L., *Ramayana traditions in Eastern India*, Dept. of Indology, Univ. Stockholm, 1988, p.15

N. 4 - AKRURA'S VISION

Location: northern arm, eastern wall, above the window (Pl. 10).

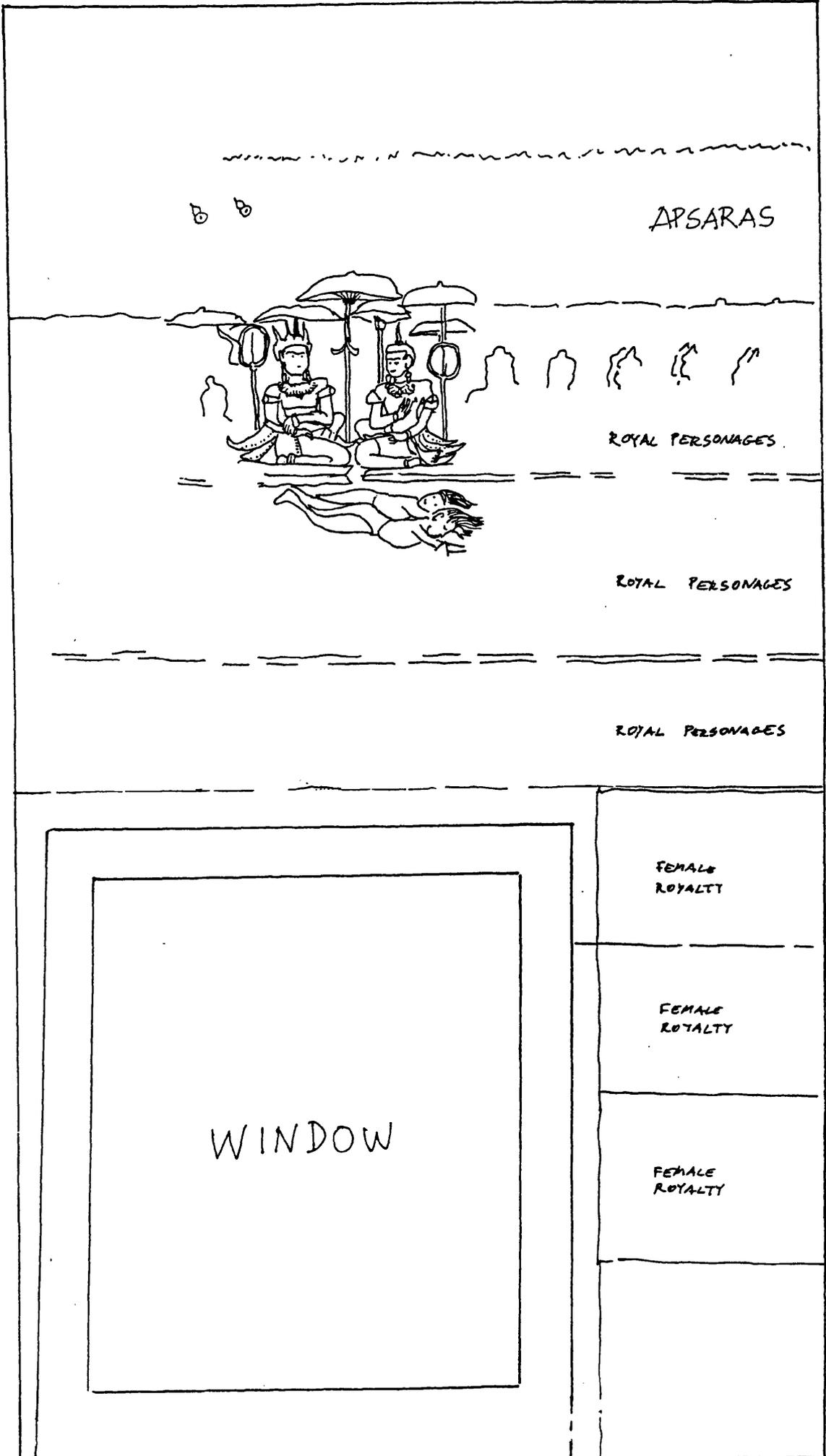
1. THE TEXT.

This relief represents Krishna and Balarama amongst dignitaries, seated on a plinth, above two human bodies, stretched out on the ground or under water, or in an act of veneration and allegiance to the god. Because of the problematic meaning of these two figures, the story has not been identified by previous authors. I am provisionally proposing here that it refer to a particular event narrated in the Purana's original text, that of Akrura's vision.

1) In the *Brahma Purana* (Book 10, chapter 39) we are told that Akrura, Krishna's uncle, has the task of guiding him and Balarama to the city of Mathura, in order to meet and slay Kamsa. Before entering the town, the trio reaches the banks of the sacred Yamuna, which destroys the sins of those who bathe in it. After washing themselves, Krishna and Balarama return to their chariot parked in a shady grove. Akrura, with their permission, goes to have a ceremonial bath. He submerges himself and while he recites the *mantras*, can see Krishna and Balarama within the water, although he knows they are seated in their chariot. Amazed, he surfaces to give a glance to the chariot to find both of them seated in it as before. Thinking that what he saw in the water was illusory, he submerges himself a second time. There he perceives the divine vision of Vishnu sitting on the great snake Shesa (Ananta). The text gives us an exhaustive description of the beauty and graciousness of the god as his *avatara* Krishna, and a long list of the deities praising him. In witnessing this extraordinary vision of Krishna revealing his divinity, Akrura is overpowered by the highest delight and devotion; all his hairs stand on their ends, and - crying - prostrates himself to recite an hymn to the Lord.

A shorter version of the same story is told in the *Vishnu Purana*, Book 5, chapter 18, in the translation of H.H. Wilson of 1860, where he comments that the praise that Akrura recites is typical of the Vaishnava eulogy of the Puranas, never present in the Harivamsa. Furthermore, Akrura addresses Krishna, or Vishnu, as identical with the 4 *vyuhas*: Krishna, Balarama, Pradyumna and Anuruddha (see chapter 1.2).

2) A second interpretation of this event can be inspired by another story of the *Bhagavata Purana*, Book 10, chapters 44, narrating the wrestling competition of Krishna and Balarama against Kamsa's bodyguards, respectively Chanura and Mushtika. The fight ended when Krishna "dashed him [Chanura] on the ground, where he lay stretched with ornament and garlands scattered and hair dishevelled", and Mushtika "fell down dead on the ground, like a tree uprooted by a stormy wind". This interpretation seems unlikely because in the original text the two men are powerful men while the two heroes are still adolescents, almost the opposite of what is shown in the relief. Moreover, considering the love the



N.4 - Akrura's vision (N.4)

Khmer had for representation of fights, I see little justification in the representation of its aftermath.

3) The further story narrated in the *Bhagavata Purana*, Book 10, chapter 28, entitled 'Krishna at the Brahmahrada pool', may provide a further interpretation because of the reference to people in water. However, it seems to me to be dealing with a too 'abstract' event to encourage artists to represent it visually. Moreover, the story has a more pastoral flavour than the one of Akrura, where a divine aura of religiosity permeates the scene. The story goes like this: one day, after the kidnapped Nanda (Krishna's ^hstepfather, who adopted him amongst the *gopas*) has been returned by Varuna, the *gopas* start to believe Krishna is god himself, and long to be absorbed into his subtle being, and be taken into his eternal regions. Krishna, out of mercy, thinks a way to fulfil their aspiration by bringing them to the *Brahmahrada* pool (also called *Para-Brahman*). Here the cowherds are made to remain immersed in a trance (*samadhi*), and then roused from this state by Krishna revealing to them the transcendent realm of Vaikuntha, Vishnu's paradise.

2. THE VIEWING

The relief is sculpted over and beside a window, in a composition with several pseudo-registers. At the centre of the **top pseudo-register** are sculpted the 2 main personages: Krishna on the highest plinth, the most important, is seated in the ceremonial way (with one knee high), dressed with a *sampot* with long flaps, wearing the customary body jewellery, and his hands seem to be empty. His headgear is interesting: behind a decorated tiara, the long hairs are tied up in 3 knots from which pointed tufts emerge, in the fashion of the *gopas*.

The other important personage, Balarama, differs in not having the tiara, but only long hairs tied up in a single knot and a pointed tuft. His dress and body jewellery are the same; he is seated on a marginally lower plinth, which is higher than the one of all other personages of this register. Both are protected by a series of ceremonial parasols, the highest of all in between the two, made of flowery cloth, of which the fans at their sides are also made. The other personages are crowned men in royal attire, setting or squatting under parasols and flywhiskers, mostly in pairs, some with their hand on their chest; only the one closest to Balarama is holding a sword.

In the **middle pseudo-register** is depicted a row of seated male personages in royal attire and conical crown, seated under parasols and in between fans, of which the majority is made with fabric but some with peacock feathers. The majority of them are holding a pointed sword. At the centre, above the parasols

and below Vishnu and Balarama, there are two personages, most likely male, lying horizontally with stretched arms and loose hairs (floating in water or gliding in the wind), flapping *sampots*. One personage has his face turned down, while the other is looking out, toward the viewer.

The **lover pseudo-register** is characterised by a row of seated male personages wearing the usual conical crown body jewellery and *sampot*. They are facing the viewer, and mostly holding their arms on their chests, although some have an arm raised with the hand in a gentle gesture of a respectful salute.

The usual compact storm of *apsaras* is sculpted in the topmost part of the relief.

The relief on the **pillar to the right of the window** is sculpted with 3 superimposed registers with female figures. In each, an elegantly dressed princess is seated on a low table, wearing a high *mukuta* terminating with 3 long points, the usual jewellery, and flowery sarong. They hold a lotus bud, and their attendants are fanning fresh air, or carry caskets possibly for jewels or gifts. Many parasols protect all of them.

3. GENERAL COMMENTS

1) The cowherd's (*gopas'*) headgear of Krishna and Balarama indicate that the two brothers are still youths, at the beginning of manhood. Comparing the headgear of the two main personages in here with that which Krishna and Balarama have in the relief of the story of 'Krishna lifting Mt. Govardhana' (N.2, northern corner pavilion), it is evident that they are one and the same. Therefore, this panel is illustrating an event that takes place in the early time of their life narrated in the classic texts, and the reference to their journey to meet Kamsa is not inappropriate.

2) The most striking feature of all the relief, is the presence of the two stretched personages. I interpret this as a single personage, Akrura, immersing himself *twice* into the water: the second time to verify the marvellous vision he had the first time. There was no other way for the sculptor could represent this but depict Akrura's body twice; his weaving hairs give the impression they are floating in water.

In the relief, Krishna and Balarama are depicted sitting in hieratic attitude, surrounded by royal personages and worshippers who, quite possibly, include the

ones of the lengthy list of the original text. The elegant ladies sculpted on the pillar, assisted by maidens, are more likely to be the goddess also mentioned in the text

3) The composition in clearly defined registers invites a linear reading. The horizontal lines are overwhelming over the vertical axis of symmetry, which passes through the shaft of the parasol between Krishna and Balarama. The three registers to the side of the window have their own central axis of symmetry passing through the body of the princesses; it is independent from the one of the main story.

N.5. SITA'S ORDEAL

Location: north-western corner pavilion, northern arm, west wall (Pl.11).

1. THE TEXT

The story is narrated in the *Ramayana* book VI (*Yuddha Kanda*), chapters 117-119.

After the furious battle of Lanka and the death of Ravana, Rama sends Hanuman to bring Sita to his presence (chapter 116) and is finally reunited with his spouse. However (chapter 117), he soon tells her that amongst his people doubts have arisen about her conduct while living in captivity with Ravana, and asks her - in an abusive way - to leave. The distressed Sita, trembling and crying, laments (chapter 18) that she has been loyal to Rama all the time, having remained a stranger to Ravana, and that he was passing a premature judgement, like a worthless man. Rama had forgotten that she, born from the earth, was of noble conduct. In desperation, she asks that a pyre be risen for her to enter the ordeal by fire to prove her purity. She then circumambulates the pyre and with a fearless heart enters the blazing flames. A great multitude of people witness horrified the scene, and a terrible cry arises from the *rakshasas* and the monkeys.

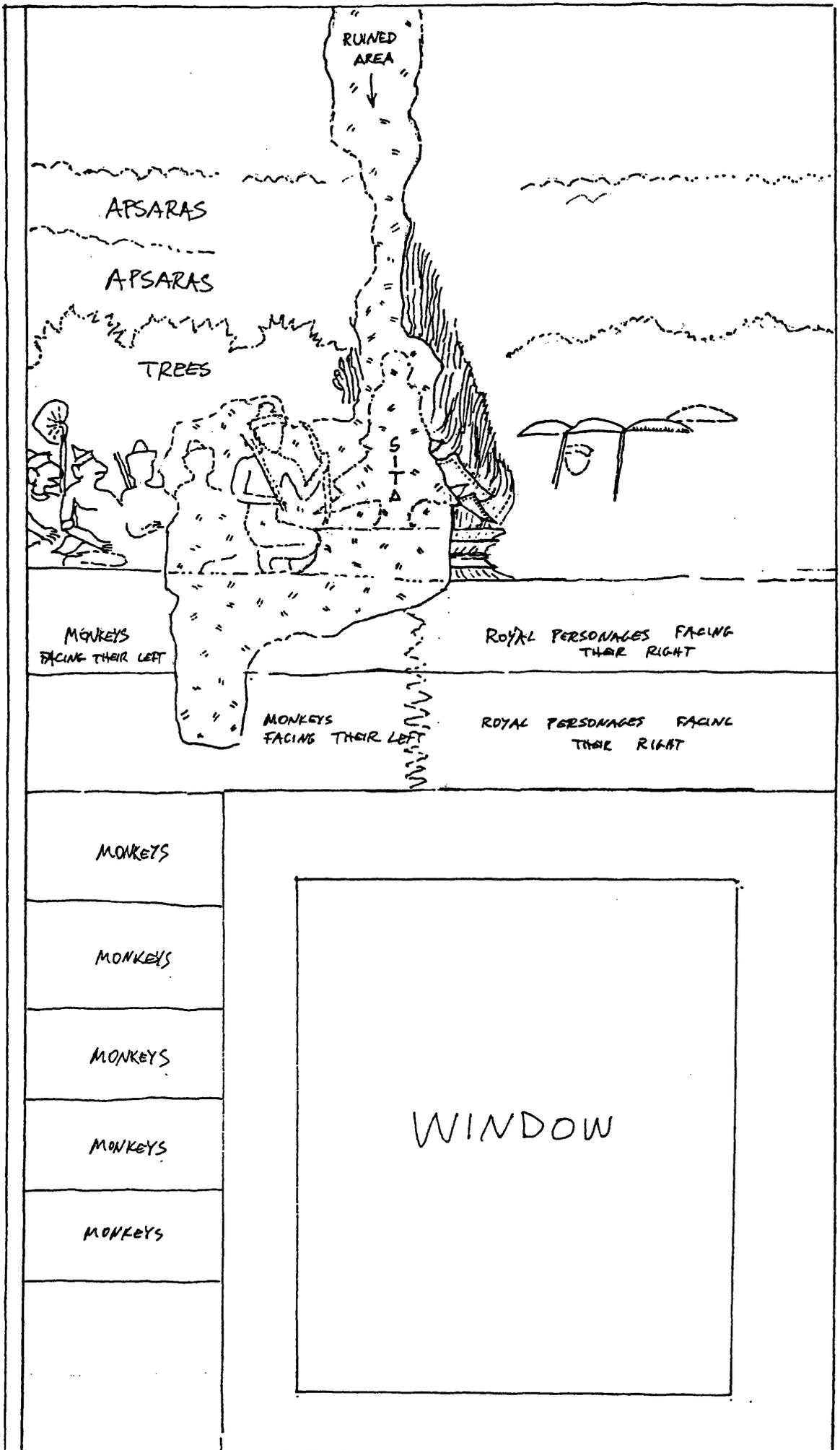
When the gods (the best of the 33 amongst them) hear these hostile lamentations (chapter 119), they descend to Lanka, approach Rama and reveal to him that he is a god, not a mortal, and reproach his acting as a common man. Rama replies "I consider myself to be a man, Rama, born of Deśaratha; who then am I in reality?" Brahma tells him that he is the god Vishnu, Krishna and Prajapati (Lord of Beings) and that it was in order to slay Ravana that he entered a mortal human's body.

In hearing these auspicious words (chapter 120), the god of fire Vibhasu restores Sita to a beautiful look, and - having taken human form - brings her to Rama, telling him she is pure and untainted. After this, Rama is reunited with "his beloved and experienced the felicity he had merited".

2. THE VIEWING

The relief, sculpted over and beside a window, is almost square, with the personages arranged in several pseudo-registers, all in an extremely poor state of preservation; the central part almost completely missing due to the crumbling of the sandstone from water infiltration. The reading is difficult.

In the **upper pseudo-register** is depicted the main event of the story: the ordeal by fire. All that we can now see is, at the centre, the pyre depicted with flames starting from a decorated plinth, extending vertically quite high, to the point of occupying more than half of the narrative relief. On the right side of the fire, the



N.5 - The ordeal of Sita

viewer can see the pointed ends of Sita's dress (sarong) which must have been arranged in the traditional flapping way. To its right, one can see, with some difficulty, a row of sitting figures holding parasols for important personages, some of which are dressed in royal attire. To the left of the pyre, three important personages can be discerned, although very corroded: the nearest, holds the bow in his left hand and arrows in his right, the usual attributes of Rama. Then to his right, follow two smaller personages, badly corroded and unrecognisable, although one, or both, carry arrows, suggesting they might be Rama's brothers, according to Khmer iconology. To the left, close to the edge of the relief, are two squatting monkeys wearing crowns, most likely Sugriva and Hanuman. The background of the scene is composed of trees, with nice birds on their branches.

Two superimposed registers depicting squatting personages occupy the **lower pseudo-register**. In both, these occupying the left part of the relief are monkeys, while the ones on the right are humans. The latter, mostly wearing various types of crown, are probably *rakshasas*, as indicated by the original text. Several monkeys carry a tree's branch in one arm. All the personages of both registers are in the gestural attitude of one hand on the heart, or of both hands united in praying attitude, or over the head; all these postures illustrating a state of great concern for what is going on, or even despair. We know from the original text that at this moment a terrible roar arose from the spectators.

There are several groups of flying *apsaras* surmounting the entire scene, as usual in most Khmer reliefs, sanctifying the event. They are arranged in two superimposed pseudo-registers.

The relief on the **pillar to the left of the window** - below the large relief described above is composed by five rows illustrating kneeling monkeys. They are quiet, in distress, considering that normally they are very active. They do not have indexing arms or hands, but are all staring upwards in the direction of the pyre.

3. GENERAL COMMENTS

1) With regard to the interpretation of the reliefs, it is now accepted amongst scholars that it depicts the ordeal of Sita. However, its ruined state of preservation has raised the doubt, although vague, that it might represent the *ashvamedha* of

^a
Dśharata. This is also known as the Horse Sacrifice performed by the king in order to obtain a son (*Ramayana*, Book I).

2) As it can be seen from the text reported above (*Ramayana*, Book VI, chapter 119), the episode narrated contains the myth of Rama's revelation and epiphany, in that it is to the god-mortal himself that his divinity is revealed (Vaishnava hermeneutics). In all the *Ramayana*, Rama is presented as a man of both physical and moral perfection, and his exaltation as a perfect man may be seen as an ideal image of an earthly manifestation of god. Nothing is said of his divine origin in the first five books. It is only late in the 6th book that the revelation takes place (see above, chapter 119), when Krishna is also mentioned, introducing thus the concept of the *avatara*. The prefix *ava* means 'down' and the Sanskrit verb *tri* translates into 'cross over'; *avatara*, therefore, means the coming down of the deity, and in Western dictionaries it is also translated as 'incarnation'. It is interesting to note that, amongst the Hindu pantheon, the *avatara* doctrine refers essentially to Vishnu; Shiva takes the human form only once, that of an enchanting mendicant (Shiva in the Pine Forest, see relief S.4). In modern view, the *avatara* has the function of allowing the divinity to become the object of the devotee's worship and meditation. It is also believed that when an *avatar* descends, the essence of the Main God suffers no diminution, since only a minute part (like a hair) of the Main God incarnates.

It is to Vishnu alone that the *avatara*'s doctrine is referred and that he appears in 10 ^{main} ~~different~~ manifestations: as a fish (Matsya), a tortoise (Kurma), a boar (Varaha), a man-lion (Narasinha), a dwarf (Vamana), and in manly semblance as Parashurama (Rama with an axe), Rama, Krishna, Buddha (disputed) and Kalki (the *avatara* still to come).

3) The same episode raises the problem of Rama's ambivalence. Despite the overwhelming force of Rama's love and devotion to Sita, for the sake of whom he suffers such a great grief and hardship, his character suffers from a marked ambivalence which is revealed on two distinct occasions. Firstly, during the event of the ordeal of fire, when he abuses Sita by telling her that "the purpose for which I won you back was to gain my own fame, since I have no attachment to you, and you may go from here as you wish". Moreover, he maliciously suggests that she has set her eyes on Lakshmana or Bharata, or the king of the monkeys

Sugriva, or even the king of the *rakshasas* Vibhishana, now that Ravana was dead. He adds another rude touch by saying that she looks to him ‘like a lamp to one whose eye is diseased’. Despite loving enormously Sita and being convinced of her innocence and loyalty, he is willing to publicly humiliate her and make her suffer. To justify himself, however, he blames his father, the cause of all misfortune, the old king who was guilty of putting lust before polity, who denied him the throne and was the cause of his exile.

Towards the end of the *Ramayana* (Book VII), the ambivalence and complexity of Rama’s character proves tragic. While happily reigning in Ayodhya with Sita at his side, he is confronted again with the old dilemma, and under the pressure of the nobles at his court, decides to repudiate her, despite being convinced of her innocence (Book VII, chapter 44). At the very end of the story, Rama wishes to be re-united with his wife, but it is now too late. Asserting once more her devotion to her lord Rama, Sita calls on her mother, the Earth, to receive her, and disappears in glory into the earth (Note that Sita was born from the earth, hence her ~~other~~ name “The furrow”). This cruel, selfish, pompous treatment of people is not exclusive to this episode. Previously Rama reveals an even greater lack of chivalry, with his unprovoked mockery and disfiguring of Shurpanakha (Book III, chapters 17-18), Ravana’ sister, who attempted to seduce him and his brother Lakshmana. The killing of Valin (see above) in an ambush, contributes to give a further negative impression of Rama’s complexity.

4) Concerning the narrative technique, this relief represents the ‘culminant’ event (the most pregnant) of an episode of the *Ramayana*, a moment of suspense, of wonder over the outcome of the fire ordeal or of expectation of justice because everybody knows Sita is pure and innocent.

2) The layout of the relief’s composition reveals - although not directly visible because of the poor preservation - that the centre of symmetry passes through the centre of the pyre, slightly off the centre of the wall. It separates the pseudo-registers with the monkeys from those of the presumed *rakshasas*, at the base of the relief.

N. 6 - VIRADHA'S ATTEMPT TO ABDUCT SITA

Location: north-western corner pavilion, wall above the lintel of the northern door (Pl.11).

1 . THE TEXT

The story is told at the beginning of the 3rd book of the *Ramayana* (*Aranya Kanda*), chapters 2-4 which deals with the adventures of Rama, Sita and Lakshmana during their years of exile in the forest.

One day, when the trio is in the thick Dandaka forest, a gigantic *rakshasa* appears. He is hideous, massive, 'sunken-eyed, huge-mouthed, pointed-eared, his belly deformed'. Clad in a tiger skin, dripping with grease and spattered with blood, he makes a great uproar, seizes Sita in his arms and starts to carry her away, cursing the intruders, proudly declaring to be Viradha, the master of the impenetrable forest. He tells them he will marry Sita and kill the two men who he does not fear having obtained Brahma's boon to be invulnerable to any weapon on earth.

The angered Rama replies by speedily placing seven sharp arrows into Viradha who falls on the ground letting Sita loose. The two brothers continue to transfix him with flaming arrows, but he vomits them out by virtue of the boon he had received. Then Rama brakes Viradha's right arm and Lakshmana the left, hurling him to the ground; aware of his boon, they decide to cast him into a pit. On hearing this, Viradha tells his story. In reality - he says - he is the *gandharva* (inhabitant of the sky) Tumburu who incurred the wrath of Kubera for having made love to the *apsara* Rambha. From this boon he will be released by a fight with Rama, assume his natural form, and return to the celestial regions. Having being asked to put an end to his suffering, the brothers bury him in the pit.

2 . THE VIEWING

This relief, high over the door, has an unusual flat tympanum delineated by a squat frame in which the story is told in a single register. It is in very poor condition, having been corroded by water infiltration; many parts have flaked away and no details are visible.

At the centre, the *rakshasa* Viradha is holding, on his left arm, Sita wearing a tall *mukuta*. The gigantic size of the monster is rendered by the comparatively small size of Sita and by his head touching the frame of the narrative relief. He is standing with flexed legs and the other arm in the act of throwing a massive javelin or spear, to his left. Viradha's hairstyle ending with a tall chignon without crown is typical of the *rakshasa*. He is dressed with a simple *sampot*, and wears a necklace, armlets and anklets. The personage he is trying to kill is Rama. He is in



N.6 - *Viradha's attempt to abduct Sita*

the position of the archer at the moment of maximum stress, fractions before releasing the arrow from the powerful bow. Although badly preserved, one can see his elaborate sampot and the belts crossing on the chest. A crown of flared cylindrical shape, ornate with gems complements the customary jewellery. At the opposite side (the left of the viewer) is another archer, Lakshmana, in the position of arming the bow, with one arm stretched out holding the bow, and the other arm bringing the arrow to the bow. He is more corroded than Rama whom he resembles closely. The scene takes place in a forest and the foreground seems to be mainly rocky.

3. GENERAL COMMENTS

- 1) Although Viradha's details described in the text are hardly present in the relief (sunken eyes, huge mouth, pointed ears and deformed belly), it is without any doubts that this scene illustrates the abduction of Sita. We know that this happened only twice: first by Viradha who failed and was killed, then by Ravana who was successful and ran away with the prey, becoming the main plot of the whole Ramayana.
- 2) Represented here is the beginning of the story, immediately after Viradha grabs Sita and tries to run into the forest with his prey, when Rama throws one of his 7 lethal arrows, while Lakshmana is only arming his bow.
- 3) To notice that Lakshmana's arrow/s extend outside the relief space being sculpted over the frame, a technique employed sparingly in Angkor Wat large relief panels. It became very common practice in the reliefs of the NE quadrant sculpted in the 16th century.
- 4) As in all pediments of the corner pavilions, symmetry is strictly applied in here, with the two brothers almost mirror images around the axis of Viradha.

Comments on *rakshasas*

In the introduction to a new translation of the *Ramayana*, Sheldon Pollock²⁰ notices that Valmiki has framed the third book of the epic (*Aranya Kanda*) with two symmetrical episodes in which Rama confronts monsters, first Viradha

²⁰ In R.P. Goodman, *The Ramayana of Valmiki*, Volume III, 1991, Princeton University Press, p. 71.

(chapters 1-3) and later Kabandha (chapters 65-69). Both are examples of the representation of the fantastic and description of the distinctive traits of the *rakshasas*. These two are really not *rakshasa* because they live permanently in the forest, in isolation, not in groups. They are also marginalised physically, their physical deformity reflecting moral deformity, stressing a symbolic concomitance between physical and moral qualities which is common in the Ramayana. Both are in reality celestial beings, relatively benign, which were cursed to enter monstrous bodies as a consequence of moral transgression. Tumburu became Viradha by neglecting his duties towards Kubera, as a result of his indulging in sexual pleasures, and Danu (a *danava*, a sort of good *asura*) became Kabandha by arrogantly attacking Indra. They are creatures of fantasy, escapism and symbols of fear of the unknown. They are fallen creatures who can be liberated only by the spiritual sword of the god-king Rama. Since their hatred and violence is directed essentially against the Brahmans, they take it out against the Brahmans' protector, Rama. However, there are several 'good' *rakshasas* capable of responsible choices like human mortals (Vibhishana, Trijata and others), but their character makes them more frightening.

N. 7 - RAMA ON THE PUSHPAKA CHARIOT

Location: north-western corner pavilion, western arm, north wall (Pl.12).

1 . THE TEXT

The story is told towards the end of *Ramayana*'s 6th Book, the *Yuddha Kanda*, in chapters 123-125.

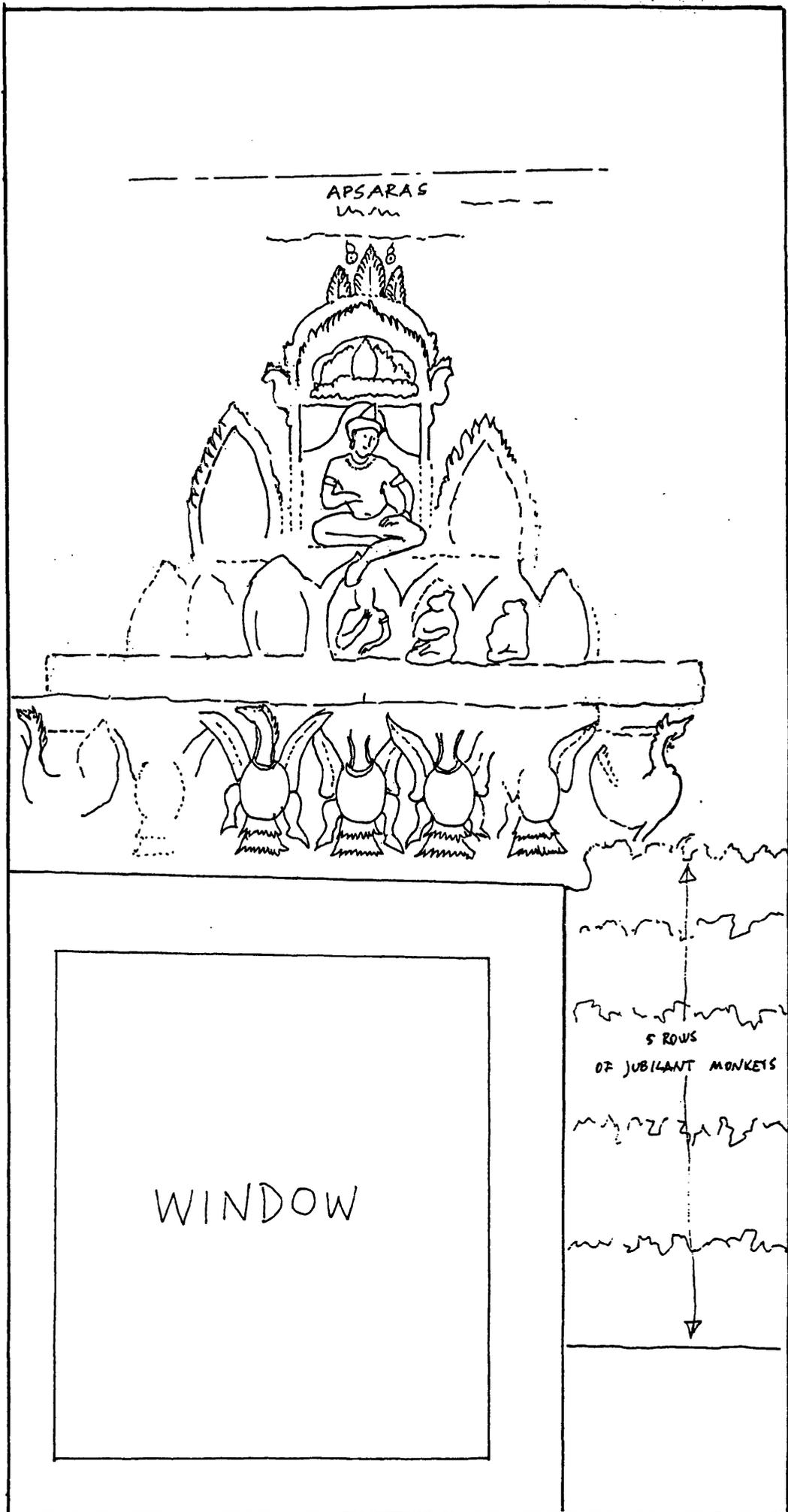
After Sita went through the ordeal of fire and reunited with Rama, Rama decides to go back to his family and people. He accepts Vibhishana's gift of the extraordinary Pushpaka chariot with its many white banners. It could fly anywhere at one's will, is indestructible, with many rooms, like a palace, gilded and covered with precious stones and pearls, enriched with golden lotuses hung together with bells diffusing a melodious sound. Looking like the peak of Mt. Meru, it is harnessed by swans (or *hamsas*)²¹. But the monkeys and their leaders, Sugriva and Vibhishana, insist on travelling with him. They all ascend the chariot and, together with Rama, Sita and Lakshmana leave Lanka comfortably flying towards Ayodhya, where Rama will be enthroned king.

2 . THE VIEWING

The entire composition of this relief is in a single register, which is exceptional in the corner pavilions. It is occupied by the illustration of the Pushpaka chariot, which is composed of three elements, from top to bottom:

- a tall richly decorated pavilion in which Rama is graciously seated, and two smaller almond-shaped pavilions at each side, hosting two seated personages, now totally eroded - presumably Sita (to his left) and Lakshmana.
- a row of almond-shaped pavilions in which several personages are seated; some with a clear monkey's face, thus Hanuman and Sugriva; one with the *rakshasa*'s hairstyle, thus Vibhishana; and others so eroded and effaced that they cannot be recognised, but who may be the monkeys' leaders mentioned in the text.
- a row of very large *hamsas* (mythical geese) propelling the chariot in the sky.

²¹ Ravana had previously stolen the Pushpaka chariot from Kubera, the god of wealth. It had many magic features; beside the capacity of flying, it obeyed to vocal commands and could talk back (*Ramayana*, Book 7, chapter 75).



N.7 - Rama on the Pushpaka chariot

The Pushpaka chariot is surrounded by a forest of banners carried by soldiers, high in the reliefs, and by a thick crowd of jubilant monkeys. Some of them carry, in pairs, wooden sticks holding coconut and bananas bunches. They seem to run in the street pointing with their arms and fingers towards something higher up in the sky.

The topmost part of the relief is sculpted with flying *apsaras*. In here, though, they are in a single row – and not multiple as usual - because the Pushpaka and the banners extend very high into the relief's wall.

The relief on the pillar to the right of the window includes 4 pseudo-registers, thematically belonging to the overlying scene. The highest depicts the same fruit-carrying monkeys, while 3 monkeys are beating on small drums, and playing hand-bells and brass gongs. One seems to be blowing a conch.

3. GENERAL COMMENTS

1) Although we do not know to which specific event of Rama on the Pushpaka this relief refers, the fact that there are only jubilant monkeys suggests an event that took place before Rama was met by his brothers, queens, ministers, nobles, brahmins, army and all the others (chapter 129). The fact that the story took place before the Pushpaka landed is supported by the absence of the usual rows of royal personages and dignitaries.

2) The layout of the Pushpaka is dominating all the relief. Its top part is squashed against the frame of the relief, leaving little space for the *apsaras*. Exceptionally, therefore, they are reduced to a single row and not arranged in the usual superimposed storms.

3) The composition is asymmetric: the Pushpaka is placed to the left of wall, over the window, leaving a lot of space in front of it, to be occupied by euphoric monkeys. Perhaps the sculptors, in the intention to suggest movement (from left to right), left plenty of space in front of the magic chariot; in doing so, they shifted the central axis of symmetry to the left and make it pass at the centre of the Pushpaka. The *hamsas* pulling the magic chariot are treated by the sculptors as decorative stylised motifs.

4) The reading of this relief²² is done globally in a single register, the attention being concentrated on the majestic Pushpaka and the multitude of dancing monkeys that extend down to the side of the window. Although there is a general sense of movement (we know from the text he is going to Ayodhya), there is no temporal sequence of events.

²² The relief is in a very poor state of preservation

N. 8 - SITA MEETING HANUMAN

Location: north-western corner pavilion, western arm, south wall, above the window
(Pl.12 and 15).

1. THE TEXT

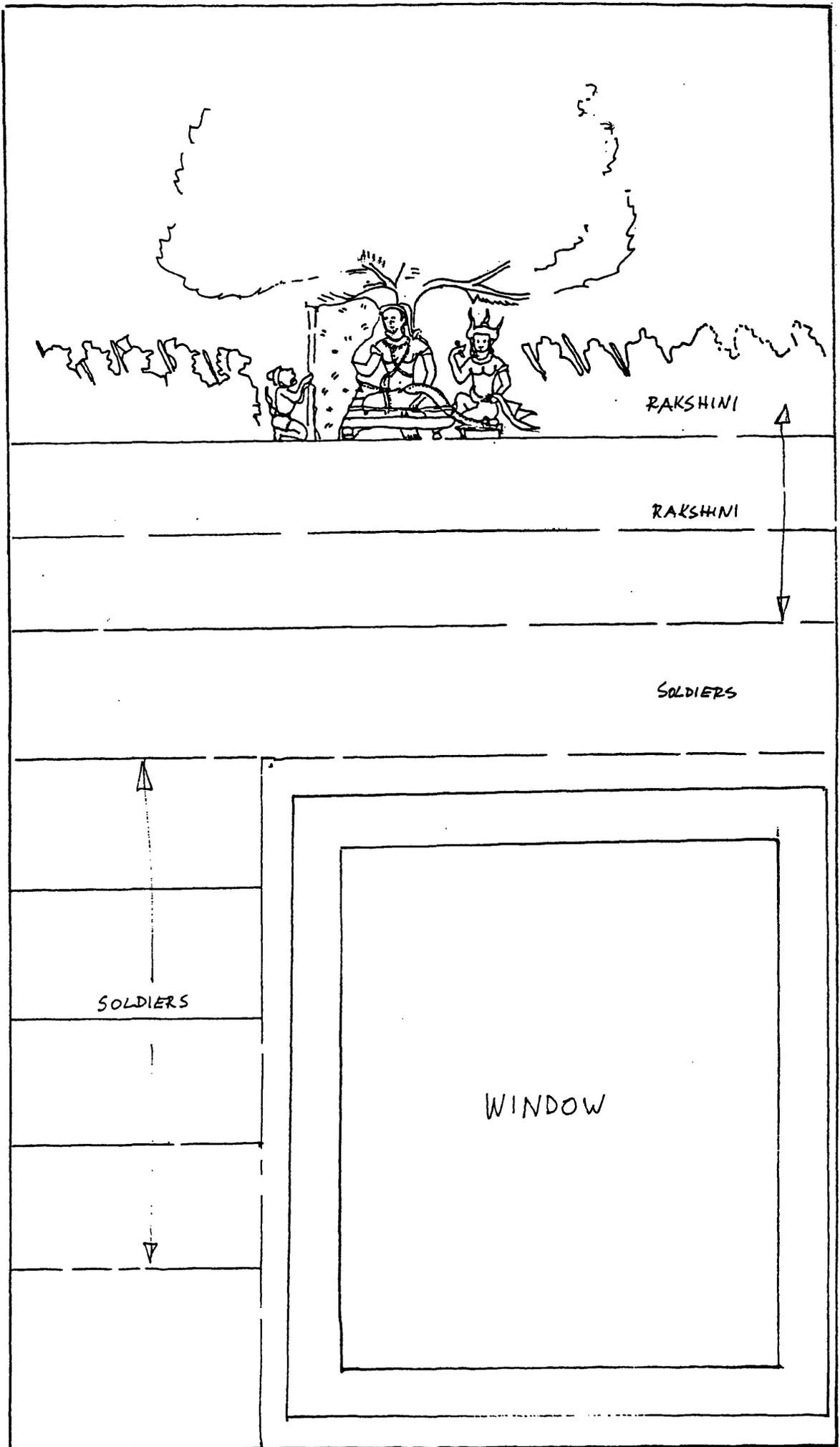
The episode of the meeting of Hanuman and Sita and the exchange of jewels occupies more than a third of Book 5 (*Kishkinda Kanda*) of the *Ramayana*, from chapter 13 to chapter 40 (out of 68).

One day Hanuman reaches Lanka, while searching for Sita, who was being kept prisoner by Ravana. Determined to find her, he enters a beautiful unexplored acacia grove (chapter 13); reducing himself to a very small size so as not to be detected, he decides to hide in a tree and waits for signs of action. Soon he is able to see Sita, although with some doubts, because she is in a miserable state, saddened by the separation from Rama and tormented by the *rakshini* (female monsters) guardians. Then the horrible Ravana enters the grove demanding that Sita marry him. On being rejected, he threatens her with death, but then he asks the *rakshini* to induce Sita to reconsider. They fail and Sita prophesies that Ravana will be slain by Rama. One of the *raksini*, however, the aged and prudent Trijata, announces that she sympathises with Sita and will protect her; but Sita is desperate and considers killing herself. Hanuman, who has been hiding on the tree all the time, decides to approach her by reciting a melodious praise of Rama, to her great surprise. She is also frightened by such a terrible looking monkey, and even thinks he is Ravana in another of his disguises. Hanuman then makes himself known and gives her the precious ring engraved with Rama's name (chapter 36) that was given to him, so she would trust him (chapter 44). Sita, however, refuses to be rescued by Hanuman, considering the fury this may cause amongst the *rakshasas*, which would jeopardise both hers and Hanuman's life. She asks, instead, that he tells Rama to hurry to her rescue because Ravana will kill her within a month, and to give him the pearl that adorned her forehead (chapter 38). Hanuman reassures Sita, listens to her instructions and takes leave (chapter 40).

2 . THE VIEWING

This relief is sculpted over and beside a window, in a composition of several registers.

The **top register** is where the main personages are depicted, but at the same time, it is the most ruined. One can hardly see the beautiful acacia tree under which Sita sits, as well as the remnants of other trees. At the centre is the slim figure of Sita sitting on a high base, a sort of throne with legs. She has long hair tied with a



N.8 - Sita meeting Hanuman

single knot, long earrings, the customary body jewellery but not the crown²³, chest crossbands, and a sarong ending with a very long pointed flap. She is facing right, holding her arm towards a small figure kneeling of the ground: that of Hanuman, clearly distinguishable for his monkey's face, raising his arms towards her and with a vertical tail²⁴. In both cases the area where the hands of the two personages are, has completely crumbled away, so that it is impossible to understand the reason for their gesture. From the original text, however, one can guess that they are handling a jewel. Close to Sita, to the right of the viewer, a female human personage is sitting on a low plinth: she is probably Trijata, the only *rakshini* kind to Sita. She is dressed like Sita but her hair is arranged with a thin *mukuta* surmounted by three knotted hair locks; with one hand she is holding a lotus bud. To both sides of these 3 personages are rows of *rakshini* with monstrous animal faces with pointed snouts, the hair coarsely arranged like bristles or wearing the spiky *rakshasa*'s helmets; all hold a sword while orderly squatting on the ground. The **middle register** depicts 2 superimposed rows of *rakshini*. Some have the same animal faces seen in the above register. Here some have a pig's snout or a bird's beak. Although symmetrically arranged, half of them sits with the right side of the torso facing the viewer while the other half have the left side of their torso facing the viewer. Their swords, however, are all arranged in the same direction, pointing to the right of the viewer.

In the **lower register** is sculpted a single row of warriors with human faces larger in size than the figures of the two overlying registers. They have an unusual hairgear, a conical *mukuta* made by overlapping elements like leaves and flowers, probably indicating that they are female *rakshasas*. They squat on the ground, some holding javelins and round shields

Superimposed rows of *apsaras* are present in the **top right part of the relief**, in the usual attitude of dancing in the sky.

The **pillar to the left of the window** contains 4 registers displaying warriors. The highest includes warriors that are identical to those of the overlying register (see paragraph 3, above). In the other 3, the warriors hold swords and rectangular shields. Although they are interpreted as female *rakshasas*, they do not have

²³ she had lost it during the struggle with Ravana when he was abducting her.

²⁴ Khmner sculptors usually represent the monkeys with erected tails, waving vertically.

breasts. This iconographical feature is applied here to the *rakshini* in order to emphasise that, although of female genre, these monstrous creatures had none of the feminine human qualities.

3. GENERAL COMMENTS

1) In the *Ramayana* it is made clear that only female monsters (*rakshini*) from different tribes were guarding the prisoner Sita. There is also a complete detailed description (chapters 22-23) of the animal ugliness of their faces and bodies, which is not reproduced by the Khmer sculptors; they limited themselves to depicting animal faces as if it would implicitly suffice to the monstrous transformation. The *rakshini* Trijata is mentioned in the *Uttara Kanda* (chapter 12) to be the wife of Vibhishana. The sculptors wanted to distinguish the benevolent *rakshini* from her terrible companions by giving her a human face.

2) Despite Hanuman being the key element of this story, he is represented in unusually small proportions, probably because Khmer sculptors imagined him still in the tiny shape he had transformed himself into at the beginning of the story (chapter 13).

3) Concerning the layout of the composition, the asymmetrical arrangement of the weapons of the *rakshasas* and soldiers is a contributing factor to the lack of central symmetry of this relief that is then viewed in a linear reading. This is another formal aspect that adds to the lack of organisation of the composition, probably with the intent, on the part of the creators of the reliefs, to give a bad impression of Ravana's court and entourage.

N. 9 - RAMA'S ALLIANCE WITH VIBHISHANA

Location: north-western corner pavilion, wall over the lintel of the west door (Pl.13).

1. THE TEXT

The story is told in the 6th book of the *Ramayana*, *Yuddha Kanda*.

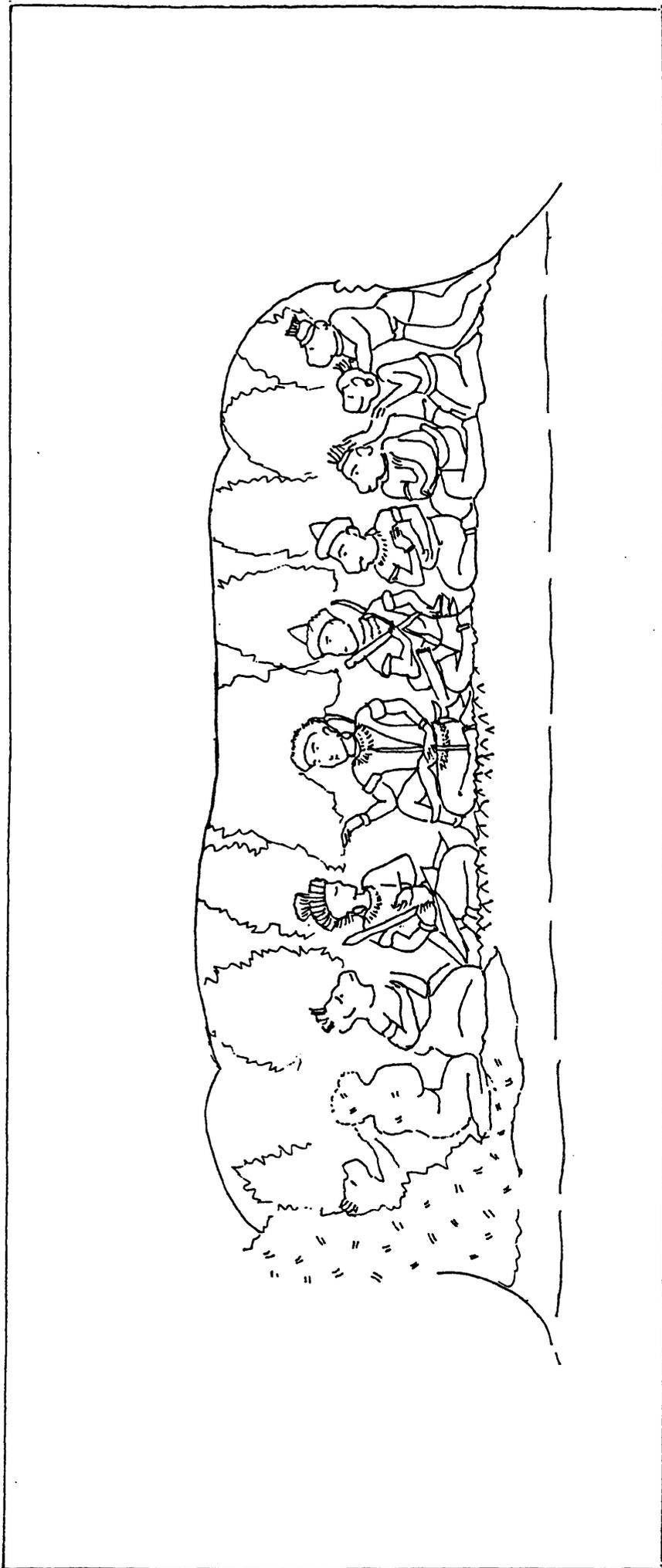
The mighty *rakshasa* Vibhishana, Ravana's younger brother, tries to persuade Ravana (chapter 14) to give back Sita - the cause of all their problems - to Rama, on the grounds that nobody can beat Rama, who he admires. Indrajit, Ravana's son (chapter 15) accuses him of being a coward, while Ravana considers him to be a snake and a traitor. Vibhishana can not tolerate this outrage and announces to leave their party (chapter 16). He goes (chapter 17), together with four of his generals, to the place where Rama and Lakshmana are.

He seeks hospitality, having had to abandon his wife and son because of Ravana's hostility. Because Sugriva mistrusts Vibhishana, a meeting is held to discuss the case, during which Hanuman wisely suggests asking Vibhishana directly what are his motives and invites him to decide what his alliance is worth to them. In Chapter 18 we read of Lakshmana wanting to slay Vibhishana, Sugriva silent, and Rama saying that Vibhishana cannot hurt him in the least, and that he can kill him with the tip of his finger. Finally, after the great Sage Kandu says it is a crime not to give shelter to those who ask for it, Rama - convinced of Vibhishana integrity - give the order to admit him amongst them. They meet courteously (chapter 19) and Vibhishana tells Rama of the terrifying powers of Ravana's brigade. On hearing this Rama commits himself to murder him and all his followers and install Vibhishana as king. Vibhishana, on his side, promises to help him to capture Lanka. The alliance is thus concluded. Immediately they start to plan the attack, which includes throwing a bridge over the sea to reach the island of Lanka.

2. THE VIEWING

The relief occupies the flat pediment delimited by the curving frame of the *naga*, and the story is narrated in a single horizontal register.

Amongst an assembly of monkeys, Rama and Lakshmana welcome a warrior wearing the hairstyle of the *rakshasas*. The friendly character of the meeting indicates that the *rakshasa*, his arm on his chest, seems to swear fidelity to his interlocutor. It is more likely that the sculptors wanted to represent the reception of Vibhishana by Rama (chapters 17-18). Behind the two brothers is a monkey with the hairstyle ending with a *mukuta*, which could be Hanuman or Sugriva, since both took part in the meeting. The other personages behind the *rakshasa*,



N.9 - Rama's alliance with Vibhishana

although almost defaced, are monkeys; there is no sign of the four *rakshasas* who were accompanying Vibhishana.

3. GENERAL COMMENTS

1) In reading the text, one would be brought to think that Rama acts impetuously after having heard Vibhishana. He is taken by a homicidal rage, he wants to annihilate Ravana, his sons, his kinfolk and his entire army before he returns to Ayodhya; then reinstall Vibhishana as king. It looks as if in his fury he has forgotten the idea of liberating and reuniting with Sita. His temper is similar to the one he had when Sugriva asked him to murder Valin.

2) With regard to the compositional layout - as usual - the main personage is on the vertical axis of symmetry, with Vibhishana at one side and Lakshmana at the other, complemented by a small group of minor personages at each side. The space between Rama and Vibhishana is larger than that of any other personages, indicating circumspection towards a guest whose intentions were not known, or ceremonial deference towards a visitor.

N. 10 - SVAYAMVARA OF SITA

Location: north-western corner pavilion, southern arm, east wall (Pl.13).

1. THE TEXT

The story is told in the *Ramayana*, Book 1 (*Bala Kanda*), Chapter 66-67.

Old King Janaka, sovereign of Mithila, is in possession of a massive and divine ancestral bow which no king and their ministers on earth so far have been able to wield. Janaka is setting this task as the price for the hand of his beautiful daughter Sita. For this purpose, a competition is organised: the *svayamvara*,²⁵ to which the princes of all the neighbouring states are invited (possibly also Ravana).

Rama, who is in town with his brother Lakshmana and the great Sage Vishvamitra, is summoned by king Janaka to 'behold' the ancestral mighty bow²⁶. Ornate with flowers and sandalwood, it is brought in, with great effort, by 500 men and is displayed in front of the royal crowd. Rama, calmly raises it, and without effort, affixes the bowstring, fits an arrow and draws it back, but in doing so, he brakes it in the middle by his immeasurable strength, with the sound of thunder. Everybody is astounded, and thrown to the ground by the reverberations. When the calm is restored the king gives Sita in marriage to Rama and the wedding is arranged. He also orders the royal counsellors to leave at once for Ayodhya on swift chariots, to bring back king Dasharata, Rama's father.

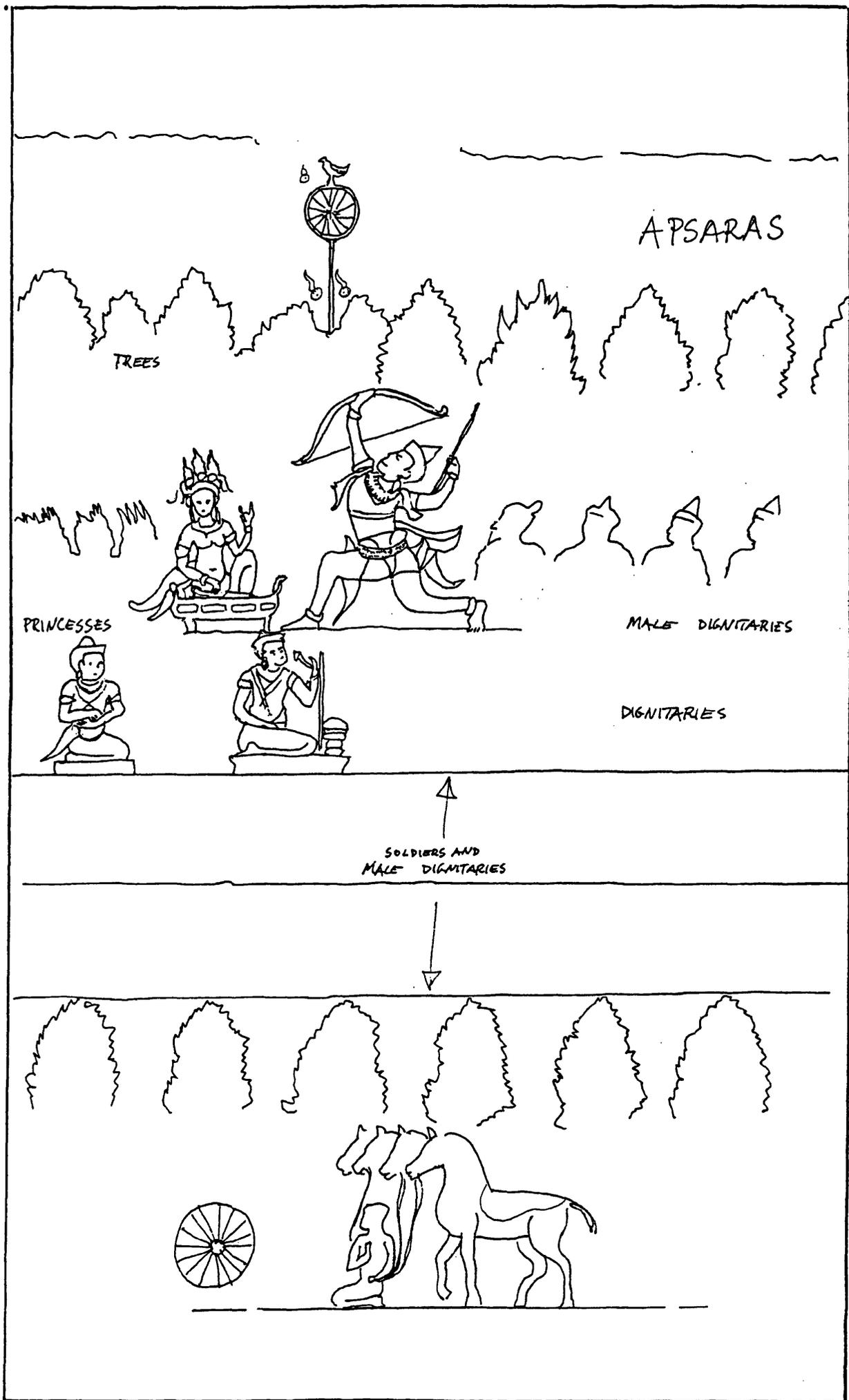
2. THE VIEWING

The relief is sculpted on a full wall; the story is set in 5 registers, the top and bottom ones being the largest.

In the middle part of the register (or 1st register), a young man of larger size than any other personage, presumably Rama, is depicted brandishing a bow in his right arm and one (or more) arrow/s in the left. His legs are bent, in the position of the archer at work; his headgear consists of a crown with a tall conical end, the customary body jewellery, a rich sampot flapping at the back and a thin vest around the shoulders. The position of his arm and the direction of his gaze create a vectorial movement converging towards a wheel on a post with a bird on top. This is the target at which he is aiming, but no sign of an arrow is there.

In front of Rama, a princess is sitting on a richly decorated throne; on the side there is a large casket in the shape of a lotus. She is wearing the typical three-pointed *mukuta*, typical of a lady of royal status. She is adorned with the

²⁵ The *svayamvara* is the occasion when a bride is given to a bridegroom who distinguishes himself in a particular tournament.



N.10 - Svayamvara of Sita

traditional jewellery and a sarong ending with pointed tails. In her left hand she graciously holds a lotus bud. She does not seem to be watching Rama, but instead is gazing towards the viewer; many court ladies surround her, some holding fans, others with one arm over the chest. They too wear a three-pointed *mukuta*, but not as complex as Sita's.

Behind Rama is a Brahman characterised by his chignon and goatee. He is Vishvamitra, Rama's personal *guru*, followed by 3 (and a possible fourth, barely visible) male characters wearing crown and jewellery, all seated in the ceremonial way, their right arms on their chests. It is not possible to distinguish Lakshmana amongst them. All the protagonists of this scene are protected by a multitude of parasols and fans, including one made with peacock feathers for Vishvamitra. In the background are regularly spaced tall trees.

In the 2nd register, it is probable that the royal personage sitting on a high base is the king himself since the scene takes place at Janaka's court. He is holding a lotus flower with a gesture similar to that of Sita; in front of him is also a decorated casket. Behind him are royal servants with fans and flywhiskers and important members of the court sitting on plinths (lower than the king's). In front, on the right side of the viewer, is a row of archers in princely costumes, probably the defeated contestants, sitting in pairs. Note that they are the only figures holding bows amongst the multitude of warriors. As in the above register, parasols protect all the figures of this register

In the 3rd register is depicted a compact row of high-ranking warriors sitting in the ceremonial way is represented here. At the centre, one holds a ceremonial crook, while all the others hold swords. It is interesting to note that because the ones to the right are in identical symmetrical positions, their swords are pointing in the same direction of the warriors on the other side.

The 4th register is sculpted with another densely packed row of warriors of high rank holding swords or maces. There is no hierarchy amongst them based on costume and armament. Because the ones to the right of the viewer hold their swords with their left arm and the ones to the left with their right arm, the visual effect is that of symmetry.

²⁶ I use Goldman's translation, chapter 66.12.

The comparatively tall lowest register illustrates a court scene. Several soldiers, without headgear but wearing simple chignons, seem to be involved in many activities: some are carrying a cartwheel, others are attending horses, surrounded by others carrying parasols (some closed) and flywhiskers. Soldiers stand with their sword at rest on their shoulder, and some kneel on the ground. Their horses are arranged in groups of four, with the ones at the centre of the panel, because of their location, being the most important, probably destined to pull a royal cart or chariot. In the background are tall trees widely spaced with vines in between, most likely a garden.

3. GENERAL COMMENTS

1) In this relief, the competition target is a bird over a wheel (presumably rotating) on a tall pole. Such a target is not described in the *Ramayana* but in the *Mahabharata* in occasion of the *svayamvara* of Draupadi, and for this reason. Przulski²⁷ suggested that, in this case, the archer is Arjuna and not Rama. This story was well known to the Khmers, as attested by the inscription of Loley (Barth, ISCC, p.393-402)²⁸. In it, after the eulogy of Yashovarman, the episode of Arjuna's shooting at the target at the competition for Draupadi's hand (Mahabharata). It is narrated in the 55th stanza, as follows: "By hitting the target, though it was not fixed [i.e. moving], through a hole at the centre of a [revolving] wheel, he was not only like Arjuna in his exploits, but also like Bhima in his impetuosity".

In the *Ramayana*, Rama lifts and bends the bow in a demonstration of strength; whilst in the *Mahabharata*, Arjuna aims it accurately at a target, in a trial of skill. In the relief one can imagine the target being transfixed as a sort of 'aerial machine' like the one of the *Mahabharata* (Adip.185,10), turning like a *yantra*. In the relief, apart from the detail of the target, everything concurs with the *Ramayana* text. Therefore, it may be that the sculptors may have followed some other text or local tradition, or that they have confused the *Ramayana* sequence with that of the *Mahabharata*. In the hypothesis of the representation of the

²⁷ Przulski J., *La legende de Rama dans les bas-reliefs d'Angkor Vat*, Art and Archeologie Khmers, Vol. 1, 1921, p.319

²⁸ Chatterji B. R., *Indian cultural influence in Cambodia*, University of Calcutta, 1964, p.110

svayamvara of Draupadi as described in the *Mahabharata* (I, 184-92), the archer would then be Arjuna, and the four squatting personages behind him the other four Pandavas. However, according to the legend, the Pandavas were disguised as brahmins, all the five of them, while in the relief there is only one Brahman. Moreover, there is no evidence - amongst the personages - of Karna, Dhastadyumna and other witnesses indispensable to the *svayamvara* of Draupadi.

2) There may be an explanation of the presence of a bird on the pole at which Rama is aiming in the relief's representation if one considers a story of the *Ramaker* translated by Francois Martini²⁹. At the beginning of this Cambodian version of the *Ramayana*, we are told that one day when Vishvamitram, the great *rishi* of magic powers, is busy performing the rituals of a sacrifice, a perverse *asura* appears. It is Kakanasura who has the shape of a giant crow. With powerful flying manoeuvres, the bird strikes the ritual oblations with his beak. To put an end to this, Vishvamitram manufactures some magic arrows and invites Rama and Lakshmana to slay the demon. Rama obliges. He takes the bow, adjust the lethal arrow and releases it instantly transfixing the demon bird that falls straight on the ground and then^e goes to the Patala, one of the region of the hells.

This story is the equivalent of that recounted in the *Ramayana*, Book 1, chapter 30, where we are told that when Vishvamitram is performing a sacrifice, the two demons Marica and Sabahu appear in the sky and release showers of blood on the sacrificial altar. With a powerful arrow Rama seriously wounds Marica who is flung into the sea. With other arrows he kills Sabahu and the remaining demons. The only difference between the two stories resides in the fact that in the *Ramaker* the demon is a single crow, while in the *Ramayana*, the two demons are *rakshasas*, since they are not described otherwise. In the *Ramaker*, the killing of the bird is Rama's the first archery's test. Its description is followed by the story of king Janaka discovering Sita and offering her hand to the man who would lift his magic bow. To this follows the episode of Rama being the only being who can lift the bow and shoot the powerful arrow, gaining thus Sita in marriage.

In this relief the sculptors may have represented a combination of Rama's great ability in archery by juxtaposing the story of Rama's first trial against Kakanasura

²⁹ Martini F., *La Gloire de Rama. Ramayana Cambodgien*, Societe d'edition "Les Belles Lettres", Paris, 1978, pages 2-3.

to the story of the lifting and arming the magic bow of Janaka as narrated in the *Ramker*.

3) Francois Martini³⁰ commented that:

- according to the Cambodian *Ramaker*, Rama bends the bow, shoots the arrow, and later, he makes the bow to turn like a wheel which ventilates his hand. From this one can conclude that Rama must have used an intact bow, perfectly working. This is the way it is represented in the relief.

- the relief depicts 2 events: the *svayamvara* in the upper register, and - below - the wedding ceremony attended by the two families. The 2 events are interconnected and represented simultaneously. The three princes behind Vishvamitra are Rama's three brothers: Lakshmana, Bharata, and Satrugna. The two personages in the register below are the two kings and fathers (Janaka and D^asharata); amongst the royal personages depicted besides princess Sita is, possibly, the queen mother.

- with regard to the target, the Cambodian *Ramaker* does not give any indication on what it was (Valmiki's Ramayana tells us it was a row of sugar-palm trees). Therefore the puzzle of the moving target illustrated in the relief remains unresolved.

4) Also in this relief, as in the one depicting Rama killing Valin (S.8), and Kama shooting an arrow at Shiva (S.7), the bow is never represented with the offending arrow armed in it. Instead, the protagonists are shown in the process of arming the bow, or after having released the arrow.

5) With regard to the compositional arrangement, the irregular arrangement and ordering of the weapons held by the various personages contribute to break the symmetry so skilfully used in most other reliefs. In the top register, the figure of an over-size Rama, with flexed legs and stretched right arm, in a position of aiming at the target fixed at the top of a pole, delimits a narrow pyramidal layout element which is offset to the left of the viewer.

6) Narrative technique and temporal sequence. The temporal sequence of the event in the Ramayana would follow a chronology which starts with Rama being invited to stretch the bow, then lifting and breaking the bow, being offered Sita in marriage, and finally the arrangements for collecting Rama's father, D^asharata.

³⁰ BEFEO, 1938, p. 245

This sequence is well depicted in the relief. At the top of the relief is Rama's performing the archery test, Sita waiting to be given in marriage to him and royal personages watching. In the middle of the reliefs are various dignitaries and soldiers attending the ceremony. At the base of the reliefs, below rows of soldiers, are people in the process of harnessing them to be attached to the chariot that has the task of collecting Rama's father (as described in the text). In this way, a temporal sequence becomes evident, in a typical case of ellipsis narrative.

N. 11 - KRISHNA AND THE GOPIS, THE RASALILA

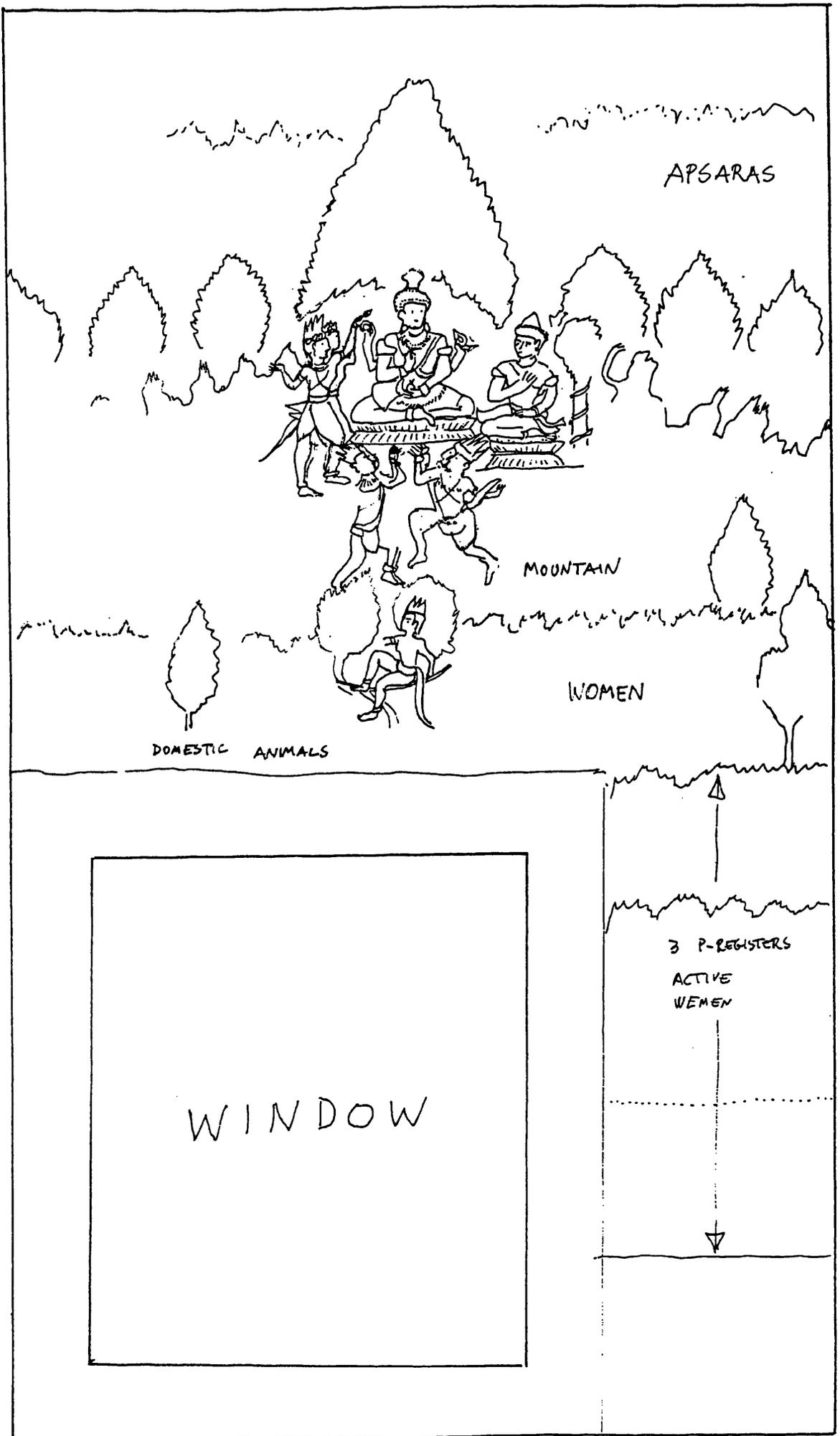
Location: north-western corner pavilion, southern arm, west wall, above the window (Pl.14).

1. THE TEXT

Although previous authors have recognised that this panel must refer to a story of Vishnu or Krishna, they have not identified which one in particular. In my opinion, it refers to Krishna with the *gopis* enacting the Rasalila dance, because in the *Puranas* and *Harivamsa* there is only one occasion in which Krishna is surrounded by women in dynamic movement, either dancing or manifesting their excitement towards their Lord: the story of Krishna's sport with the *gopis* which culminates with the dancing of the *Rasalila*. The event is narrated in the *Bhagavata Purana*, Book 10, quite at length, starting from the end of chapter 29 and culminating with chapter 33. I will explain later why it is not possible to specify to which chapter the relief refers.

1) One day (chapter 29) Krishna decides to enact his long promised play with the *gopis* (female cowherds). When the moon is high in the sky, he plays the flute, ravishing the heart of all the *gopis*. In agitation, they hurry to him, their lover, totally absorbed in him, forgetting all their duties. Though obstructed by husbands, parents and relatives, they can not be stopped as their mind is snatched away by Krishna. In seeing all this multitude of women assemble near him, Krishna attempts to dissuade them from staying out at night when they should be at home with their families, keeping their duty. However, to the plea of the disappointed *gopis*, Krishna proceeds to play love-sports, firstly in the forest and then in the Yamuna river's cool waters. In seeing that the women start to feel proud of their beauty and to develop a sense of self-importance, Krishna suddenly disappears with the view to purify them through suffering and make them worthy of his grace. The *gopis*, initially deeply distressed and feverish, recover and start to search for him (chapter 30), and when they realise the futility of their behaviour, begin to sing a prayer for Krishna's return (chapter 31). To their surprise, the Lord appears (chapter 32) in the very midst of them, making them ecstatic with joy. Under the autumnal moon, he speaks to them about the selfishness of mortals' love and foolishness of accomplishing the objects of desire. In appreciation of their constant devotion, he inaugurates the sport of the Rasa dancing with them the *Rasa krida*³¹ (chapter 33). But the women fail to form a circle because each one is rooted on the spot for fear of leaving Krishna's side;

³¹ A circular dance during which a number of female dancers dance with their hands interlocked, in the company of men who place their arms round the neck of the women-partners; it is also called *Rasa mandala*.



N.11 - Krishna and the gopis

so, the god takes each one by hand and completes the circle of the dancing, assuming as many forms as there were gopis, enjoying himself dancing. The women's wreaths and ornaments become loose and fall; they are too involved in dancing to re-adjust their dishevelled locks of hair, garments and brassieres. Krishna is fatigued from over-dancing, and moves towards the Yamuna to enter its cool waters in the company of the exhilarated *gopis*, before disappearing again into the night.

2 . THE VIEWING

The relief is composed of 2 pseudo-registers combined in a pyramidal shape, of which Vishnu occupies the vertex. In the **top pseudo-register** Vishnu depicted seated in the Indian position on a decorated base, under a beautiful tall tree, at the top of a mountain. He is richly attired, with crown and all the jewellery due to his high rank. His face has a serene expression, open eyes and a gently smiling mouth. He has the shade of moustaches and thin beard. His four arms are holding his attributes: the discus, the conch, a small spherical object like a ?pearl between the thumb and the forefinger, and a small conical, pear-shaped container in the hand on his lap. To the left side of the king is a male figure in royal attire, seated in the ceremonial position (one knee raised) on a decorated lower base. He holds one arm on his chest, in a position of veneration; possibly he is a king or a court's member. At his left, the trunk of a tree is tied with a ribbon. At the sides, and below these two personages are several women in the traditional costume of court's girls with high pointed (usually 3 points) *mukuta*; they carry offerings to the god, lotus buds and flowers' branches. Some of them seem to be moving at a dancing pace, thus belonging to the troupe of the dancing girls which was part of the royal palace or temple's apanage.

The **lower pseudo-register**, sculpted all along the base of the wall, includes a row of crowned *gopis*: to the right of the viewer there are dancing girls, as above. To the left, through a difficult reading, one can barely see two richly dressed personages amongst animals (? cattle) peacefully at rest in the forest. At the centre, there is a curious figure of a girl seated on a branch of a low tree. The left is a small group of 3 animals: a lion, a lioness, and a young? deer, quietly watching he scene.

The usual storm of flying *apsaras* is sculpted in the **topmost part of the relief**.

On the **pillar to the right of the window** are sculpted 3 superimposed pseudo-registers representing dancing girls wearing the characteristic three-pointed *mukuta*. A mountain with sparse trees makes the background.

3. GENERAL COMMENTS

1) There are no doubts that in this relief we are dealing with a story of Krishna while he was still involved with the cowherds and their wives, the *gopis*, because of the presence of cattle in the left lower part of the composition. Furthermore, a group of *gopis* in a state of excitement could only be found in one of the above episodes narrated in the text; however, it is not possible to decide to which specific chapter the relief refers for the lack of visual details. Moreover, Krishna is represented in a very formal way, enthroned as Vishnu, in a hieratic attitude, observing or giving a sermon, flanked by his brother Balarama.

In the iconography of Angkor Wat and the best know Khmer temples, Krishna is never depicted playing the flute or dancing, as he should be if illustrating the text, like in this occasion: instead, he is either sitting in hieratic position, or slaying an enemy. Perhaps the Khmers were not interested in the sensual aspect of the god, but only in his metaphysical essence, emphasising the allegorical meaning of the story (see the interpretation chapter in Part II). This conventional presentation would explain the presence, in this relief, of his brother Balarama, whose attendance to the *Rasalila* is not mentioned in the original text. Both have attained late youth and Krishna is at the centre of his cult and therefore he is identified with Vishnu.

2) The episode of the *Rasalila* happens shortly after the *gopas* (male cowherds) have announced Krishna's divinity (chapter 28): the god is the one who embodies in every Yuga, the son of the Lord of Wealth, therefore called Vasudeva, and the equal-to and part-of Vishnu. Also after Indra (chapter 25) named him 'Govinda'. This may explain why, in this relief, Krishna is illustrated in the form of Vishnu and not as the cowherd. His representation in Vishnu's form may help in diminishing the sexual connotation of the story. Krishna moves between two levels of existence, the human and the divine. What seems a miracle to men is simply a display of his divine nature. Paradoxically, it is through tricks and miracles that the god Krishna continuously reveals the ultimate unity of existence.

3) The layout of this relief is in pyramidal form, the presence of Vishnu at the top of it strongly emphasised by the beautiful large triangular tree³² under which the god is sitting. The personages are symmetrically arranged and present body gestures directed towards Vishnu, guiding the gaze of the viewer towards that focal point.

4) With regard to the layout of the composition, in this relief - like in the one of 'Shiva appearing in the Pine Forest'- the arrangement of personages is quite chaotic. This is due to the display of excitement of the women for their god, their fervent devotion (*bhakti*), before organising themselves into a circular pattern required for the *Rasa lila*. They seem to be moving towards Krishna, in small groups, as elements of a series of frames arranged in some temporal sequence. The layout converges towards Krishna immobile under the tree, the centre of symmetry and the top of the pyramidal composition. The narrative continues uninterrupted in the wall beside the window, the elements being the same, and not separated in registers.

³² The beautiful tree under which Krishna is seated may be the "Nipa tree" mentioned in the text at chapter 22 on which he climbed, after having stolen the girls' clothes. Part of the garments may still be attached to the trees behind Balarama.

N. 12 - RAMA KILLING KABANDHA

Location: north-western corner pavilion, wall over the lintel of the south door (Pl.14).

1. THE TEXT

The story to which this relief probably refers is narrated towards the end of the 3rd book of the *Ramayana* (*Aranya Kanda*), chapters 69-71 of Shastri's edition, and in Pollock's³³ translation, chapters 65-69.

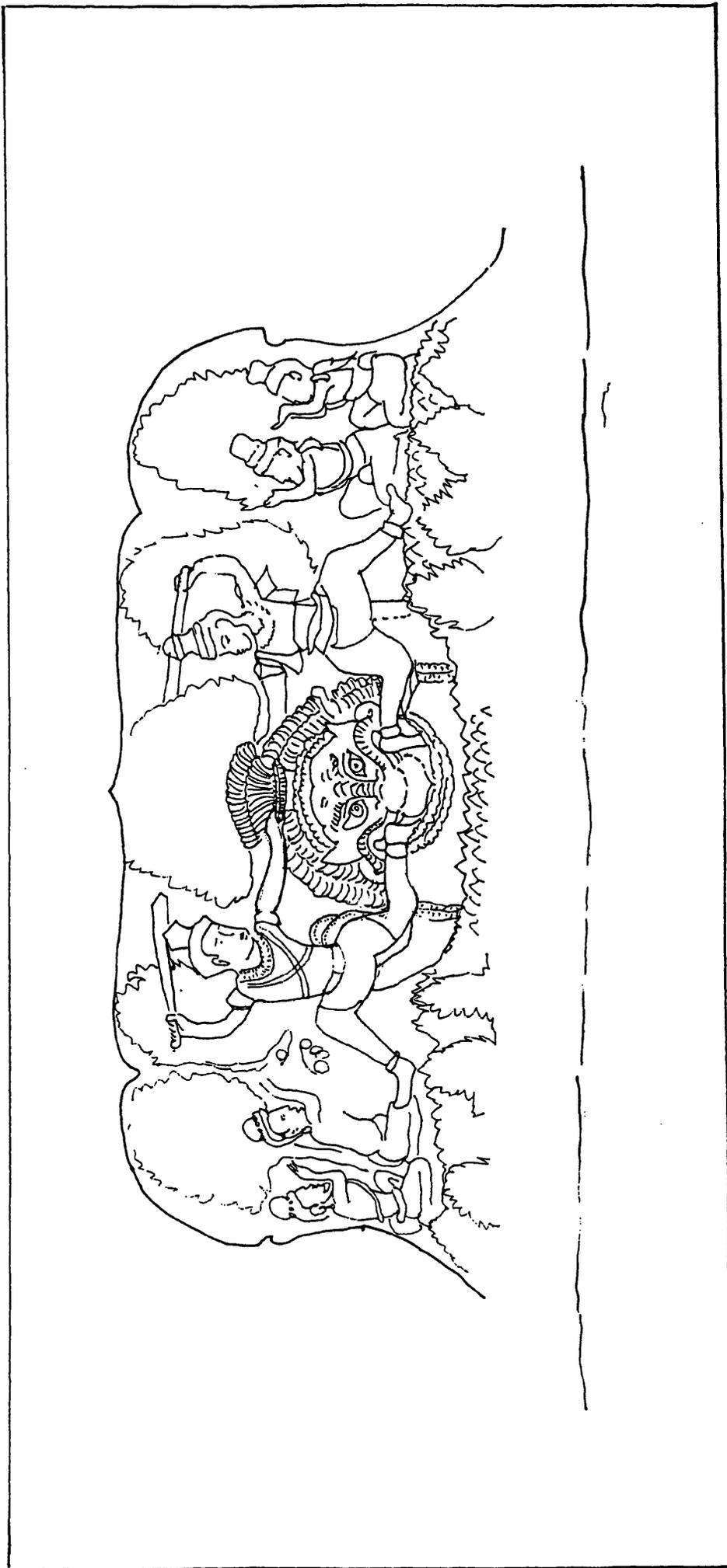
One day, in their search for Sita, Rama and Lakshmana enter the thick woodlands of the Krauncha forest to reach the hermitage of Matanga. There they meet another gigantic monster, the huge *rakshasa* Kabandha. He has the unique hideous features of being without head or neck, his face set in his belly, covered with bristling hairs. His single terrible eye with thick lids opens on his chest, and the mouth which he is licking, has massive lips and fangs.

The dreadful ogre grabs Rama and Lakshmana with his huge arms, holding them with all his strength. In distress, the two brothers insult him, making him angry, but at the right moment they cut off with their swords the *rakshasa*'s arms at the shoulders: Rama cuts the right arm and Lakshmana the left. Mortally wounded, Kabandha asks the brothers who they are. In hearing the answer, he rejoices realising that they are his salvation for the reasons he will tell in his story.

He is the *danava* Danu who, having received from Brahma the boon of longevity, one day challenged Indra to a fight. The great god, however, hurled his powerful mace on him thrusting his thighs and head into his body. Not only had Indra done this, but he had also extended Kabandha's arm over four miles and placed a mouth with sharp teeth in his belly. Later, when disturbing and frightening a great *rishi*, he was told that he would regain his original beautiful form when Rama would sever both his arms. Thereafter, he had been wandering in the forest waiting for Rama.

Having revealed his story, Kabandha tells Rama that if he puts an end to his life and cremates him performing thus a consecration by fire, in a pact of friendship he will tell them who is acquainted with Ravana. The two brothers proceed to conduct the ogre's ceremonial cremation. When Kabandha, freed from his horrible body, is rising to the sky, he tells them that the only person who can help them is the mighty Sugriva, king of the monkey tribe, who had been exiled by his brother Valin, and was currently wandering on Mt. Rishyamuka. They must hurry to him and conclude an alliance that will lead to Sita's liberation. Then, Kabandha, having regained his pristine beauty, enters the sky.

³³ In R.P. Goodman, *The Ramayana of Valmiki*, Volume III, Princeton University Press, 1991



N.12 - Rama killing Kabandha

2 . THE VIEWING

The usual flat-shaped space of this pediment delimits a horizontal space in which the story is told in a single register.

At the centre is the large hideous face of an ogre protruding from a body with two large robust arms. The face has two large eyes, a nose like a short tusk, a very large mouth touching the ears, with massive teeth and a pendulous tongue. The ears are pointed and all the whole head is covered with thick bristles or scales which, at the top, are grouped in a large chignon. Kabandha's body emerges from the ground at the level of his shoulders; with his two strong arms he is grabbing two smaller figures. His hands, barely evident in the relief, are pulling the two heroes by waist, at the back of the sampot, towards his big mouth, so that he can devour them.

Rama and Lakshmana, look very similar. From the text we know that Rama was at the right side of the monster, so he could cut his right arm; Lakshmana is therefore the one at his left side (right side of the viewer). They both hold a sword high, ready to release the terrible blow that will sever massive Kabandha's arms. With the other arm they grab the monster by the ribbon which keeps his hair together in a tuft; one each of the two brothers' legs is very close to the monster's mouth. At each side of the two brothers are two seated personages, kneeling with raised arms, in a praying gesture. They are ascetics, judging from the small goatee and high chignon, probably belonging to the nearby hermitage of Katanga.

The scene happens in a dense forest, noticeable for the presence of a fruit-tree behind Rama, and of a symmetric branching tree just behind Kabandha's head, which looks like being part of him. In the foreground, small animals graze in the forest. Kabandha's arms and head emerge from a rocky ground.

3. GENERAL COMMENTS

Doubts have been raised on the identity of the *rakshasa* depicted here because the description given in the original text does not agree with what is represented in the relief. Mannikka³⁴ believes that the monster is not Kabandha, but Viradha, and that Coedes in 1911 may have taken the giant head of Viradha for the stomach of

³⁴ Mannikka E., *Angkor*, 1996, p.182 and 319.

Kabandha. The discussion below will explain why I believe that Coedes' was right, the monster being Kabandha.

By looking in detail at the monster of the relief, one can notice that he does not have the features described in the text for Kabandha (see above). He does not have the features of Viradha either, the villain who attempted to abduct Sita (relief N.6 in the same corner pavilion), who the text describes having a face with sunken eyes, huge mouth, pointed ears and deformed belly. Therefore, the particulars of both monsters are not represented literally in either relief. If the depiction of the monster's heads is not a criterion to define who is who in the reliefs, one has to refer to the action that is taking place in the scene. In the text, Rama and Lakshmana chopped off with their swords Kabandha's arms, while they 'broke' the arms of Viradha after having transfixing him with bundles of arrows. In the relief under discussion, Rama and Lakshmana are depicted holding swords, not bows and arrows; on the contrary, in the lintel representing Viradha (N.6), the two brothers are seen energetically pulling the strings of their mighty bows. Moreover, here the monster seems to be in the process of eating one leg each of the two heroes, which relates to what said in the text (Pollock, 65-66). Kabandha did warn them he is tormented by hunger, and because they have entered his domain, they are going to be his prey. In conclusion, it is Kabandha who is represented here. In the layout of the relief discussed in here, the elements are arranged with such a perfect symmetry that they seem to be mirror images.

Part I - Chapter 4**NARRATIVE RELIEFS FROM OTHER SITES OF THE TEMPLE**

The specific objective of this thesis is the analysis of the narrative reliefs from the two western corner pavilions in order to understand how they contribute to the creation of a religious-social meaning and reflect Khmer vision of reality at the time of the building of Angkor Wat. This can not be achieved without considering narrative reliefs from other parts of the temple within the context of its architectural rhetoric. The relief's examples chosen are, in my opinion, contemporaneous to the construction of the temple, the few exceptions being clearly pointed out. The analysis must include the famous large panels of the 3rd enclosure, the sculptural reliefs of the walls of the galleries, the lintels, and the pediments. This can only be done, here, in a summary way, considering their large number in this colossal temple.

4.1. MAIN ENTRANCE (Western gopura) AND GOPURAS OF THE 4TH ENCLOSURE

Four entrance pavilions, or gopuras, provide access to the enormous Angkor Wat complex, of which the area between the 4th and the 3rd enclosure was functioning also as a city¹, or part of it.

The western entrance gopura (or Western Gopura), which is the main entrance because the temple is opening to the west, is almost 235 m long, the exact geometric projection of the temple facade². It is composed of a central towered sanctuary flanked by 2 subsidiary towered sanctuaries, each leading to long corridors with walls without windows to the east, and two parallel rows of pillars supporting a corbeled vaulting to the west. The corridors end with a false door before the distal gateway, not having thus the function of connecting the

¹ Jacques C., *Angkor, Cities and temples*, Thames & Hudson, 1997, p.156

² Groslier B.Ph., *Angkor*, Arthaud, 1956 , p.97

central shrine to the gateways. At each of the distal ends of the Main entrance is a large gateway of cruciform plan, but without tower, meant for animals, carts, and riders on elephants. A room with two windows and a false door, probably a little shrine, follows it. The central shrine's access is marked by a lintel over the central door representing Vishnu *Anantasayin* (Pl.16); at the opposite end, over the central exit door, another lintel depicts Vishnu on Garuda's shoulders (Pl.16) facing the *asura* Bana (for detailed description, see 4.7). Most of the door jambs of the inner shrines carry nicely executed tapestry reliefs; particularly noticeable is the one between the central and the southern shrine (Coedes 91 P; see page 155). The long galleries are not decorated with narrative reliefs, but the wall carries a continuous frieze of dancing *apsaras* (40-50 cm high) wearing the three-pointed *mukuta* and a long flapping sarong. The gateway's walls have some of the most refined and delicate tapestry reliefs (see photo of Pl.31) and refined floral moulding of Angkor Wat. At the back, on the side facing the temple, all the walls are decorated by a continuous frieze of guardians standing on the back of mythological animals (horses, lions, dragons, etc.) brandishing a club or a sword, flanked by two Garuda-like animals. The lot is framed within a multilobate triangular space, part of a larger theme of foliate scrolls emerging from a *kala* mouth; many *apsaras/devatas* are also sculpted, probably the most elegant of all the temple. The other gopuras giving access to the temple, are located to the north, east, and south; they have a sanctuary on either side of the entrance and are of relatively modest dimensions, about 60 m long, and can only be entered on foot. Although the inner side seems bare and unfinished, outside, the main pediments of the main doors carry important low-reliefs (Pl.24, top).

The exceptional quality of Angkor Wat 's gopuras, is meant to introduce the visitor to a separation from earthly affairs before entering into the supernatural world of the gods. In architectural terms, it reflects the Vedic 'rite of passage' known as *diksha*, which consisted in breaking certain taboos placed upon the normal conduct of the worshipper so as to create a psychological separation from his habitual concern³. In particular, the Western gopura demarcates a place where the devotee could prepare himself for the religious experience of the shrine, and

³ Maxwell, *The gods of Asia*, 1997, p.15

experience of the divine (called *darshana*, 'seeing'). As Mannikka⁴ suggested, the high standard of the inner and outer decoration of the gateways' complex of the western gopura attests to the ritual and spiritual importance that the Khmers must have paid to this type of passageway.

4.2. THE LARGE PANELS OF THE GALLERY OF THE 3RD ENCLOSURE

The reliefs' themes.

Although all the stories narrated have been identified, there are no Khmer inscriptions elucidating the meaning of the eight important reliefs' panels from the galleries of the 3rd enclosure. Here I will list their themes as accepted by most scholars⁵.

1. Western gallery, south wing. *The Battle of Kurukshetra* (single panel circa 50 m long). This relief depicts the decisive confrontation in the plain of the Kuruk between the Kauravas and the Pandavas. Amongst the latter, Arjuna is assisted by Krishna who recites the famous sermon reported in the *Bhagavad Gita*.
2. Southern gallery, West wing. *The Historic Procession* (single panel over 100 m long). Identified by a small inscription with the posthumous name of *Paramavishnuloka*, King Suryavarman II himself is represented on the royal throne, at the top of mount Shivapada, giving solemn audience and royal orders, and then - for the second time - in the middle of his troops, leading a formal procession⁶.

⁴ Mannikka E., *Angkor Wat, Time, space and kingship*, Univ. of Hawaii, 1996, p.70-75.

⁵ For details and full illustration of these large panels, please see Le Bonheur A., *Of Gods, Kings and Men*, with photographs by J.Poncar, Serindia, 1995. For the two reliefs of the NE quadrant (5 and 6), please consult the exhaustive work of Giteau M., *Iconographie du Cambodge post-angkorien*, Publications de l'EFEO, Paris, 1975

3. Southern gallery, East wing. *The Heavens and Hells* (single panel c.60 m long). Inscriptions on the reliefs indicate that the upper two registers of this relief depict people leading towards the heavens while the lower one leads to the hells where sinners will parade in front of Yama, the god of time and death, and sentenced by Dharmā⁷.
4. Eastern gallery, South wing. *The Churning of the Ocean of Milk* (single panel c.50 m long). This is the depiction of the creation myth. Vishnu, at the centre of the panel, stands on Mt. Mandara, that serves as the central pivot⁸ supported by the turtle Kurma (Vishnu's second avatar) wearing a small crown, controlling the churning operation by the *devas* and *asuras*, who are pulling the great naga snake Vasuki acting as the rope around Mt. Mandara. This action takes place in order to obtain the elixir of immortality, the *amrita*.
5. Eastern gallery, North wing. *The Victory of Vishnu over the asuras* (single panel c.50 m long). This is the story of the battle of Vishnu, mounted on Garuda, alone against the hordes of *asuras* who wanted to steal the *amrita*.
6. Northern gallery, East wing. *The Victory of Krishna over the asura Bana* (single panel c.60 m long)⁹. In the relief the scene starts with Garuda, carrying Krishna on his shoulders, appearing in the middle of a great army of *devas* fighting against the *asura* Bana, the eldest son of Bali, with one thousand arms. It is interesting to note that Krishna is represented as Vishnu with 8 arms and 10 heads, and that Bana has 24 arms, all unusual numbers for Khmer iconography.
7. Northern gallery, West wing. *The battle between the devas and the asuras* (single panel over 100 m long). This is a representation of the cosmic battle between the gods and the demons, which was necessary

⁶ A small inscription below each of them names the main personages taking part to this procession. They have been translated and explained by Etienne Aymonier in "*Le Cambodge*", Leroux, Paris, 1904, Vol. III, p.247

⁷ *Ibidem*, p.265

⁸ This is the only representation of the mountain with a phallic shape, and not as the usual pole or post.

⁹ Although in this battle the highest degree of cruelty is depicted by the largest number of cut off heads, feelings of compassion and camaraderie are depicted by soldiers kneeling close to dying or wounded companions, to comfort them.

for the restoration of righteousness and order in the universe. All the great gods of the Hindu pantheon attend in procession, riding their traditional mounts, including Shiva, Brahma, Skanda, Surya, and the *ashtadikpalas* (sentinels of the eight directions) with Indra, Varuna, Vayu, Yama and Kubera.

8. Western gallery, North wing. *The Battle of Lanka* (single panel c.50 m long). This is the story of the great battle between Rama's army of monkeys, led by Hanuman, against the forces of Ravana, the *rakshasa* king of Lanka.

The reading order of the large panels.

We do not have any evidence on the customs of the Khmers with regard to the way their temples should have been visited. It is known, however, that in India, where processions honouring a deity are an important part of the temple's activity, the movement generally takes place from the inner and darkest part to the most open and outer part of the temple. Alternatively, it may proceed with a circumambulation following a clock-wise direction (keeping the temple to the right), the so-called *pradakshina* direction. For funerary processions, even in modern times, the opposite direction (anti-clockwise) is followed, the so-called *prasayva* direction.

With regard to the study of Angkor Wat, we do not know if, when the temple was in use, the galleries of the 3rd enclosure were accessible to the public, or were restricted to the initiate and the elite. Moreover, it may be that Indian rules were not followed due to different religious and monastic Khmer traditions, or different rituals. Architectural features like the very high steps which separate the various galleries, the massive doors which separate them from the corner and intermediate pavilions, and the probably large amount of statues which were filling some rooms of the galleries would have made a processional sequence very arduous, if not impossible.

Another element to be considered for the visiting order is that the temple was not finished during the life of the Suryavarman II. This is evidenced by the

fact that out of the 8 large sculptural panels of the gallery of the 3rd enclosure, ~~probably~~ only six were completed when the sovereign was alive. They are: Battle of Kurukshetra, Battle of Lanka, Historic Procession, Heavens and Hell, Churning of the Ocean of Milk, and Battle between *devas* and *asuras*. There is some doubt if the panel with the Historic Procession was part of the finished ones; the inscription '*Paramavishnuloka*' ('He who has reached the realm of the Supreme Vishnu'), implying that the king was dead, engraved under his image, was added after the completion of the relief¹⁰. Furthermore, *Paramavishnuloka* - besides being the posthumous name of the king - it may simply refer to the king being an *avatara*, even in his lifetime, of Vishnu on earth.

As mentioned above, the remaining two large panels of the north-eastern quadrant have been sculpted much later, in the 16th century when king Ang Chan I (and later his son) restored monuments of the area of Angkor, after almost two centuries of neglect¹¹. The reason why these two wings of the 3rd enclosure had been left unsculpted is a matter of speculation. It is most likely that, after the king's death, there was no motivation from the part of a new king to complete the temple of his predecessor: he would rather build his own state-temple. Moreover, he re-introduced the supremacy of Shiva, and the Vaishnava followers of Suryavarman II may have run out of funds.

In the above description I have followed the reading path dictated by the compositional movement of the scenes depicted in the panels. As one enters the 3rd enclosure gallery from the western entrance, one is compelled to proceed to the right and follow the narrative action's flow of the Battle of Kurukshetra (counter-clock wise), and search the final outcome of the fighting. The visitor would be discouraged to turn left, when entering the 3rd enclosure, because it would be arduous to read the panel of the Battle of Lanka against the action's flow. In this relief, the monkeys of Rama's army are battling from left to right (counter-clock wise) as they engage Ravana's 5 troops. After the Battle of Kurukshetra, one

¹⁰ Jacques, personal communication

¹¹ Coedes G., *La date d'exécution des deux bas-reliefs tardifs d'Angkor Vat*, Journal Asiatique, fasc.2, 1962, p.235

continues the reading in the next gallery where the scenes of the Historic procession and Heavens and Hells follow a compositional pattern from left to right, counter-clock wise. This pattern continues, more or less evident, for the rest of the 3rd enclosure, until the final panel of the Battle of Lanka. In fact, in the gallery of the eastern side, the counter-clock wise movement is not evident, since in the panel of the Churning of the Ocean of Milk, the composition is static and completely symmetric. According to Mannikka¹², however, the counter-clock direction is suggested through the symbolism of the spring equinox (see comments in the following pages) when the sun begins to travel counter-clockwise around the earth. In the panel that follows, that of the Victory of Vishnu over the *asuras*, there is no directional movement as a whole, but a chaotic melee of fighting people. It is, however, in temporal succession to the episode of the churning, because it deals with the fight Vishnu had to sustain in order to get back the *amrita*, produced by the churning, from the *asuras* who were trying to steal it. In the northern gallery the battle scenes unfold in the same counter-clock wise fashion, as the hero protagonists move from east to west attacking their enemies in both the Victory of Krishna over the *asura* Bana and of the Battle of the *devas* and *asuras*.

In conclusion, the direction indicated by the compositional movement of the scenes depicted in the panels is also the reading direction needed for the understanding of their meaning and for the construction of a narrative cycle. It is a counter-clock direction that corresponds to the Indian/Khmer *prasavya* direction, considered to be the funerary direction for visiting a temple.

The narrative cycle of the large panels

Both Bosch¹³ and Mannikka¹⁴, who emphasised in the reliefs the role of Vishnu as a solar divinity, attributed particular importance to the an anti-clock wise direction of reading needed in order to visualise a possible narrative cycle. If

¹² Mannikka E., *Angkor*, 1996, p.129

¹³ BEFEO, 32, 1933, p.1-71

¹⁴ Mannikka E., *Angkor Wat*, Univ. of Hawaii, 1996

for Bosch Vishnu's reliefs must have followed a symbolic iconographic cycle of dawn, apogee (noon), and sunset, for Mannikka, on the contrary, the cycle was purely astronomical, as I will discuss here below.

According to Bosch, the reading of the reliefs should start from the Churning of the Ocean of Milk (considered in India an auspicious start) because it is the point when the jewel Kaustubha comes into the sun king's (Vishnu) possession allowing him to govern on earth as the *chakravartin*. The Churning would then be a metaphor for the beginning of the rule of the Khmer king as a *chakravartin*. To this follows the relief of the various battles of Vishnu/Krishna against the *asuras* ~~and *devas*~~ which were equivalent to the wars of the king against his enemies in Cambodia and outside (the Chams and the Dai Viet). Then, the Battle of Lanka, the triumph of Rama against evil forces, is also comparable to the king's battles; this comparison, actually, would elevate the king's rather modest wars to the rank of the epic battles. The battle of Kurukshetra - continues Bosch - is one of the conclusive events of the solar path of the king. It is possible that in Cambodia, like in Java, this battle was taken to signify the end of the sun-king, and therefore understood as a sinister and unfortunate event. For this reason it had to be sculpted in the southern 'region' of the temple consecrated to the dead. Bosch acknowledges that the last two panels of the cycle are difficult to fit within a solar path, because the Historic procession seem to be a real military event, an important secular procession, and the Heavens and Hells story does not include Vishnu or the King.

To explain the former, Bosch argues that, since the posthumous name of *Paramavishnuloka* is inscribed under the king's image, the scene must refer to an event of the kingdom of the dead. The procession is the solemn 'descent' march of the army, commanded by the deceased king, towards the last judgement represented in the next panel of Heavens and Hells. This panel is even more problematic because it does not have depictions of the king or Vishnu. However, the interconnection between the two panels can resolve the problem. In the Heavens and Hell, while the sinners are placed in hell to expiate, the loyal lords who served and followed the king are elevated to heavens in groups of 19, corresponding to the number of the ministers and vassals of the Historic

procession. The twentieth, the king himself is represented, not as Paramavishnuloka, but as Yama, the king of the death. The ideal king of Indian literature and inscriptions is often accompanied by Yama or Yudhishtira, the Dharmaraja by excellence, and is therefore identifiable with the concept: deceased king = supreme judge, king of the dead. Moreover, in the *Mahabharata* it is said that once Vishnu took the role of Yama.

Bosch concluded that being the king present in all reliefs under one form or another, the cycle was complete. It started with the churning, the dispersing of the demons of darkness followed by the apogee of Lanka's battle. It initiated to decline with the Kurukshetra battle, and reached its natural end in the kingdom of the dead, from where he re-emerges to be deified as Vishnu and adored at the Vishnuloka in the central tower of Angkor Vat.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, also Mannikka¹⁵ has proposed hypothesis based on the solar concept of Vishnu, and for her as well, the relief panel illustrating the Churning of the Ocean of Milk is particularly significant.

In it, the sun and the moon, Surya and Chandra, are depicted inside a large disc on each side of the churning pivot, and their meaning requires quite a knowledge of astronomy. On the day of the winter solstice (around Dec.22nd) the sun is at its southernmost position in the sky; it starts to move northward until June 21st, the summer solstice day, to its northernmost point in the sky. This north-south and south-north solar oscillation ranges between 49 and 43 degrees, and the moon oscillates between north-south extremes across the celestial equator in an arc that can reach an average of 54 degrees. Clearly these numbers are venerated in Cambodia as they were in Indian astronomy. The 54/54 pairing of the number of *devas* and *asuras* involved in the Churning may have been inspired by the latter number. The pulling of the snake Vasuki causes the sun and moon to move back and forth, north and south, each year covering a 54-degree maximum arch every 6 months. In the relief the position of the pivot corresponds to that of the spring equinox. The 91 *asuras* (counted in the relief) in the south represent the 91 days from equinox to winter solstice, and the 88 northern *devas* represent the 88 days

from equinox to summer solstice (in fact there are 88 devas aligned in the relief). The northernmost *deva* would represent the summer solstice day, and the southernmost *asura* would correspond to the winter solstice day. The 3 oversize figures depicted on each side of the pivot (Mt. Mandara) divide the churning scene into six segments representing the 6 months between December 22 and June 21. One large figure holds the snake's head, another the tail; each represent the solstice days. The period of the solstices is also expressed in terms of days: the total of 180 *devas* and *asuras*, plus 3 days symbolised by the churning pivot at the spring equinox centre of the relief add up to 183 days between solstices (182 if the *deva* on top of Mt. Mandara is excluded). Both numbers are correct, depending on the year, thus $183+183 = 366$ days, one leap year; $183+182 = 365$, a normal year. This scene is thus a calendar. The king himself is directly tied to the symbolism of the solstice-equinox movement and to the Churning of the Ocean of Milk. He is like an equinox but rather than being at the centre of time and in space between solstices, he is at the centre of his realm, with the central sanctuary tower of the temple being the conceptual centre of the capital and the nation.

The special importance for the Khmers of the legend of the Churning, is further emphasised, according to Mannikka, by the calculation the architects of Angkor Wat have made to allow the sun to illuminate the protagonists of the relief's story during specific times of the year¹⁵. During the winter and summer solstice periods at Angkor Wat, clearly distinguishable shafts of light bracket each side of Mt. Mandara and Vishnu at the centre. In effect, the two solstice shafts flank the Churning scene as they flank the centre of the Battle of Kurukshetra. Because the special shaft of light reaches (one a year) also the central of the three oversize *asura* (with many heads and 20 arms, formerly believed to be Ravana), Mannikka hypothesises that this must be another incarnation of Vishnu, his *asura* manifestation, to assist in the churning efforts. As a consequence of this, the oversize personage amongst the *devas* with the head-dress of an *asura*, must be the *deva* manifestation of Vishnu (instead of Vibhishana, Ravana's brother, as

¹⁵ Mannikka E., *Angkor*, 1996, p.36 and 161

¹⁶ Mannikka E., *ibidem*, p.162

suggested by Le Bonheur¹⁷). Mannikka's has extended her theories, of which I have given only two examples here, to most of the other 7 large relief panels to come up with an astronomical-cosmogonical cycle.

Symbolism of the large panels

In my opinion, besides the astronomical point of view, the meaning of the reliefs can be understood through an iconological and visual semiotic approach. This approach would disclose that the reliefs' themes are a paradigm of metaphors needed by the Khmer king to assert his kingship. In this instance, the Historic procession would become a metaphor of the assertion and acceptance of the supremacy of the king, of the loyalty needed by his ministers, generals and army. The Heavens and Hells relief which follows, if read in continuity of narrative, may symbolise the rightfulness of loyalty to the king, since his 19 ministers - seen in the Historic procession - may be the 19 personages comfortably being in the Heavens. The main meaning may be, however, the acceptance of one's own *karma* and of being judged for earthly deeds by the king of the dead, Yama. In both instances, it is a king who explicates his rightful power, both in life and after death, highlighting the intimate association between secular and divine power.

In the Churning of the Ocean of Milk one could read the establishment of order out of chaos and the primal act of creation out of separation. Would this refer to Suryavarman II's successful attempt of uniting the various overlords, the small separated 'kingdoms' of 12th century Cambodia?

The remaining five large panels depict great battles: two of epic type, that of Kurukshetra and of Lanka, which symbolise the victory over evil forces and the reestablishment of lawful order with the assistance or the guidance of Vishnu, respectively manifested as Krishna and Rama. The three other battles scenes are of mythological type, of Vishnu against the *asuras*, of Krishna with the *asura* Bana, and of the *devas* against the *asuras*, again indicative of the supreme power of Vishnu and his victorious mission to re-establish the divine law and order.

¹⁷ Le Bonheur A., *Angkor. Temples en peril*, Paris, Herscher, 1989, p.176

The Khmer kings, from the teaching of royal brahmins would not have had much difficulty in identifying themselves and their lives with those of personages from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, with their heroic princes and warriors practising asceticism to win divine support, and ferocious fights against evil forces in order to re-establish order. The epic world would have been mirrored in Khmer experience, with its series of small 'kingdoms' and their collapses, and the wars against the perennial enemies, the Chams and the Dai Viet; at the same time they were stressing the necessity of establishing alliances. The religious texts were also metaphors for temporal beliefs, insofar as the kings were identifying themselves with the gods, and their righteous deeds equated to those of Rama or Vishnu, and their enemies with the *asuras* and *rakshasas*.

From the devotional point of view, out of the 8 panels, 5 are attributed to Vishnu, 2 to old legends, one on the origins. They are narrating mythological themes, with the exception of one with a historic character (Historic Procession), and another dealing with the after-life.

4.3. CRUCIFORM CLOISTER

The cruciform cloister¹⁸ is the spacious ceremonial hall, with a cruciform plan, located in the western part of the temple, between the 3rd and the 2nd enclosure; almost certainly it was used to officiate rituals and ceremonies. Towards the end of each of the double pillared galleries of the cross, is a doorway with a large lintel flanked by two narrower doorways with half pediments. The lintels represent, to the west, the Churning of the Ocean of Milk; to the south, Vishnu resting on Ananta; to the east, Vishnu's three strides (*Trivikrama*), and, to the north, the battle between Vishnu and the *asuras*. To both sides of each doorway is a half pediment; unfortunately, the majority of them have been completely eroded, although four are still readable. In the northern arm of the

¹⁸ The French archaeologists and historians have been using the term "Preau cruciform^e" or "Preau en croix" for this particular site of the temple. In French, the word 'preau' refers the open space in the middle of the cloister of religious buildings; in secular architecture, it refers instead to the covered part of the court where people can walk protected from the rain. In both cases, the term

cross, over the western narrow door, is Krishna subjugating the *naga* Kaliya, while over the eastern narrow door is Krishna throwing in the air the bull-demon Aristha before killing it. In the western arm of the cross, over the southern narrow doorway is Krishna killing the demon horse Dhenuka (?or Kesin), while over the northern narrow doorway is the famous episode of Krishna's infancy, when he uproots the two *arjuna* trees, as already seen in the relief S.6, above a lintel of the SW corner pavilion.

First of all one can notice that in the Cruciform cloister, all the reliefs (still readable) deal with the myths of Vishnu and Krishna, Rama being excluded; secondly, that the lintels emphasise the symbolism of creation, altogether anticipating the reliefs of the main shrine (1st enclosure and main tower). The symbolism of the Churning of the Ocean of Milk I have explained for the panel of the eastern side of the gallery of the 3rd enclosure (see above) and for the relief S.1 of the SW corner pavilion. Suffice to say that it represents the primeval act of creation of order from chaos, besides that of the *amrita* (elixir of immortality). Another version of the creation-myth is that of Vishnu on Ananta. In fact, when Vishnu sleeps on this mythic snake, floating upon a shoreless ocean of eternity, from his actively dreaming mind emerges the template of the universe with its three elemental forms, as well as Brahma the architect of creation (see the relief N.1 of the NW corner pavilion).

In the light of the Vedic concept that 'to measure out, to spread, and to prop apart elements' of the universe, is to create¹⁹, also the myth of Vishnu taking three strides (*Trivikrama*) is a creation myth. In the *Vishnu Purana* it is narrated that once the god contracts his limbs to assume the shape of a dwarf in order to trick the demon Bali (note that we are not dealing with abstract concepts here, but with an individual demon). He challenges the demon-lord of the triple world, to give him the space of his kingdom he could cover in three steps. Having Bali condescended thinking he was only a dwarf, Vishnu regains his endless form and with 3 strides conquers earth, the sky and heaven, stealing the demon's three

Cruciform cloister, or Cross-shaped cloister, is appropriate for this Khmer architectural element.

¹⁹ Doniger O'Flaherty W., *Hindu Myths*, Penguin, 1975, p.175

worlds he had previously stolen away from Indra. He then sends Bali, his sons and grandsons to hell, and shatters other cruel monsters. The magic number three, which is woven into almost all of Hindu cosmology, appears here in Vishnu's 3 steps (*padas*).

The meaning of the myth of Vishnu *Trivikrama*, with the 3 chronologically progressive strides of the god, can also be seen as a reference to the evolution of life from physical to ethereal. Moreover, the strider himself would be the factor unifying space and time in the interconnected states of the tripartite universe²⁰. The rides are regarded as having taken place once at a point in mythological time; but this time is, from the mortal point of view, a continuous if not eternal instant. Life is seen to be born, exist and perish, but all within a continuum of such vast duration, that it seems to be an eternal present. The spatial aspect of the strides defines both the tangible world, Earth and atmosphere, contained within the first two strides, and the heavenly world - the glory of which could be seen in the brilliance of the sun - where Vishnu, its creator, lives in the company of Indra, king of the gods.

Finally, the lintel with Vishnu fighting against the *asuras* shows the god furiously attacking the two most devastating of them, Bana (with 10 arms) and Ravana (with 10 arms and 5 heads) in order to reintroduce on earth the peace and order that they had totally upset with their terrible actions.

4.4. THE MAIN SHRINE

The central mass of the temple was meant to be the home of Vishnu and the realisation of Mt. Meru. It carries the (first) enclosure gallery, with towers at the four corners, peripheral corridors, and axial corridors leading to the central tower-shrine where a colossal statue of Vishnu placed at its centre. Claude

²⁰ Maxwell T.S. *The gods of Asia*, Oxford University Press, Calcutta. 1997, p.78

Jacques believes that it may be the one with 8 arms now worshipped in the northern subsidiary pavilion of the main entrance centre.²¹

The central tower is at the intersection of the N-S and E-W axis, and is the point through which passes the vertical pole of the universe, represented here by the vertical well in which ritual offerings were buried (extending some 25m below the shrine's floor). Its symbolism reaches thus cosmic dimensions, well above the temporal one of being the centre of the kingdom and of the city.

Mannikka²² has introduced another level of meaning by suggesting that the central tower is symbolic of the Churning of the Ocean of Milk. This if one considers that the image of Vishnu inside the shrine is over the axis of the temple which is identified with the churning post, i.e. Mt. Mandara, with the turtle Kurma at its base (the top surface of the second enclosure). Moreover, the stone lotus capping of the central tower is equated with the lotus seat of Brahma over the central axis of Mandara, or to the top of the lotus stalk itself. At Angkor Wat, the churning scene would inaugurate the beginning of King Suryavarman II's rule and a new time-cycle, the *krita yuga*, of eternal righteousness. This propitious beginning is founded on the meaning of the axial lotus stalk that rose from Vishnu's navel as he created the universe, and everything that evolved from that point onward'. The symbolism of the main shrine would be connected, in this way, with that of the main entrance to the temple, where, above the central door of the Western gopura, is a lintel representing Vishnu creating the universe and Brahma, i.e. the primordial act of creation.

The tower's sanctuary doors were once open, and the existing 4 doors were walled in 14-15th century by Buddhist monks. Over each of the four large doors are lintels with reliefs of 9 gods; in the one facing west, Vishnu is represented at the centre, and - in total - 32 gods of Indian mythology are thus represented. Because of the architectural complexity of the central tower, there are stepping pediments and half pediments richly decorated with reliefs, mostly eroded and

²¹ *Angkor*, 1997, p.182 and fig pg. 156

²² Mannikka E., *Angkor*, 1996, p.81

badly preserved. In general they are sculpted deeper than the ones of other sites of the temple, and their simpler composition emphasises the main personage, for the need to be visible from far away.

The entire decoration of this imposing architectural element is quite extraordinary. The outside walls of the gallery are sculpted with a tapestry of medallions with mythological personages; the balusters of the windows are admirably chiselled and lathe-turned. The inner walls of the gallery are ornate with the most delicate low-reliefs of the tapestry type composed by interlacing thin ribbons. Those on the doors' jambs are of the floral type instead (chapter 4.9), with the exception of the doorjambs of the main doors of the central sanctuary, which have medallions with mythological personages. Most of the corridors' pillars carry reliefs of *apsaras/devatas*; the ones around the central shrine are slightly smaller in size than the one on the outer walls and of a unique refinement. Four roofed corridors along the axes N-S and E-W connect this gallery to the central tower dividing the first enclosure into 4 elements. At the centre of each axial corridor is a small porch over the steps leading to the sunken courtyard, which originally must have been decorated with a small lintel and a pediment. However, of the latter, only few are still in place after the repair work carried out over the time by kings and devotees who restored damaged parts or added missing elements. One can easily see how columns and pillars taken from other sites of the temple have been used for putting together lintels and pediments (Pl.27, left).

4.5. PEDIMENTS

In such a rich and complex architectural structure as that of Angkor Wat there are hundreds of pediments, double and half pediments over doors, porches and roofs' steps, all with carved low-reliefs; regrettably, most of them are in a poor state of preservation and others are completely ruined. On some of the best ones, Coedes²³ identified some narrative stories, of which 10 refer to the Ramayana, 18 to the legends of Krishna/Vishnu, including 4 of the god assisted

²³ Coedes G., *Etudes cambodgiennes: VII, Seconde etude sur les bas reliefs d'Angkor- Vat*, BEFEO, XIII, part 2, 1913.

by Garuda, 4 to generic battles between *devas* and *asuras* and one each devoted to Shiva, Brahma and Indra. With observations from fieldwork in Angkor Wat, comments on some of the best pediments with narrative reliefs are presented below.

1 - Pediments of the main shrine and first enclosure.

In the pediments of the main tower the main personages are sculpted deeper and on a larger scale than anywhere else in the temple. Three of the pediments refer to stories of victory over demonic personages. The one to the south, of Vishnu probably slaying his inimical uncle Kamsa with a double-edged axe (Pl.17, right) or -perhaps- Kaitabha and Madhu²⁴. The one to the east, of Krishna triumphant over *rakshasas* (Pl.17, left) and the one to the north, of Hanuman, above Ravana (depicted here with 10 heads but 2 arms), holding by the limbs two *rakshasas*, in an episode probably without any reference to a specific *Ramayana* story. The pediment to the west, possibly the most important, depicts Krishna lifting Mt. Govardhana.

The half pediments - instead - seems to illustrate various episodes of the *Ramayana* (Pl.25, right) and some stories of the life of Krishna. There are no reliefs with epic battle scenes in the main tower, but only on the small lintels of the galleries connecting it with the surrounding gallery. Here, the lintel facing east of the northern gallery represents Krishna on Garuda in a position that seems to be of confrontation with Indra on Airavata. If the reading is correct, we may be dealing with the episode of Krishna's combat with Indra for the possession of the Parijata tree.

The inner walls of the gallery carry delicate floral and ribbon tapestry reliefs, without personages, while the entire outside walls are carved, from base to top, with a magnificent tapestry made of large medallions with personages.

Each of the 4 corner-towers of the 1st enclosure have two imposing doorways each, opening on the staircase connecting the central sanctuary to the inner courtyard of the second enclosure. They have large pediments above lintels which are also beautifully carved (see below); unfortunately not all of the pediments are

in a good state of preservation, some being in fragments, making the reading and interpretation quite difficult. On the one from the SW corner-tower facing west, one can still see Krishna subduing the *naga* Kaliya. The one over the SE tower facing west depicts Vishnu seated amongst acolytes, while most of the remaining pediments seem to represent battle scenes between *devas* and *asuras*; *Ramayana* stories seem to be absent.

In conclusion, based on the reliefs which have survived, it seems that the main mass of the first enclosure and its magnificent central tower, are ornate with reliefs related to exploits of Vishnu and Krishna, while Rama's stories occupy a subsidiary position, being relegated only to half-pediments.

2 - Pediments of the second enclosure.

The second enclosure is made by a long rectangular gallery with towers at each corner, each with 2 doorways and staircases leading to the inner courtyard of the 3rd enclosure. There are two doors on the north side and south side of the gallery; the main doorway with its two subsidiary doorways, is on the western side, opening to the Cruciform cloister. All the pediments facing the second inner courtyard seem to be devoted to the *Mahabharata* and from the *Ramayana* (Pl.23, bottom). Battle scenes are common²⁵, possibly including that of Kurukshetra and of Lanka, with the dangerous wounding of Lakshmana by Indrajit (Pl.18). Surprisingly the *Ramayana's* episode of the death of Valin appears on two out of the 10 pediments on the second inner courtyard (Pl.s 19 and 23). The pediments above the doors of the towers, facing the inner courtyard of the 3rd enclosure, are quite majestic and sustained by large lintels; most of them are in a poor state of preservation or are unreadable. Noticeable are the ones of the SW corner facing W, and of the SE facing E, with an elaborate battle scene with heroic personages on horse-pulled chariots. A divine personage (or the king) holding a sword or a club, is represented seated above the central (axial) doorway of the eastern side of

²⁴ Horrible demons who - according to the *Mahabharata* and the Puranas - sprung from the ear of Vishnu while he was asleep at the end of a *kalpa*, and were about to kill Brahma, who was lying on the lotus coming out from Vishnu's navel.

²⁵ I have distinguished 3 types of battle scenes: mythological battles when attended by *devas*, *asuras* or *rakshasas*, *Ramayana* battles (mainly Lanka's battle) when monkeys are present, and *Mahabharata*, or generic battles, when attended only by humans.

the gallery of the second enclosure.

In conclusion it seems that the narrative reliefs of the second enclosure were addressed mainly to epic stories of Indian mythology (*Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*), with preference for scenes of fights and massive battles.

3 - Pediments of the third enclosure.

This enormous enclosure is defined by extensive rectangular galleries with corner pavilions and four entrances at the cardinal points, of which those to the west and to the east have two subsidiary doors each. No towers were build over any of these elements, but staggered, double and simple pediments ornate Them. The western doorway is the most important and it opens to the east on the Cruciform cloister which connects the 3rd to the 2nd enclosure; to the west it faces the main causeway coming from the Western gopura. By examining first the pediments of the 3rd enclosure gallery facing outwards, towards the open space of 4th enclosure, one can notice, in the southern side, the pediments with the story of Aniruddha prisoner of Bana, above the central door. Above the southern exit of the south-eastern corner pavilion, the Kaundinya legend (Pl.20, bottom) is possibly displayed. In the eastern gallery, one can see the large pediment on the central door, with Vishnu and Lakshmi (Pl.21, top) majestically enthroned above 3 rows of acolytes. Several half-pediments tell of the Ramayana: Ravana seated in his palace, Sita's abduction (Pl.26), Rama and Lakshmana resting in the forest in the company of monkeys (Pl.25, right), the killing of Valin (Pl.25, left). The half pediment of the southern subsidiary door narrates the story of Krishna killing the elephant Kuvalayapida; this was a colossal elephant, or a demon in elephantine form, belonging to Kamsa and sent by him to trample Krishna and Balarama.

In the northern gallery, above the central doorway is a pediment with a divinity (or a king) holding a peacock feather triangular fan; another pediment shows Vishnu on Garuda fighting Ravana. Most of the half pediments towards the western side, narrate Krishna's battles and Krishna lifting Mt. Govardhana (Pl.27, left); Rama appears on Hanuman's shoulders, fighting Ravana, or amongst monkeys.

On the western side, the NW corner pavilion's door is ornate with half pediments with a battle scene and with Sita resting under the acacia tree. Above the central

doorway is a large pediment representing a king riding an elephant (Pl.25, bottom); the doorway of the SW corner pavilion carries a pediment with an important personage on chariot.

Turning our attention to the few well preserved narrative reliefs of the 3rd gallery facing inside, towards its inner courtyard, one can observe a Shiva dancing above the door exiting to the south from the Cruciform cloister. There are also two interesting pediments above the western and eastern doors of the libraries, respectively depicting a Skanda riding a peacock (or Varuna a goose), and Kubera riding a horse. The several remaining pediments are in poor state of preservation or have been rebuilt with the available fragments; they are impossible to read.

In conclusion, from a superficial glance at the enormous gallery of the 3rd enclosure, it seems likely that mythological themes of the gods were sculpted mainly in the pavilions of the western and eastern entrance, while diverse episodes from the *Ramayana* are concentrated in the southern and northern side of the galleries. Events related (openly or symbolically) to the king's life may also be present, intercalated without an easily understandable program.

4 - Pediments of the 4th enclosure.

This is the outer enclosure of Angkor Wat, aligned along the large moat. Four gopuras allow access to the temple, and having already described the Main entrance above, I am discussing briefly in here the North, East and South doorways or gopuras. Very little is left of the pediments of the eastern and southern gopuras. In the latter one can observe a few half pediments with battle scenes and the western pediment with Rama on Hanuman' s shoulder at the battle of Lanka; in the northern, a half-pediment with Ravana seated in his palace. By far the best-preserved reliefs are to be found in the northern gopura. A beautiful Krishna lifting Mt. Govardhana is visible on the pediment facing the west, while Krishna trampling on a mass of monsters is sculpted over the southern door. In this pediment appears a type of demons totally different from the *rakshasas*. If the typology of the latter is very well known (human massive body, grimacing face with bulging eyes and typical hairstyle crowning the head), that of this new type is quite unusual; they are small being, with rounded childish face, bold or with a thin

bonnet. Because of this, they might represent the *daityas*, children of Diti and Kasyapa, genii enemies of sacrifices, always plotting against the gods. The *daityas* belong to the large family of the *asuras* which include-amongst others- the *danavas*, the *rakshasas* and some *nagas*. On the eastern pediment, Krishna is seen holding by the hair two *rakshasas*. Finally, the pediment that originally was over the northern door, is assembled on the ground, depicting Krishna on the shoulders of Garuda.

4.6. TAPESTRY RELIEFS

I will enter - in some detail - into the study of the so-called “tapestry reliefs”. Although these reliefs may seem of little significance compared to the large narrative reliefs from the corner pavilions and long galleries of Angkor Wat, they have several elements that makes them unique and particularly interesting. In a large percentage of cases, each medallion of the relief composing the “tapestry” contains an image that refers to a myth or a legend. This image is then combined horizontally and/or vertically with others to compose a short story. Each image, each unit, is like a word; combined in a logical way it creates a phrase, and the way in which the combination takes place respects certain rules, a syntax. The story is thus narrated in its essence, revealing the mastery of the designers to represent a story using only a few basic elements (medallions). They are short essential visual statements. When combined horizontally and vertically, they are like crosswords, an unique mental and visual exercise. To this exceptional aspect of communication tool, the tapestry reliefs add another feature. They present to the viewer the essential iconographic elements of each story’s protagonist. These can be used to identify or confirm personages and stories in reliefs from other sites of the temple. Furthermore, since they are reliefs of the narrative and not decorative type, they function as further contributors to the building of the narrative discourse of Angkor Wat.

Design of tapestry reliefs

In 1913, George Coedes, possibly the most acute interpreter of Khmer art and

history, called to attention some peculiar very low carved reliefs in the shape of a circular trellis, like medallions, decorating some wall pillars at Angkor Wat²⁶. These medallions range in diameter from 12 to 20 cm, and enclose figurines summarily defined or silhouetted personages, animals, flowers. They are interlaced with each other and cover entire walls, and the great majority of the doorjambs, simulating a "tapestry" decoration ("decor en tapisserie")²⁷. No inscription is associated with them.

Individually, each medallion of the tapestry shows a considerable variety of themes. The following subjects being the most common at the centre of the medallion: a man with a bow or a spear running after an animal, an un-armed man running, a princely man holding his sword or axe, mythological personages like Vishnu, Krishna, Rama and Balarama, Brahma, Indra, Airavata, etc. Also depicted are ascetics and cowherds by pairs, sometimes close to their animals, an animal in flight (or charging), single animals like horses, lions, deer, foxes, rabbits, boars²⁸, squirrels, rats, dogs, birds (including parrots and phoenixes). Finally, a mythological flower or a lotus is depicted, often with a personage which seems to pop out from the centre of the flower, or be seated on it. The medallions of the so-called elephants' doors of the Main entrance (Western gopura) are larger and include the characteristic figure of a man fighting a gigantic monster, something like a crossbreed between a bird and a dragon. It is interesting to notice that body of these animals merges into the trellis of the overlying medallion, in a transformation process typically evidenced by the so called *gana*²⁹. The latter are peculiar elements of Khmer iconography, where a human figure with crowned elephant head, transforms his trunk into the horse which he is riding!

²⁶ Coedes G., *Etudes cambodgiennes: VI^e seconde etude sur les bas-reliefs d'Angkor-Vat*, BFFE0, XIII, part 2, 1913, pp.17-21, 8 plates.

²⁷ This 'tapestry' decoration was introduced at Angkor Wat for the first time in Khmer art, and further used (J.Boisselier, 1966) at Bayon and in minor temples like Ta' Nei, Ta' Som and others. At Banteay Kdei it was executed on the roof of the vaults of half-galleries imitating the wood coffered ceilings with rosacea carvings, and later, to the blinds of the false doors (Vat Nokor, Ta' Prohm of Bati).

²⁸ The common appearance of the boar may refer to Vishnu's incarnation as the boar Varaha.

²⁹ A clear example is illustrated by C.Jacques in *Angkor*, Bordas, 1990, p.75, and by Suryavudh Suksvasti in *Stone Lintels in Thailand*, Muang Moram Publisher, Bangkok, 1988, p.35 (lintel from Prasat Muang Khaek, Thailand). More details on the *ganas* can be found in Smitthi Siribhadrara, *A comparative study of Khmer lintels in Thailand and Cambodia*, Modern Press, Bangkok, 1990, p.189.

When examined closely and the distinct medallions put together, one can read - as mentioned in the introduction - scenes or events, from short humorist stories (a man pursuing an animal which can be perceived also as chasing the man) to well known mythological stories. The best preserved illustrate: The Churning of the Ocean of Milk, Krishna uplifting Mt. Govardhana, Rama killing Marica, the abduction of Sita, the duel between Valin and Sugriva, Rama killing Valin, the alliance between Rama and Vibhishana, the meeting Hanuman-Sita and Trijata, Hanuman exchanging jewels with Sita, the Battle of Lanka, the ordeal of Sita, and so on.

From the analysis of Coedes' paper, it does come as a surprise to see that the legends of Vishnu/Krishna taken from the Puranas and *Harivamsa* are the most common (amounting to 58). There is an overwhelming number of representations (19) of the episode of the god lifting Mt. Govardhana offering divine protection, followed by those of Vishnu's fighting on the shoulders of Garuda (17) all sorts of enemies. In order of frequency follow the illustrations of events from the *Ramayana* (at least 39 occurrences), with the great majority depicting specific adventures of Rama (20) and his fights and alliances. A few (6) dedicated to Sita, her abduction, captivity in Lanka, and ordeal of fire; often the same topic re-occurs in different sites of the temple, emphasising its popularity and meaning. Amongst other Brahmanic stories, the ever popular Churning of the Ocean of Milk appears 5 times, the favourite Shivaite story of Arjuna and the *kirata* 3 times, while one tapestry relief seems to narrate the story of Shiva *Bhikshatanamurti*. Finally, on the walls surrounding the balustrad windows, the tapestry reliefs are always composed of two birds, parrots or phoenixes in circular movement holding each-other's beak.

Not all the reliefs of the tapestry type form narrative patterns. In fact their greatest percentage is composed by a single element (a man on a lotus flower or simply a lotus flower), or two elements, repeating themselves all over the doorjamb, like a decorative tapestry. I will conclude the discussion on the tapestry reliefs by asserting that all of them have been produced through the use of stencils; this is discussed in the following chapter.

The use of stencils for the making of reliefs

During my research on the temple, I had the chance to discover the original ink drawings of the medallions, on the top part of the doorjambs at the NW corner of the gallery of the 2nd enclosure (Pl.28). To my knowledge, previous authors have not mentioned this fact³⁰. The tapestry design of the medallions is clearly marked in permanent black ink³¹ revealing an accurate use of stencils. On these ink drawings, the sculptor would then have proceeded to chisel a low relief.

They are the original drawings, since they are the only ones that remained unsculpted from the long series of the medallions below on the same doorjamb; the medallion to the bottom right in the attached photograph clearly shows the sculpting of the scroll was initiated but then abandoned. At Angkor Wat, through the use of stencils, the sculptors could proceed quickly to sculpt, on standardised patterns, tapestry reliefs on almost all the doorjambs of the temple. The fast use of stencils is proved by some of them having been placed - and sculpted - upside-down, with the central personage topsy-turvy, as on the eastern jamb of the external door of the northern door of the central shrine (2P of Coedes)! This suggests that the technique of stencilled drawings may have been used for the production of all sculptural low-reliefs of the temple. This discovery may be the element needed to prove the theory that the large reliefs of the north-eastern quadrant of the 3rd enclosure³² - sculpted in the 16th century - were based on original drawings of the 12th century.

Description of some tapestry reliefs

With reference to the paper of Coedes³³, I have re-examined on location the tapestry reliefs. Since my photographs of tapestry reliefs do not have enough

³⁰ Roveda V., *The use of drawings for the making of the reliefs from Angkor Wat*, 7th International Conference European Association of Southeast Asian Archaeologist, Berlin, Oct. 1998

³¹ It would be interesting to make a chemical analysis of the ink or lacquer.

³² narrating the story of Vishnu's battle against the *asuras*, and Krishna's victory over the *asura* Bana

³³ Coedes G., *ibidem.* VI, p. 17-21

contrast (due to their poor lighting) to be easily readable, and because it has been impossible to make new ink-rubbings, I have to use here the eight excellent plates of Coedes's paper³⁴. Here below is a selection of some of the best example of narrative medallions (location indicated also in my map attached here).

The Churning of the ocean of Milk (Coedes plate I).

This scene appears on the southern doorjamb of the north-facing door between the NW corner pavilion and the gallery with the relief of the Battle of the *devas* and *asuras* (location 60 P of Coedes). Another specimen appears on the eastern jamb of the door of access to the SW corner pavilion, coming from the gallery with the relief of the Battle of Kurukshetra (82 P of Coedes). A poorly preserved example is also on the eastern door jamb of the south-eastern door exit of the SW corner pavilion (80 P of Coedes); in the last two cases the relief is facing west.

In 60 P one can see Vasuki (horizontal 4), the pivot made by Mt. Mandara (C 2-5), Vishnu (C3), Brahma (C2) flanked by two worshippers, the *devas & asuras* (horizontal 4), and the turtle Kurma (C⁵) behind which clearly appears the head of the goddess Shri and of the horse Uccaihsvara. There is also another head, just sketched, possibly that of the elephant Airavata. At the top, is the usual row of *apsaras* (horizontal 1), some of which (1 B,C,D) are represented frontally, flying in horizontal position, with the legs higher than the body, emphasising thus the large bosom. Medallions with seated worshippers and/or royal personages fill the rest of the composition. In this relief the reading follows a cross-shaped pattern, following the two axes made by Vasuki, as the rope for the churning, and the vertical post of Mt.Mandara. Once recognised, this composition stands out from the remaining unspecified decoration of the wall.

Arjuna and the kirata (Coedes' plate II).

This scene is located on the southern jamb of the highest central stepped doorway of the Cruciform cloister (35 P of Coedes). The action of the story is sculpted in

³⁴ The plates illustrate black ink-on white paper stamping, easier to see and read than the actual reliefs.

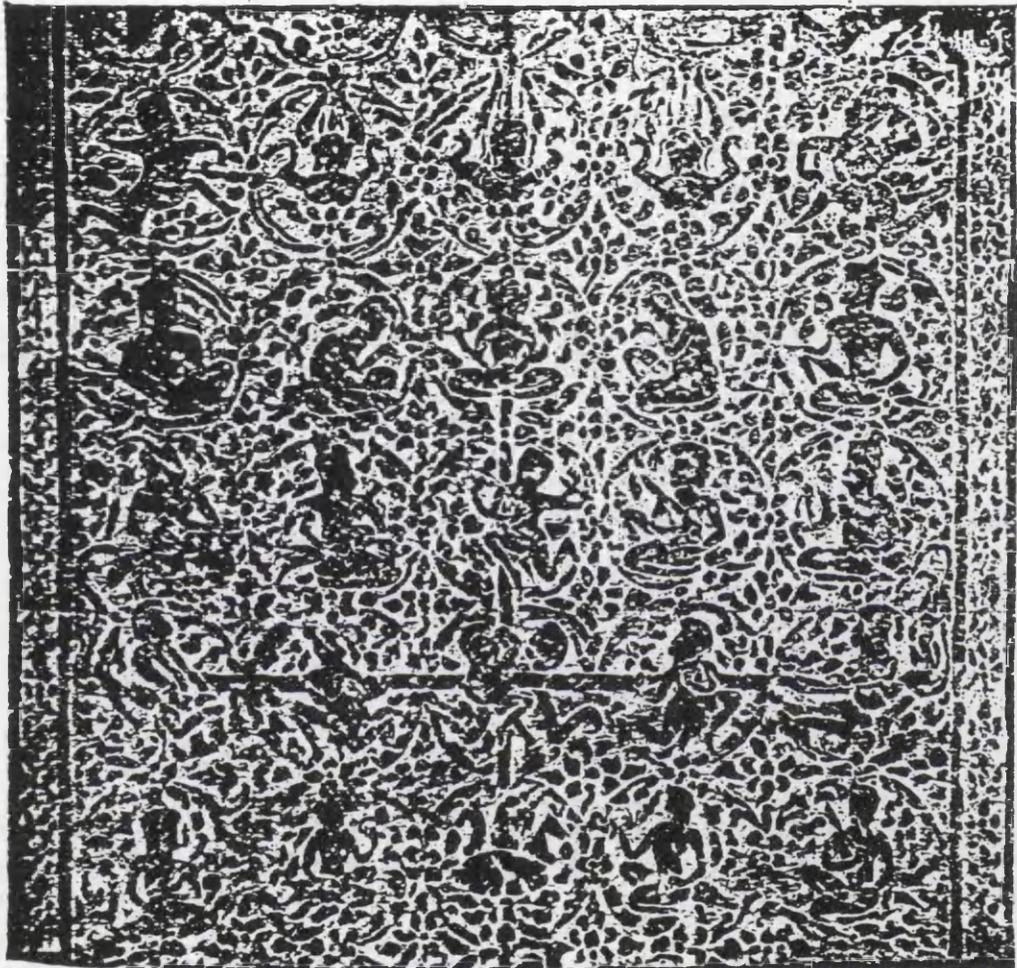
A

B

C

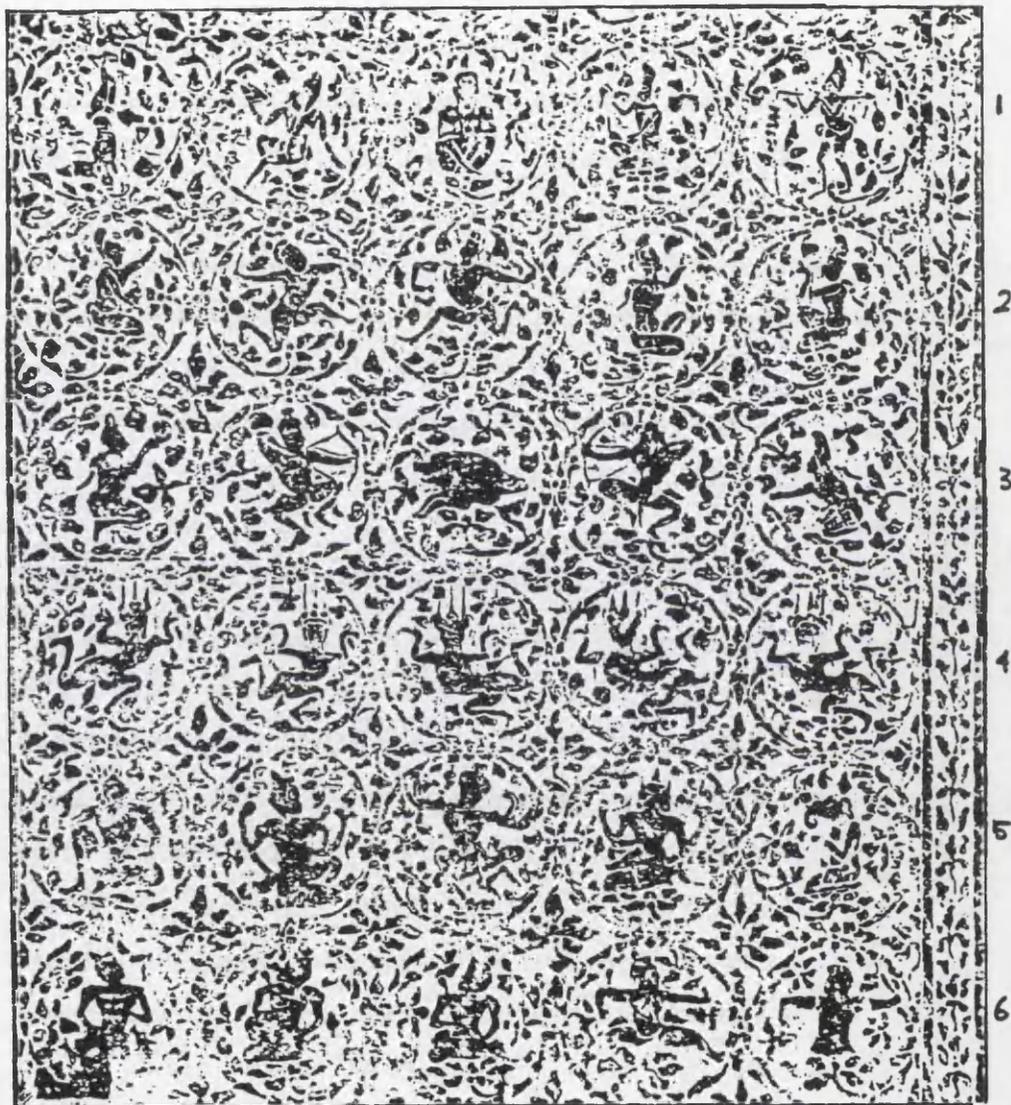
D

E



BARATTEMENT DE L'OcéAN. (60 P Sud)

A B C D E



ARJUNA ET LE KIRĀTA — ÇIVA DANSANT. (35 P Sud)

row 2 and 3, where Arjuna (B3) and Shiva, as a *kirata* (D3), are depicted with the disputed boar at the centre (C3), between the two; they are flanked by ascetics recognisable by the high hairdo. In the overlying row, the two are involved in the mythic hand to hand fight (2B and C), surrounded by ascetics.

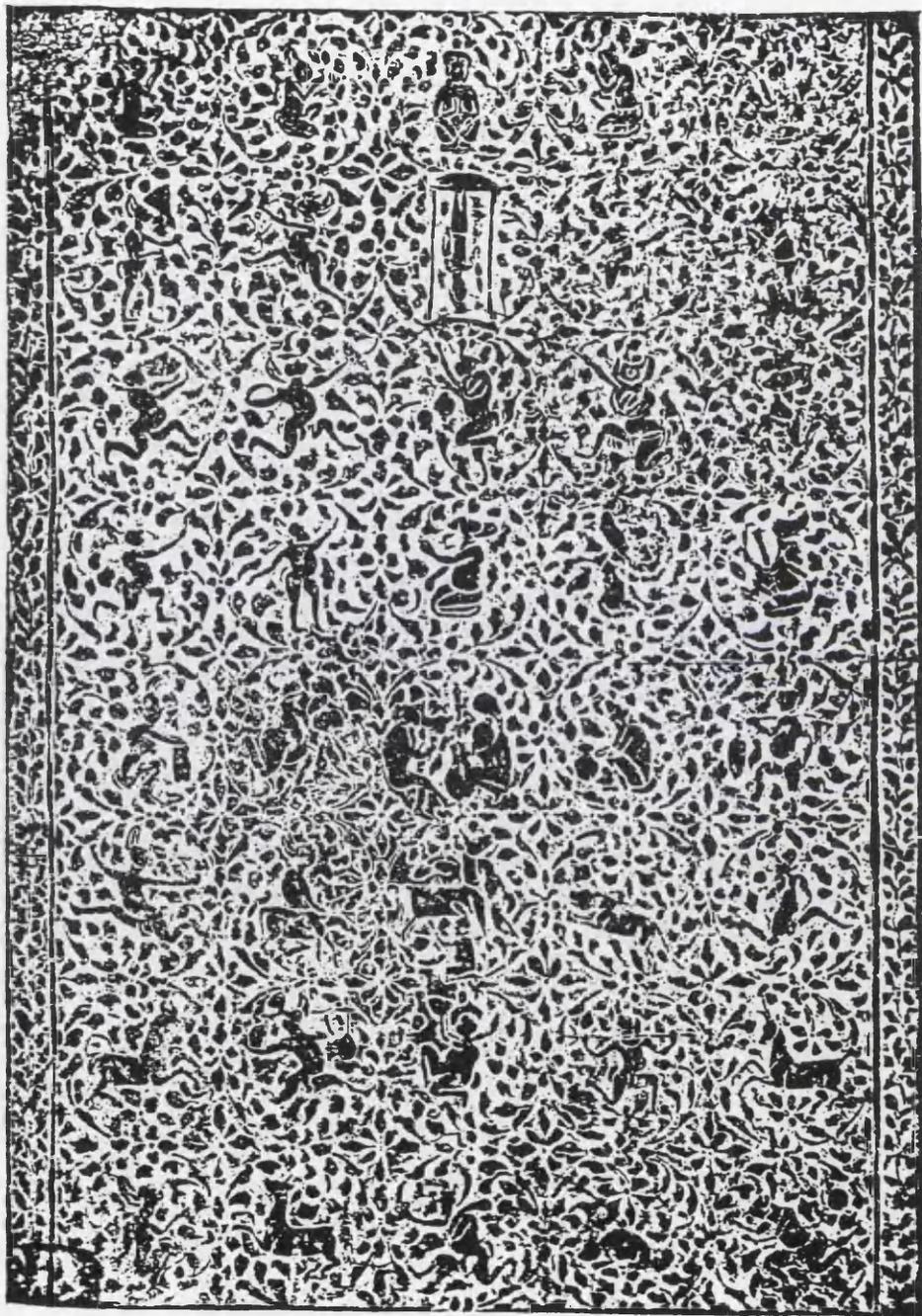
Below this event is a row with 5 dancing apsaras (4 A, B, C, D, E) with the 3-pointed *mukuta*, and below this is a row with a dancing Shiva (C⁵), with many arms, flanked -to the left of the viewer - by Vishnu (B⁵) followed by? Rama (A⁵), and - to the right -by the multi-headed Brahma (D⁵) and then Ganesha (E⁵). At the top of the main story, is a row of ascetics, of which the one at the centre (1 C) is seated in meditation, while the others are active. It is interesting to note that the ascetic 1 A is represented upside-down, probably in some form of yoga position, unless the sculptor used the stencil in the wrong position! This episode, taken from the *Mahabharata* (Vanaparvan, *Kairataparvan*) has been illustrated several times and in many Khmer temples (Bapuon, Wat San Kev, and Bayon).

Shiva in the Pine Forest (Coedes' plate III).

This scene is located on the eastern jamb of the door of access to the gallery of the 3rd enclosure with the relief of the battle of Kurukshetra (83 P of Coedes); it is illustrated by my photograph at Pl.30 bottom. Although Coedes interpreted this relief as the story of Ravana transforming himself into a lizard in order to penetrate Indra's harem, he was aware that this was highly hypothetical due to the absence of women which should be present in the gynaeceum. On the grounds of several iconographic elements and its analogy with the large panel of the SW corner pavilion (S.4) I do not think there are any doubts that this is the Shaivite story of Shiva *Bhikshatanamurti* appearing in the Pine Forest. At the centre of the upper row is an ascetic seated in meditation or making penance (1 C). He is identified as Shiva by the presence of surrounding worshippers (1 A, B, D). He is seated in meditation and just below him appears a personage within the frame of a door which has a lizard over the lintel (C2).

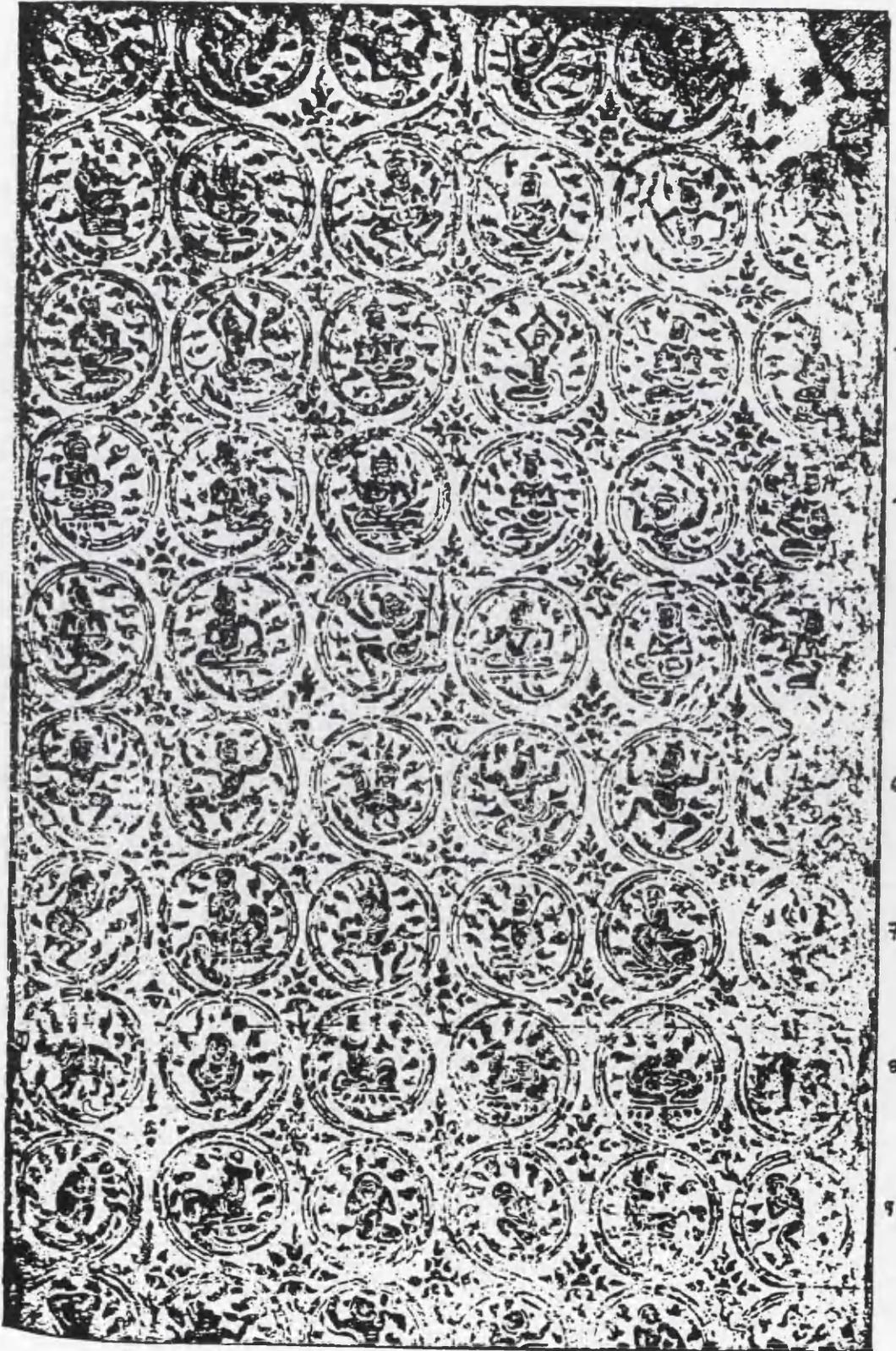
The scantily dressed personage is Shiva *Bhikshatanamurti* - for a strange reason - is represented upside-down. Coedes interpreted this peculiarity as an attempt to illustrate a minor-image of the ascetic Shiva appearing instead in a physical-

A B C D E



RĀVAṆA MÉTAMORPHOSÉ EN MARGOILLAT. (83 P Est)

A B C D E F



ÇIVA DANSANT — BARATTEMENT — KRṢṢA SOULEVANT LA MONTAGNE.
91 P Ouest haut

sensual form. I am still unconvinced of the need to represent Shiva upside-down to explain that the god is acting as the erotic-Shiva and not as the ascetic-Shiva, as he is in the *Bhikshatanamurti* story. Perhaps he is represented in the way it would be seen by the ascetic Shiva (1 C) facing him. Shiva seems to be surrounded - on the same row (2A,B,D,E) and on the row below (3A,B,C,D) - by personages dancing in a joyful attitude, the wives of the brahmins; we know from the original text that they were scantily dressed and with disorderly hairdo, mesmerised by the beautiful appearance of the Shiva. This may have induced Coedes to believe they were not women but fighting men. In row 4 are quieter personages, probably the brahmins themselves, and below - at the centre - are two unidentified personages (5C) one of which seem to be playing a musical instrument (*vina* or *sitar*), surrounded by working ascetics (5A,?B,D,E). The remaining underlying rows (6,7,8) depict forest animals actively hunted by the ascetics. Some ascetics are involved in pastoral activities like pasturing a cow (6B), or milking a cow (6C); below, one can see a hunter (^{EB}SE) ambushing a sleeping animal (^{DB}SD).

Multiple composition (Coedes' plates IV and V).

It appears on the western jamb of the door leading to the southern subsidiary entrance of the Main entrance (Western gopura; P 91 of Coedes).

Coedes recognised that this wall composition (illustrated in two plates) is one of the most interesting of this type amongst all from Angkor Wat, being composed of 7 distinct episodes, and where the sculptors demonstrated a great mastery in combining the needs of the story with the decorative elements. It is just one of the elements that make the Western gopura one of the most richly decorated and sumptuous site of Angkor Wat.

1 - Unspecified scene (rows 1-3). High in the relief is a scene of a Brahman (B 3) and of several other personages paying homage to celestial beings and gods, including *kinmaras* (A 1), a naga (B 1), Garuda (C 1), all badly preserved. Also present is Shiva (C 2) dancing between Vishnu (D 2) and Brahma (B 2), Ganesha (A 2) and so on.

2 - The Churning of the Ocean of Milk (rows 4-6). These rows show Vishnu holding a stylised short pole in C5, superseded by Brahma (C4), standing over the turtle Kurma (C6) from which one can clearly see the heads of Shri and of

Uccaihsvara peering out. The *devas* and *asuras* pulling the invisible Vasuki are depicted in row 6.

The cross-motif composed by the Mandara post and the Vasuki serpent, which highlighted the story in the reliefs of Plate I, is here missing or fused with the foliage defining the medallions, making the story's interpretation more difficult.

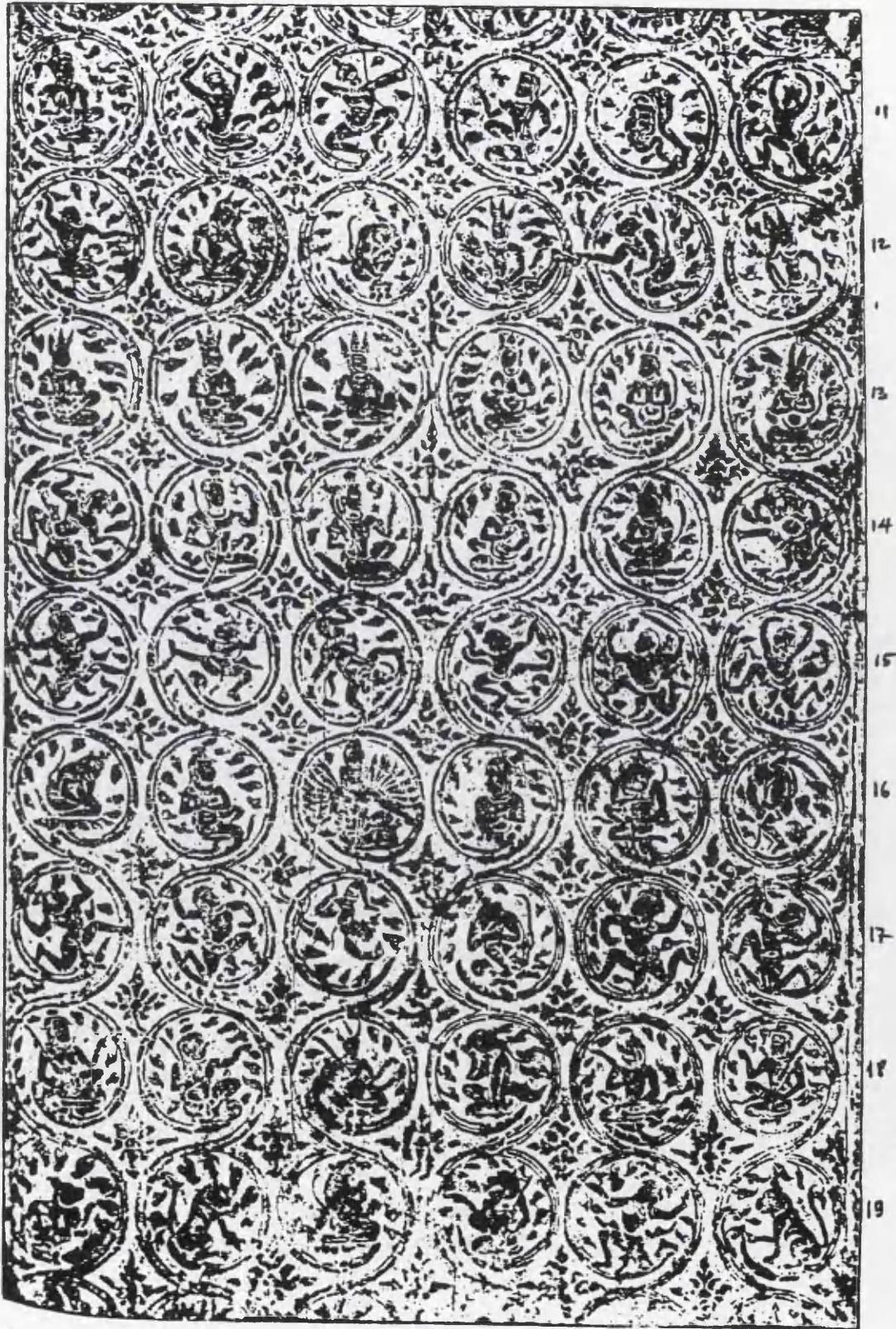
3 - Krishna uplifting Mt. Govardhana (rows 7-9). All the medallions depict squatting frightened cowherds and shepherds with their animals, and isolated animals, with the exception of C 7 in which Krishna is shown with his left arm lifting Mt. Govardhana (not depicted) to create shelter for his *gopas* from the torrential rain sent by Indra.

4 - Rama killing Valin (rows 10-13). The two monkey brothers Valin and Sugriva are shown facing each other in C 10 and D 11, fiercely fighting. Below, close to Lakshmana (D 11), Rama (C11) is about to release, from his fiercely stretched bow, the lethal arrow against of Valin, by aiming in his direction in the overlying medallion. The dying Valin is probably shown to the right (Q 11) as a falling body, and below, dying in the arms of his affectionate spouse Tara (D 12). In some medallions, agitated monkeys express their grief (F 11 and A 12) while others are crouched in dismay (C 12). The most moving - showing the mastery of the sculptors - is the one in E1 2 who extends his arm out from the medallion to touch the feet of the dying king or friend. Valin's many wives are depicted in row 12 B. 12 E and in all row 13, wearing the three-pointed *mukuta*, some with one arm supporting the head, in an attitude of desperation (12B and 12 E).

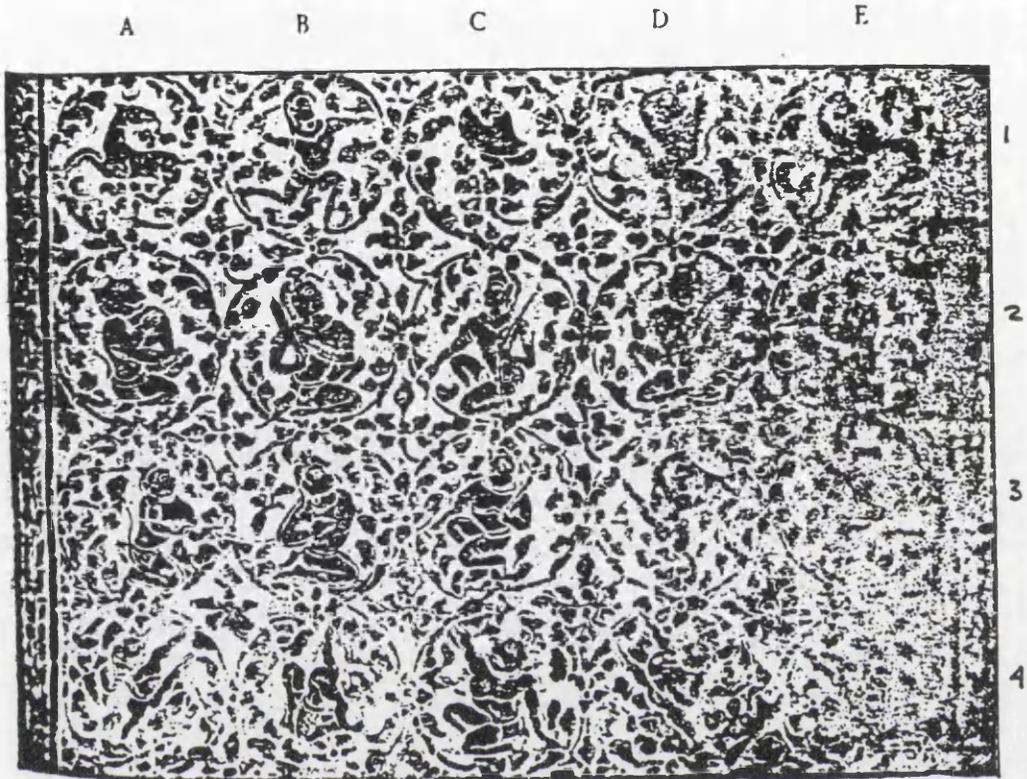
5 - Alliance between Rama and Vibhishana (row 14). To the left side of this row are sitting Rama (C 14) and Lakshmana (B 14), holding their bow, according to the traditional iconography. Rama is facing Vibhishana (D 14), the monkey prince brother of Ravana, who is seated with his left arm on his chest, another common iconographic gesture, followed by his generals, obviously depicted as monkeys with tails, wearing a royal crown (E 14).

6 - Unspecified episode (rows 15-17). The main protagonists are Hanuman (C15) and Ravana (C 16). Hanuman is distinguishable amongst the somersaulting and jumping monkeys of row 15, by wearing a crown, while Ravana by his legendary 10 arms per side. Ravana is facing an unknown personage (D1 6) - not Rama because the bow is missing - and several monkeys (A1 6, E and F1 6), making the

A B C D E F



DUEL ENTRE VĀLIN ET SUGRĪVA ET MORT DE VĀLIN — ALLIANCE DE RĀMA AVEC VIBHĪSAṆA —
RĀVAṆA — ENTRÉE ENTRE HANUMAT ET SĪTĀ.
(9) P Ouest bas)



ALLIANCE DE RĀMA AVEC VIRHĪṢAYA.
(84 P Sud)

interpretation of this scene impossible.

7 - Hanuman exchanging jewels with Sita (rows 17-18). Hanuman is represented twice in this row: first as a small monkey (C 17) on an *ashoka* tree, as a result of his diminished size in order not to be detected by Ravana 's guards, and later squatting or sleeping on the branches (D 17). Below is Sita (D 18) in the *ashoka* grove, in the traditional seated pose holding her head with one arm, practising austerity; she is surrounded by the Ravana' s *rakshini* of which the benevolent Trijata is represented with a human face (~~B and E~~^C 18).

Alliance between Rama and Vibhishana (Coedes' plate VI).

It is located in the southern jamb of the subsidiary southern entrance door (opening to the west) of the western entrance of the 3rd enclosure (84 P of Coedes); it is illustrated by my photograph at Pl.30 top.

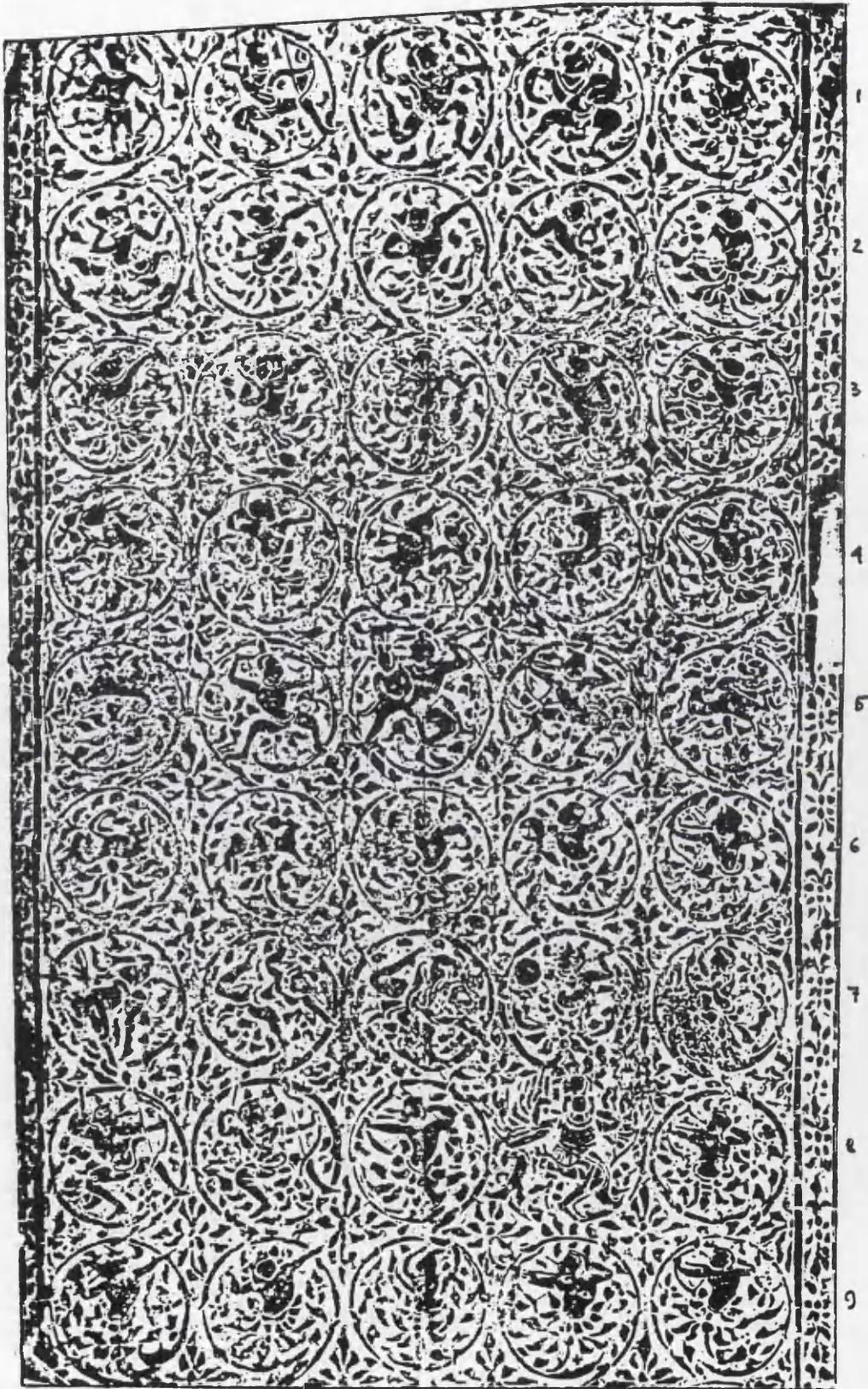
Rama (C 2) and Lakshmana (D 2), holding their bow, are seated facing Vibhishana (B 2), who is squatting close to a monkey (B 1), possibly Hanuman. The latter is also represented in the row below (A 3) where the scene (badly preserved) seems to narrate another moment of the same meeting that leads to the alliance of the two.

The Battle of Lanka (Coedes' plate VII).

It is located in the western jamb of the subsidiary southern entrance door (opening to the north) of the western entrance of the 3rd enclosure (85 P of Coedes).

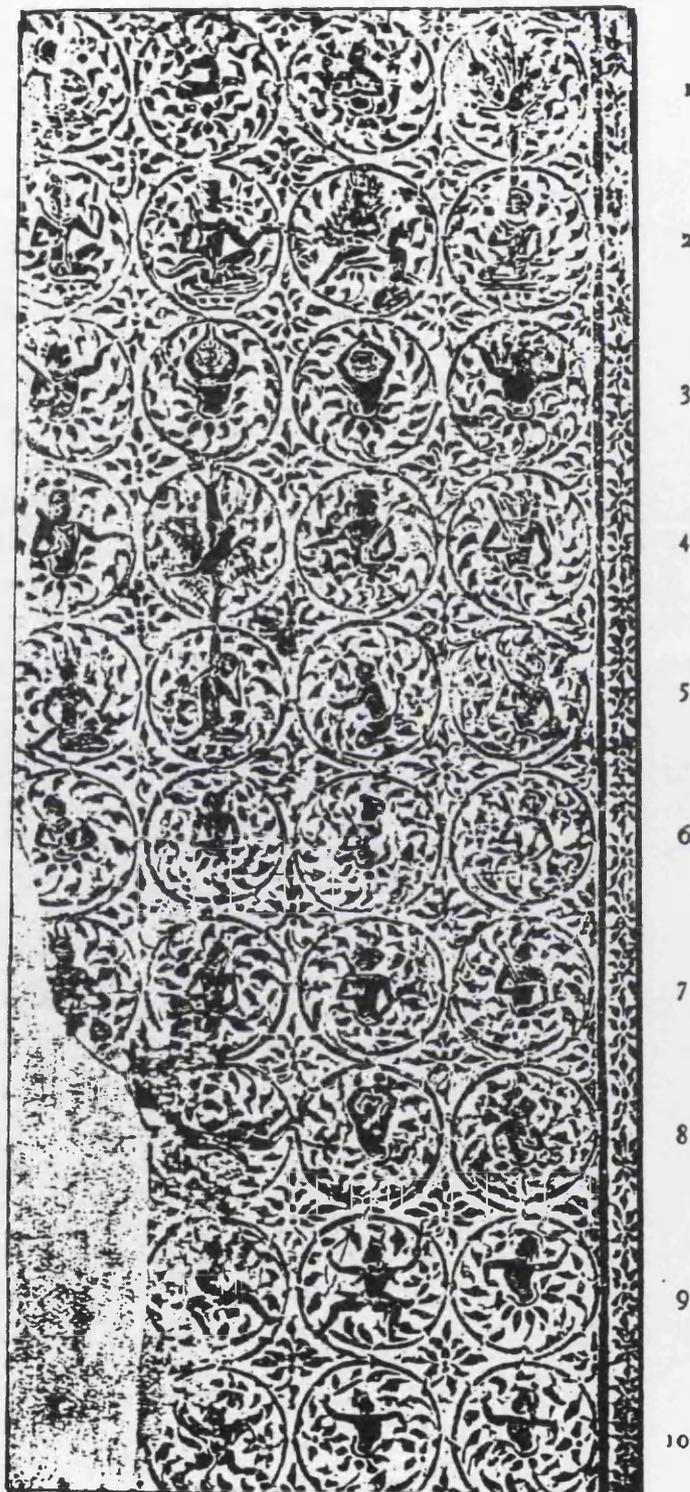
Amongst fighting monkeys of rows 1-3, Rama and Lakshmana are depicted in the medallion C3 as immobilised on the ground by the magic arrows of Indrajit which transforms into snakes tightening them up. The two heroes are surrounded by friends (B 4) and monkeys (A 4) in distress. It is not clear if the large personage in the medallion D4 is Indrajit himself or Garuda who arrives to free our two heroes. The latter could be the personage sketched in medallion E4, who seems to be suspended in the air. Below this scene, is a row of monkeys curiously represented standing (row 5), probably mourning the paralysed heroes.

It is interesting to note that the fiercely fighting monkeys, of which Hanuman was the most illustrious representative, are depicted with a leg and an arm raised very high, almost in an acrobatic position. In this form are the bronze insignia carried



A B C D E
DUEL ENTRE VĀLIN ET SUGRĪVA — ENLÈVEMENT DE SĪTĀ PAR VIRĀDHA —
DUEL ENTRE RĀMA ET RĀVAṆA.
(2 P intérieur Est)

A B C D



ORDALIE DE SĪTĀ — ENTREVUE ENTRE HANUMAT ET SĪTĀ.
(2 P intérieur Ouest)

by Khmer soldier depicted in several reliefs, and particularly evident in the one of the Historic Procession. It was considered symbolic of the fierce strength and military prowess of Hanuman.

Ramayana' multiple composition (Coedes' plate VIII).

It is located on the eastern jamb of the interior door of the northern door of the central shrine (P 2 of Coedes).

1 - The duel between Valin and Sugriva (rows 1 and 3). In the top row of the composition we can see, from left to right, Lakshmana standing still holding his bow (A 1), preceded by Rama in the flexed position of the archer ready to act (B 1). In his turn, Rama is preceded by the two monkey brothers, more likely Valin first since he is presenting his back to Rama (C 1), and then Sugriva (D 1). The last personage of this row is unidentified, as are all the other monkeys of the underlying row (A-E 2); two of which (B 2 and C 2) have an arm raised pointing in the direction of the fight between Valin and Sugriva. Row 3, questionably belonging to this story, seem also to contain gesticulating monkeys.

2 - The killing of Marica (row 4). The first 3 medallions of the row show Rama (B4) following the appearance and disappearance of Marica in the bushes (A4 and C4). In the E 4 medallion he is shown in the act of releasing his lethal arrow to Marica (D4) who seems to be turning his head away from him, probably already wounded.

3 - The abduction of Sita (row 5). Ravana grabbing Sita is clearly shown at the centre (C5) between Rama and Lakshmana (B5 and D5); the two medallions at the ends are not identifiable (A5 and E5).

4 - The battle of Lanka (rows 6-9). The medallions of this wall's portion depict fighting personages; most of them are agitated monkeys, one of powerful build (C7) being either Nila, Sugriva's general, or the ubiquitous Hanuman, and the others are strange beings, most likely the *rakshasas*. Rama (B⁸) and Lakshmana (A8) are sculpted in the moment when they release their powerful arrows against Ravana (D8), depicted with many arms as per the iconographic tradition.

In this relief several medallions contain personages with only the body's torso being recognisable, since the lower half is replaced by a flower, giving the impression that the figure is popping out from it. It is not that the personages have

the lower part of the body with multiple locomotion extensions, as Coedes initially believed.

Ramayana's multiple composition (Coedes' plate IX).

This scene is located on the western jamb of the interior door of the northern door of the central shrine (P 2 of Coedes). Apart from the main protagonists of the stories, all the personages seem to be popping out from flowers.

1 - The meeting of Hanuman and Sita accompanied by Trijata (rows 4-5). Under an *ashoka* tree, on which a small animal has climbed (B 4), Sita is seated in the typical attitude (B 5) of holding her head with one arm, probably practising penance; she seems to listen to Hanuman who is kneeling in front of her (C5). The monstrous *rakshini* of Ravana are all around her, with horrifying faces, some with a beak (D 4 and D 5), while the one friendly to Sita, the kind Trijata (A 5) has a human face and wears the royal 3-pointed *mukuta*.

It is interesting to note the presence of 2 personages in medallions A 4 and C 4 who are finger pointing towards the scene to call the attention of the viewer. Although their arm and finger are directed towards the upper part of the tree (B 4), the tree itself is clearly connected, via its trunk, to the underlying scene (B 5).

2 - The ordeal of Sita (rows 1-3). The location where Sita's ordeal takes place (C2) has gardens with trees on which animals are climbing (D1). Sita is represented in the C2 medallion in the middle of the fire's flames, going through the ordeal. A small crowned personage is kneeling near her, probably the god Agni. Rama (B2) and Lakshmana (A2) are observing the test. Another unidentified princely personage is seated under a tree (D2). In the row below (3) are several monkeys with raised arms, greatly agitated by the spectacle; the one from A3 is clearly pointing his arm and his finger in the direction of the ordeal's scene. We have seen this also in the NW corner pavilion (N.5).

3 - Unspecified scenes (rows 6-10).

It is difficult to read these 5 rows because one cannot identify the plot; moreover the left part of the doorjamb is eroded away. Noticeable is the personage of medallion B8 in horizontal position, the two royal people with bows facing each other (B-C9), and Garuda in medallion B 10.

Comments on tapestry reliefs

After having examined these tapestry reliefs, I think that they have been executed by using several different patterns of stencils which had different personages' combinations and permutations, circumscribed by a floral-vegetal scroll of variable diameter. It seems that the degree of rock chiselled away from the original pattern's design was up to the individual sculptor. Sometimes the carving was 'moderate' like in the P 91, where the story is easily readable; other times it was 'excessive', like in the story of the *Bhikshatanamurti* (83 P). In here, the personages seem to be scattered in the thin background foliage, having the circular border of the medallions almost completely disappeared.

Considering the enormous surface covered with tapestry reliefs it is plausible to imagine that an army of sculptors was employed under the control of several supervisors, and that a limited amount of individualism must have been inevitable (or wanted?). By that time the sculptors may have followed clear conventions of representation involving a common visual vocabulary (Rama and Lakshmana always together, consistently holding the bow, Sita prisoner always with one hand supporting her head, and so on). They may have adopted a common visual grammar/syntax by which the above elements (single images) were arranged in a consistently defined way (Lakshmana always to the left of Rama, Vibhishana always to the right of Rama, the *apsaras* always in the highest position, the *rakshasas* in the lowest position, and so on).

4.7. LINTELS

Although there are hundreds of lintels in the temple, only a few carry narrative reliefs. At Angkor Wat, their decorative function has been replaced by the imposing pediments they support; they have lost the predominance they had in previous temples where they were the most salient feature of the door, and where pediments were not used. In the 3rd enclosure, all the entrance doors with porches do not have decorative lintels, the architrave supporting the pediment directly. The majestic doors of the 2nd and third enclosure facing outside have - however - imposing lintels decorated with a series of large elongate foliage individually

aligned almost vertically, without the usual undulating horizontal scroll. This is, apparently, characteristic of the style initiated during the Angkor Wat time according to Coral (de) Remusat³⁵; this author also noticed that the *kala* at the lintel's centre has two additional teeth, a sort of 'wisdom teeth', not previously seen. At the centre of the lintel is a small mythological group, which, for the lintels of the doors of the 1st enclosure facing outside could be: a god with a sword seated on a *kala* flanked by small *simhas* (lions), a god standing over the raised arms of a *simha*, or on the back of a horse, Vishnu on Garuda, and so on. Particularly noticeable is the Indra seated on his elephant Airavata in the lintel of the north-facing door of the southern gallery of the 2nd enclosure.

The best narrative lintels, and the most important for their content, are the ones over the doors of the Cruciform cloister, individually described above (chapter 4.3). Furthermore, two of the most important lintels of Angkor Wat are to be found, not surprisingly, in the Western gopura - which is also the main entrance - over its western and eastern main doors. The former - facing west - represents (Pl.16), at the centre of the four convolutions of the naga, the so-called episode of Vishnu (with 4 arms) Anantasayin. The god is reclining on the snake Ananta (with 5 hoods), holding hands with his consort Lakshmi seated at his feet; from his body emerges a lotus stalk terminating in the lotus flower on which Brahma is seated (for illustrations see³⁶). It is important to notice that the representation of this essential event, Vishnu creating the universe and Brahma, his architect, is the very first to be met when entering Angkor Wat. The other - facing east - narrates (Pl.16 bottom right), within the 4 main convolutions of the naga, the battle of Krishna against the *asura* Bana (for illustrations see Finot, Parmentier and Coedes, 1932³⁷). The god appears, with four arms, at the centre of the composition, mounted on Garuda, at the moment when he is facing the ten-armed Bana on his chariot pulled by a horse with a dragon's head. A post standing between the two main personages carrying a small divinity is, most likely, a war

³⁵ Coral(de) Remusat O., *L'Art Khmer, les grandes étapes de son évolution*, Vanoest, Paris, 1951, p.49

³⁶ Finot L., Parmentier H. et Coedes O., *Le temple d'Angkor Vat*, EFEO, Mémoires archéologiques II, 1927-32, Plates 398-428.

³⁷ Finot, Parmentier et Coedes, *ibidem*, Plates 195-96, Plates 16-63, and Mannikka, *Angkor Wat*, University of Hawaii Press, 1996, p.80.

insignia. Below this central group, is another composition with Krishna, holding Lakshmi on his lap, seated on a plinth sustained by the stretched arms of the lion (*simha*). To both side, are two worshippers, also supported by a smaller lion. The image of a divinity on a plinth sustained by the lion is also used as a metaphor for a royal personage, and for the king himself in the pediment above the central doorway of the southern gallery of the 3rd enclosure.

4.8. PILASTERS

Most of the temples's doors with pediments present also richly decorated pilasters which have, at the base, a small narrative relief (Pl.s 32, 33). The same applies to some pilasters of the Cruciform Cloister, and at the end of the long galleries with reliefs of the 3rd enclosure. Their presence had been noticed by Goerge Coedes in 1913³⁸, illustrated later by Gilberte de Coral Remusat³⁹, and subsequently described by Jean Boisselier⁴⁰ as being typical of the style of Angkor Vat in the temples of Banteay Samre, Beng Mealea and Angkor Vat. This new trend made references - for the first time - to the Indian epics, legendary personages or the sacred texts.

These reliefs at the base of the pillars, usually within a pyramidal layout, are a synthesis of narrative, insofar as the story is narrated exclusively through the presence of the main personages. All accessory elements - if any - are so stylised that they evanesce into the overlying decorative motifs of the foliage's trellis, the main motive of the pillar, revealing the great mastery of Khmer sculptors. I have found a variety of topics, the most common being Krishna lifting Mt. Govardhana, the Churning of the Ocean of Milk, Krishna subduing the naga Kaliya, and - amongst the legendary figures- Krishna and Balarama, Vishnu on Garuda, Shiva dancing, Indra on Airavata, a god seated holding a sword or an axe (? Rama-of-the-axe) and some unidentified others.

³⁸ Coedes G., *Second etude sur les bas-reliefs d'Angkor Vat*, BEFEO, XIII, 1913, I, p.1

³⁹ Coral de Remusat G., *L'Art Khmer, les grandes etapes de son evolution*, Vanoest, Paris, 1951, p.84, Plate XXIX, fg. 100.

⁴⁰ Boisselier J., *Le Cambodge*, Picard, Paris, 1966, p.172, fg.46.

4.9. ORNAMENTAL MOTIFS

Besides the reliefs mentioned above, the thousands of *devata/apsaras* sculpted on the exterior walls of the galleries and of the towers most likely had the function of transforming the temple into a celestial palace, assisted by the hundreds of celestial beings acrobatically riding a horse. The similarly abundant reliefs of ascetics (*rishis*) would refer to the temple as being their abode, Mt. Meru. All the meanings of these images converge to elevate the temple from a materialistic structure into a super-terrestrial monument. Details of this type and of purely ornamental motifs have amply been discussed by Henri Marchal and by Gilberte de Coral Remusat in 1951, in their papers for the EFEO⁴¹.

2.10. THEMATIC CHOICE AND ARRANGEMENT OF PEDIMENTS.

A high percentage of the reliefs have been destroyed, with the ones left difficult to read because either they are badly eroded, or are fragmentary. Thus any interpretation of the iconography and of the plot of the story is both arduous and conjectural. For instance, unless one knows the story, it is difficult to say if a personage with 10 arms is Bana, Kalanemi or Ravana⁴²; the latter being identifiable only if his 5 heads are not broken or eroded. Some *rakshasas* are indistinguishable from monkeys with a hair tuft; a heroic figure with a bow is not necessarily Rama, particularly if appearing in a large battle scene. Battle scenes themselves are also problematic because there are so many of them in Hindu mythology. They include the battle of Kurukshetra, of Krishna against Paundraka, of Indra against Ravana, and it is hard to define the specific one; one can make an attribution to the battle of Lanka only if monkeys are represented. Because of

⁴¹ Marchal H., *Le decor et la sculpture khmers*, Vanoest, Paris, 1951; Coral de Remusat 6., *L'Art Khmer, les grandes etapes de son evolution*, Vanoest, Paris, 1951.

⁴² In the Ramayana Kalanemi is the *rakshasa* uncle of Ravana. In the Puranas he is the great *asura*, son of Varochana, the grandson of Hiranya-kasipu (killed by Vishnu in the Lion avatar, Narasinha). He was killed by Vishnu, but was said to live again in Kamsa and in Kaliya.

these adverse conditions, I can only propose a tentative perception of few general patterns in the thematic choice.

- 1) Vishnu holding a rosary, as an ascetic, which appears of the door pillars of the Western Gopura, is an icon that is not depicted anywhere else in the temple.
- 2) Shiva appears in the door pillars of the north-eastern corner pavilion, in the cardinal location reserved for him. He also appears, dancing, in a southern pediment facing the courtyard between the 3rd and 2nd enclosure. As mentioned elsewhere, Shiva's stories are depicted in the SW corner pavilion, an unusual cardinal location for Shiva.
- 3) The existing half-pediments of the 3rd enclosure are mainly devoted to the Ramayana in the north and central part of the northern gallery, and in the eastern and southern part of the western galley.

These patterns are only a few possibles amongst the many which are undetectable because most of the reliefs have been lost; therefore, they do not reflect the true intention of the designers of the temple. It seems highly probable that they followed a codified iconographic system, which - due to great architectural complexity and the dimensions of Angkor Wat - may have gone out of the control of the *shastras* and of the architects' intentions during the construction of the temple.

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SW & NW CORNER PAVILIONS
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PART II & III

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*Part II - Chapter 1***SEMIOTICS AND NARRATOLOGY OF THE RELIEFS****1.1. SEMIOTICS OF THE RELIEFS**

In my approach to the interpretation of Angkor Wat's reliefs I have used semiotics in order to seek a deeper level of meaning besides the one revealed by iconography. Semiotics¹ is the study of the effects of production and reception of meanings in all forms, of the life of signs in society. Its roots are to be found in linguistics², the theory of verbal language, and in the assumption that visual signs, like verbal signs, are organised according to a basic grammar³. Visual language, like verbal language, is a form of communication, a way of conveying meaning. Semiotics provides the possibility of an analytical practice, of describing and explaining the process and structures through which meanings are constituted. It is useful "as a method, a paradigm, a perspective, or just an eye-opener"⁴.

The semiotician gives an important role to the reader. The image plays some part in producing its meaning, but so does the reader; the impact is largely determined by the fact that the reader already has a level of concern and a range of social attitudes about Khmer events. The semiological and narrative structure of the relief has to interact with the social attitude of the reader for the impact to occur. In this case, communication is the production and exchange of meanings. On this basis, Angkor Wat's reliefs are a form of communication, and as such, they have an internal structure that goes beyond the surface level of the images. The reliefs encapsulate a set of visual codes established by the Khmer culture of the 11-12th centuries; these codes express the aesthetic, social, religious, economic organisation of the time, and their relationships to power of the ruling class and

¹ from the Greek *semeion* = sign; it is also called the science of signs, semiology

² See the works of F.de Saussure (1857-1913), C.S.Peirce (1839-1914), R.Barthes (1915-1980) and other contemporary scholars mentioned in the following pages.

³ Saint-Martin F., *Semiotics of visual language*, Indian University Press, 1990

⁴ Bal M., *Reading Rembrandt*, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p.26

elite. It is important, thus, to look at the process of their production and unravel, through the semiological analysis, the systems of meaning that they create.

In keeping with the assumptions set out in the introduction, I suggest that Khmer culture, and visual culture in particular, had well defined ideas about invention and impulse to document visually their literary and oral traditions. Furthermore, literary and verbal contexts must have had a great influence on the visual art of the time. The conception of the reliefs' panels almost certainly comes from the king's Brahmins who were highly versatile in theological, philosophical and mythological matters, and perfectly familiar with Hindu texts like the *Puranas*, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. They may have put forward the ideas and concepts to be conveyed through a relief, or simply a story, which they may have discussed amongst themselves, or with ministers or others, and finally with the sculptors or the head of the temple's works. According to the sparse iconographic data available in the literature⁵, one may speculate that Hindu dogmas did not undergo substantial changes during the time of the building of Angkor Wat. The authority of the Brahmins (as a class) to define the doctrine was unchallenged, and the leading figures and the cultural elite of the age persisted in their traditional Hindu attitudes. There are no accounts, as well, of changes in the attitude of people towards the religious beliefs in use. It may be that - like in India - Khmer sculpture manuals (*shilpashastra*) in use at the time would impose strict rules for the representation of sacred images, including the king, perceived as divine or of semi-divine origin. This rigidity would also force the sculptors to be conservative in their visual representations, not allowing iconographic innovations deviating from the *shastras*.

Khmer sculptors executed their reliefs in a style that iconically translated the Indian narratives⁶ derived from the classic texts and possibly, in a few cases,

⁵ See the works of E. Aymonier, L. Finot, G. Coedes and C. Jacques.

⁶ According to Bryson, texts interfere both with the conception of the artwork and with their perception by the viewer, and textuality determines the rhetorical effect of painting. There are, as he puts it, 2 modes of representation: discursivity and figurality, which are based on well known semiotic pairs like paradigm-syntagm, denotation-connotation, signified-signifier, realism-narrativity. The distinction of discursivity and figurality can be compared to Peirce's symbols and icons. Iconicity provides a ground for the production of meaning, a code that establishes the

developed locally; maybe also local legends. Images were meant to illustrate well-known stories. In this context, the reliefs were probably influenced by the visual images which could be generated by the specific events/stories of the texts. Although these images, especially when sculpted on walls of temples, did function as a replacement for texts in partly illiterate societies, they did so on the basis of overwriting previous texts. Images were 'readings', and functioned in the same way as any verbal telling. In a process of intertextuality⁷, the reliefs became new texts, more likely mediated by the priest, and not read directly by the layman. The Khmer visual, iconographic and literary traditions allowed the production of images and stories represented on the reliefs, appealing to an already established knowledge that enabled the recognition of the scene depicted.

1.2. THE FIGURATIVE CODES

Some important semiotic elements, which are an essential part of the reliefs from the corner pavilions and other sites of the temple (described in Part II), are discussed below.

Spatial code. In some panels, noticeably the ones in which the main protagonist/s of the story are in a ceremonial posture, they appear to be separated from all other persons and from the setting by a very clear space, mainly undecorated. The best examples are the reliefs of Krishna lifting Mt. Govardhana (S.2), Shiva appearing in the Pine Forest (S.4), and Krishna and Balarama in the Akrura's episode (N.4). Moreover, there is a spatial difference between 'high' and 'low' personages depicted in reliefs, either in their layout or in their placement on pedestals, which acts as vehicle for a number of more abstract values. Some of the best examples can be seen in the relief with Shiva on a high pedestal over Ravana shaking Mt. Kailasa (S.5), of the relief Shiva reducing Kama to ashes where both images of Shiva are on tall pedestals (S.7).

relation sign/meaning on the basis of analogy. For example, a map is iconic not because it resembles the land, but because it shares the shape of its boundaries. Symbols are codes that establish the relationship sign/meaning on the basis of a conventional agreement (like perspective).

It is well known that visual height usually has a positive value attached to it, connoting a high position on the hierarchical system of society and the army, high moral standards, an ability to be a leader, and the consciousness of power. When we add this fact to the realisation that gods are high up in heaven, and that the dead are down in the ground, we can begin to understand how this visual metaphor influences our reading of the reliefs. In reality, it is also obvious that there is nothing 'natural' that links high social position, high military rank, high moral standards and the power of winning military battles. Making sense of them through the same visual metaphor is one way in which the dominant values are spread throughout society.

This spatial code is particularly evident in the layout of the large panel of the Historic Procession⁸, sculpted in the gallery of the 3rd enclosure, where king Suryavarman II is separated from all other persons and from the surrounding setting by a very clear space, extending to both the left and the right. Only the sparse vertical stems of umbrellas and other ceremonial signs fill this space. This type of spatial code is the norm in almost all the pediments of the temple.

Size code. The bodily dimensions of the main protagonist, usually a god, are larger than those of other personages; they are depicted in the so-called "heroic size". An outstanding example can be found in the image of Krishna on the shoulders of Garuda in the relief of the god bringing back Mt. Maniparvata (N.2). The multitude of soldiers surrounding this figure is so small as to amount to almost insignificant decorative elements.

Although other examples of the size code abound in the reliefs of the corner pavilions, none can surpass that of the large panel of the Historic Procession. In here the court servants squatting closely on both sides of the king are smaller than the five dignitaries to the right, of which the first is the smallest. The fact that they are squatting down accentuates the physical space surrounding the king. While the first and the last two are squatting on the ground, the two in the centre are instead kneeling on a thin raised platform, in the ceremonial way

⁷ By *intertextuality* is intended the relation/s between one text and other ones which are demonstrably present in it (G.Genette in G.Prince).

(with the knee folded higher). This reduces their height, thus becoming a signifier of acceptance and solidarity. Their proximity to the king is depicted according to a sequential order respecting the rank of the dignitaries. Le Bonheur⁹ has comprehensively described the hierarchical arrangement of people in this relief, noticing that the nearest to the king are - on one side - the ascetics, *rishis* and *gurus* of the forest of Mt. Shivapada, while - on the other side - are the high dignitaries and ministers closest to the king. More distant from the king is a long series of dignitaries (*anak sanjak*), the importance of which is created by the permutation of the number of parasols, war standards, fans of different shapes, long banners, fly-whiskers, and so on. They are preceded by the troops and their generals and captains. More remote from the king are the Siamese mercenary troops.

Attitude code. The attitude code is obviously related to the spiritual and/or ceremonial content of the story, when the protagonist assumes a dignified attitude calling for respect and admiration. In the corner pavilions I have observed, in situ, several examples; unfortunately the photographs I have taken without scaffolding that would have allowed close-up pictures, are unsatisfactory. One of the best example is that of the serene attitude of Shiva in meditation before (or after) being disturbed by Ravana's shaking of the mountain (S.5; Pl.5). Good examples are also the celestial attitude of Krishna and Balarama as they appear in vision to *Akkrura* (N.4; Pl.10), and the detached attitude of Krishna while sitting amongst the *gopis* (N.11; Pl.14). Rama instead - exemplifies an attitude of strength and determination - in the relief of Sita's *svayamvara* (N.10; Pl.13), and by Krishna lifting Mt. Govardhana with a single arm (S.2; Pl.1).

In the above reliefs, the meaning of the attitude code is highlighted and strengthened by placing the protagonist on a stand or on raised plinths. This is particularly evident in the large panel of the Historic Procession where Suryavarman II, calm and dignified, and in a relaxed position, seem to be in full control of the situation and aware of the tribute rendered to him. His head is inclined slightly towards the dignitaries, and he holds an unspecified object

⁸ For illustrations of the reliefs of the 3rd enclosure mentioned in this chapter, please refer to the book: *Of Gods, Kings, and men*, by A. Bonheur and J. Poncar, Serindia Publications, 1995

hanging down from his right arm¹⁰. His left arm is raised in an horizontal gesture in the direction of the five dignitaries. It could be a gesture of power, but the real meaning is obscured by his hand holding another unspecified object. The king is seated on a throne, a raised sitting ceremonial chair, its height being a signifier of power. It is not a common chair but a throne, and this emphasises the fact that the king is firmly installed. The raising of the seat and the need for everyone to kneel shows the power of the king, who exerts total control over everybody. The scene represents the ideology of paternal power and/or kingship, of the dominant person within a large male community concerned with maintaining its power and its right to rule.

Temporal code. Sometimes, specific narrative elements are arranged in a regular, repetitive way, creating a temporal composition or rhythm, producing a semiotic unity. Typical examples are to be found in the rows of personages witnessing the main protagonists of events told in the reliefs of the corner pavilions. They are sitting quietly, but with their arms holding swords or lotus buds, often seem to create an undulating or rhythmic movement in time.

Admirable examples of rhythmic scenes are to be found in the large panels of the Churning of the Ocean of Milk or of the Historical Procession, both in the gallery of the 3rd enclosure. In the former, the slow churning rhythm of the *devas* and *asuras* is interrupted by the action of heroic-sized personages, eventually terminated by the gigantic figures holding the ends of the snake Vasuki. In the latter, the play of the legs of the marching infantry (ahead of the sacrificial fire) seem to follow a very subtle changing rhythm, which varies in speed from the soldier at the front to the ones at the back ranks.

In the same gallery, it may seem that, at a first glance, the scene of the battles of Lanka or of Kurukshetra are very disorderly, but when the eye starts to discern geometric units as being interdependent, the initial confusion and complexity become a measured rhythm.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p.18

¹⁰ Probably a piece of jewelry in the shape of a lotus; see G.Groslier, *Recherches sur le Cambodgiens*, Chalamme, Paris, 1921, p.82, Fig.51.

Social code. From the above, it is clear that the ideators and the artists who created the reliefs constructed the figures of gods, kings, aristocrats, generals and dignitaries larger than all others, floating above the populace, signifying power, a total identity with the power of the king, the physical fabric of the kingly institution itself. The populace, instead, is represented much smaller. Unlike the representations of the powerful, for common people a whole range of semiotic codes that could communicate social or emotional messages have been largely disregarded in the reliefs: gesture, expression, clothing, etc. The monkeys - instead - are represented with great verve: their faces disclose all sort of grimaces, their body posture takes the most acrobatic positions. They are showing a strong emotive participation in the battle and a passionate personal commitment. It looks as if these great allies of Rama held a special position in Khmer iconography and sculptural characterisation, because through them the Khmer artists could express visually the emotions that they were not allowed to manifest in gods and humans.

Cropping of figurative elements. Cropping the environment, the surroundings, in a given scene helps to neutralise history by eliminating references to nature, to the real world and concentrating the viewer's attention on conceptual elements, like the supremacy of heroic figures. As seen in the relief narrating the story of Rama killing Valin (S.8, described above in Part I), the compositional cropping made by the sculptors by emphasising the presence of the Valin and Sugriva, and relegating Rama to a diminutive role behind a bush, may have been deliberately wanted to hide the un-chivalrous behaviour of Rama. It is conjectural to think that perhaps Khmer ideators/artists were conscious that mainly the core of the story could have determined the effect of the relief upon the reader; or, that they may just not have been selfconscious of their approach to the work.

1.3. SYNTAGMS OF SIGNS

From viewing the reliefs of Angkor Wat it is evident that in them signs are combined in syntagms¹¹, that is, meaningful sequences. It is appropriate in here to have a close look at these sequences of signs because they can be of help in reading and interpreting narrative reliefs, and in understanding how specific reliefs fits within the visual sacred discourse of the temple. Amongst the most noticeable signs that are so combined we have:

- The way a god is adorned, resulting from a choice from paradigms of crowns, necklaces, bracelets, armlets, *sampot* style, hairdressing style, etc.
- The way the god is presented, resulting from a choice from the paradigms of events from original texts. The way a divinity is depicted, from a choice of attributes and number of arms or heads.
- The way the architects designed the reliefs, out of a choice of locations and shapes: rectangular on wall or over lintel, equilateral triangle on pediments, and triangular on half-pediments, and so on.

All combinations presumably respected Khmer formal conventions based on social and religious rules. The way Krishna was dressed and his hair arranged - for instance - have a relationship with the way the Khmer believed the cowherds to be in Vraja's pastoral country. But the actual meaning of such signs is determined also by their relationship with other signs in the syntagm. In this case, Krishna is associated with his brother Balarama in similar attire. In another example, a conch is a physical object, but in the hands of Vishnu it is invested with a religious meaning: it is a signifier and it becomes a sign when it is read with the high degree of motivation required by all myths. There are paradigms of signs for Vishnu or Shiva but each sign depends for its meaning upon the readers' familiarity with the other signs for Vishnu or Shiva. Reliefs are always both indexical and iconic, due to the fact that there are no inscriptions (symbols) which

¹¹ A *syntagm* is a rule-governed sequence of two or more units of the same type. The written word is a visual syntagm composed of a sequence of paradigmatic choices from the letter of the alphabet. A visual syntagm is made up of a number of signs. For analytical convenience, a syntagm can have different orders of signification. See Fiske J., *Introduction to communication studies*, Routledge, London, 1991, p.105

could literally explain the usual signs. However, the knowledge of Indian canons (or their adaptations) and local traditions can be taken to replace inscriptions, therefore supporting the symbolic meaning of signs.

There is a clear degree of motivation in Khmer reliefs insofar as Indian-derived principles have influenced the meaning of signs, based on a high degree of convention and arbitrary agreements among brahmins, the ruling class, and sculptors. As an example of this, we can analyse the reliefs narrating how Rama killed Valin (SW corner pavilion, S.8), from the famous episode of the *Ramayana*. In it, we can recognise two main signs: Rama and his brother Lakshmana, and the massive Valin fighting his brother Sugriva. The subsidiary signs are: the background of shrub and trees, and - in the lower part of the relief - Valin dying in the arms of his wife Tara, and the small group made by Rama, Lakshmana and Sugriva.

The syntagm of the first order brings these signs into a particular kind of relationship: one of heavy confrontation between two heroic figures (Valin and Sugriva), and the other, of Rama's acting in an ambush. The signifiers become signs when we read them, when we match them with our mental concept (the signified), like that we already have of epic fights, and of Rama's battles against evil forces. The syntagm of the second order triggers the concept that form our myth of Rama and Valin, that is, that Rama is always 'right and victorious', and that Valin is 'wicked', powerful but a loser-to-be. The confrontation narrated in the reliefs is that of organised power; the event represents the perennial struggle between good and evil forces. Valin's corpse on the ground is the necessary outcome of an event aiming at re-establishing peace and order, this being - perhaps - the main symbolic meaning of the story. The way the leading figures (Rama, Valin and Sugriva) are arranged in the relief requires our eyes to swing from left to right (up and down) and vice-versa, reinforcing the connotation of dynamic confrontation. The movement of the readers' eyes becomes an iconic representation of the exchanges between the two factions. The dynamic of such a

meaningful fight is also emphasised by the absence of subsidiary signs acting as softening elements such as trees, birds, and building.

1.4. NARRATOLOGY OF THE RELIEFS

Visual narrative is one of many representational codes employed by artists to transmit information and convey the cultural experience of their period. Modern scholars have emphasised the importance of the process of re-inventing the experience communicated by ancient pictorial narrative. In front of a pictorial representation we create a dialogue between images/words or signs/meaning, we read the story and recreate its narrative. Images are able to narrate stories, and narrating is an integral part of visual arts. "Beneath the words, beneath ideas, the ultimate reference of the mind is the image"¹².

When confronting the Angkor Wat reliefs, the viewer may read them, tell a story to himself, and try to understand the narrative messages. As Louis Marin¹³ rightly says "This means that he converts the iconic representation model into a language, and more precisely into a story, thanks to the mimetic power, the fascinating likeness of the object represented by the painting [relief] he looks at". Below I will interpret this Angkor Wat visual language and analyse how it builds up into a discourse. It follows, that, firstly, it is essential to analyse the visual narrative techniques employed in the reliefs, in order to see if there might be a system, or a pattern, common to the various scenes, which may facilitate the reading and the interpretation of the stories narrated.

Although the iconographic interpretation is a necessary step in reading visual narrative, it must be followed by an analysis of the narrative structure. Iconography is basically a descriptive process of identification, whereas narrative is a process of organisational analysis, indicating 'how' the story is narrated as

¹² Mitchell W.J.T., *Iconology*, University Press, Chicago, 1987, p.43.

¹³ Marin L., *Towards a theory of reading in the Visual Arts*, in N. Bryson, 'Calligram', Cambridge Univ.Press, 1988, p.68

opposed to 'what' is narrated¹⁴. Traditional iconographic interpretation can reduce the image to a question of treatment (connotation of style) that confuses the meaning, and neglect the narrative.

The study of narrative as a code of representation of temporally ordered situations and events, is called narratology. To understand how visual images are organised, one must acknowledge the multiplicity of meanings inherent in any artwork, and the richness of their possible reading. This forces the viewer to take an active and creative role in a dialogue with the artwork, to reinvent the experience they communicate¹⁵.

In the last 10-15 years there has been a growing number of papers on narrative studies applied to the arts of antiquity, constructing narrative, and demonstrating that visual images have an infinite capacity for verbal extension, forcing the viewer to take an active and creative role with the artwork. In a book edited by Peter Holliday¹⁶, the analysis focuses on the narrative of Egyptian and Greek art, Etruscan tombs, and Roman sculptures. Richard Brilliant's *Visual Narrative*¹⁷, deals with the story-telling scheme of Roman small tablets, carved in low relief, which probably were meant to illustrate episodes of the Iliad. In the same publication, the study of the visual narrative of Trajan's column reveals a structure of an annalistic discourse. Several papers deal with the narrative structure and the reading programme of mediaeval illuminated manuscripts¹⁸, and

¹⁴ Holliday P.J., *Narrative and event in ancient art*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p.8.

¹⁵ Amongst the latest works dealing with the narrative's theory and its application to the reading of artworks, two publications by Mieke Bal are particularly revealing: *Narratology*, University of Toronto Press, 1994, and *Reading Rembrandt*, Cambridge University Press, 1991. In her paper on narratology, she explains that a text is a finite, structured whole composed of signs (but the text is not the story). The narrative text is a text in which an agent relates a narrative (narrator), and that it includes a *fabula*, which is a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors (events which are worked into a story). The story is a *fabula* that is presented in a certain manner; the event is the transition from one state to another state; the actors are the agents that perform actions, and to act is defined as to cause or to experience an event.

¹⁶ Holliday P.J. (editor), *Narrative and event in ancient art*, Cambridge University Press, 1993

¹⁷ Brilliant R., *Visual narrative*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1986

¹⁸ Lewis S., *Reading Images*, Cambridge University Press, 1995

of the Bayeux Tapestry¹⁹, and so on. Vidya Dehejia, dealing with visual narrative of early Buddhist murals and reliefs published important works on Indian art²⁰.

To my knowledge, semiotics has not been in applied so far to the study of Khmer reliefs. The only exception is the recent iconographic study of the story of Arjuna and the Kirata in the small sculptural panels of the Bapuon's temple by Natalia Rodriguez²¹ in which she includes an analysis of the narrative structure.

The interpretation of the meaning of the 24 reliefs' panels of the corner pavilions involves an in-depth study of their visual narrative, in particular the order in which event/episodes are narrated visually. For this, Elkins'²² scheme of analysis of visual narrative has been adopted here. It includes 3 major components:

- 1) The 'order of occurrence', that is the order in which the events narrated in the source-text occur.
- 2) The 'order of telling', that is the order in which the events or episodes of the story are visually composed or told on the walls of the temple.
- 3) The 'order of reading', that is the order in which the viewer reads and experiences this visual narrative, its evolving in time, its chronology.

¹⁹ Terkla D., *Cut on the Norman bias: fabulous borders and visual glosses on the Bayeux Tapestry*, Word & Image, Vol.11, No.3, 1995

²⁰ Vidya Dehejia, *On modes of visual narrative in early Buddhist art*. Art Bulletin, Sept. 1990, p.372; India's visual; narrative: the dominance of space over time, in *Paradigms of Indian architecture*, edited by G.H.R. Tillotson, Curzon, 1998

²¹ European Association of Southeast Asian Archaeologists, 6th International Conference, Leiden, 1966

²² Elkins J., *On the impossibility of stories: the anti-narrative and non-narrative impulse in modern painting*. Word & image, Vol.7, No.4, 1991

1.5. VISUAL NARRATIVE COMPONENTS OF THE RELIEFS

1) Order of occurrence

In Part I, I proposed a specific order in which to visit the pavilions, and explained the reasons for this order. Having followed this visiting sequence, one must find out how the stories depicted are organised and if they follow the order in which they occur in the original Indian texts. Thus we have to define the elements which would concur to constitute the 'order of occurrence' of the stories, that is, the order by which the stories happened in the original texts. These elements could be highlighted by grouping the stories by individual Indian texts, or by following an idealised chronological sequence of each event. In the first case, the reliefs' order should be:

SW CORNER PAVILION

^h *Baghavata Purana & Harivamsa*

- 1 - The Churning
- 2 - Krishna as a young boy dragging a heavy mortar
- 3 - The murder of Pralamba & The dousing of fire
- 4 - Krishna receiving the offerings destined to Indra
- 5 - Krishna lifting Mt. Govardhana

Ramayana

- 6 - Death of Valin
- 7 - Ravana shaking Mt. Kailasa
- 8 - Rama killing Marica

Other Puranas

- 9 - *Vamana Purana*. The betrothal of Shiva and Parvati
- 10 - *Saura Purana*. Shiva reducing Kama to ashes
- 11 - *Linga Purana*. Shiva in the Pine Forest
- 12 - No references to texts. Water festival

NW CORNER PAVILION

Other Puranas

- 1 - *Vishnu Purana*. Introduction to the descent of Vishnu
- 2 - *Brahma Purana*. Akura's vision
- ~~3~~^h *Bagh*~~h~~ⁿ*avata Purana & Harivamsa*
- 3 - Krishna bringing back Mt. Maniparvata
- 4 - Krishna and the *gopis*

Ramayana

- 5 - Sita's *svayamvara*
- 6 - Rama killing Kabandha
- 7 - Viradha's attempt to abduct Sita
- 8 - Rama's alliance with Sugriva
- 9 - Sita meeting Hanuman
- 10 - Rama's alliance with Vibhishana
- 11 - The ordeal of Sita
- 12 - Rama on the Pushpaka chariot

By comparing this polytextual grouping with the actual arrangement of the stories in the reliefs on the walls of the corner pavilions, it is evident that the Khmers did not follow the order by which the stories occurred in individual original texts. According to Indian mythology²³ the temporal sequence of events should be:

SW CORNER PAVILION

1. The Churning
2. Krishna as a young boy dragging a heavy mortar
3. The murder of Pralamba & The dousing of fire
4. Krishna lifting Mt. Govardhana

²³ Dimmitt C. & van Buitenen J.A.B., *Classical Hindu Mythology*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1978

5. Krishna receiving the offerings destined to Indra
6. Ravana shaking Mt. Kailasa
7. Death of Valin
8. Rama killing Marica
9. The betrothal of Shiva and Parvati
10. Shiva reducing Kama ashes
11. Shiva in the Pine Forest
12. Water festival

NW CORNER PAVILION

1. Introduction to the descent of Vishnu
2. Krishna bringing back Mt. Maniparvata
3. Akrura's vision
4. Krishna and the *gopis*
5. Sita's *svayamvara*
6. Rama killing Kabandha
7. Viradha's attempt to abduct Sita
8. Rama's alliance with Sugriva
9. Rama's alliance with Vibhishana
10. Sita meeting Hanuman
11. The ordeal of Sita
12. Rama on the Pushpaka chariot

When checking this list of an idealised 'order of occurrence' of the stories against the actual order by which the stories are visually told ('order of telling') on the 12 walls of each corner pavilion, one can see that the order of occurrence is not respected. This was not the basis of selection. In both pavilions the reliefs do not follow the texts' sequence, even when stories from a specific Indian text are grouped together, as in the case of the stories from the most frequently illustrated text, the Ramayana. Also several meaningful events in the original texts have

been omitted. The criteria for exclusion may have been that of the Brahmans who presumably conceived the visual narrative of the temple. The very generalised observation that the amorous encounters of Krishna or Rama have been excluded, as well as Krishna's pastoral life, would seem to suggest that the Khmers preferred scenes of action rather than the contemplative ones, for the obvious reasons that these would not enhance the divine and heroic image of the king. I will return to the various attempts by scholars to make sense out of the reliefs narrative 'order' and narrative scheme in my concluding chapter.

2) Order of telling

In literature the events of a story can be presented as processes through time, succeeding each other in time, whereas in sculptural reliefs only fixed moments can be depicted. The visual rendering of events progressing in time is problematic for sculptors. In Western art, various theories have been formulated on the technique of visual representation of various moments of a story. Marijke Klokke²⁴, in a recent publication which refers to the pioneering works of Weitzmann (1957) and Wickhoff (1950), concludes that there are 3 main parameters: the number of moments in the story (episodes, events) visualised; the number of scenes (panel/s) representing this/these moments; and the form by which they are both represented. The latter refers to the fact that episodes and panels can follow a continuous, a sequential, an alternate or a cyclical order of visual representation, involving the concept of time flow. The methodological classifications by the above authors are quite similar, but in several instances the meaning they attribute to nomenclature's terms employed is confusing. For the purpose of this study, I propose a simplified scheme:

Linear method, in which the story is told in a linear way, either as a single event or as events rolling in time (like in a frieze). This is typical of the large reliefs in the 3rd enclosure's gallery, like the one depicting the Historic Procession, the Churning of the Ocean of Milk, and the great epic battles. Each event is narrated in a linear way, from left to right, or

²⁴ Klokke M.J., *Tantri reliefs on Javanese candi*, KITLV Press, Leiden, 1993, p.69

converging from the extreme ends of the panel towards ~~the~~ its centre, even when the event is visually represented in two or more registers.

In the corner pavilions, this linear method applies only to the reliefs above the lintels because, due to their layout along a single register, a single event is generally narrated in this way. We read it from left to right, or perhaps going back and forth, along a path which is marked for us by most interesting visual signs. When the relief's story is arranged according to the text 'order of occurrence', then the linear order of reading is chronological.

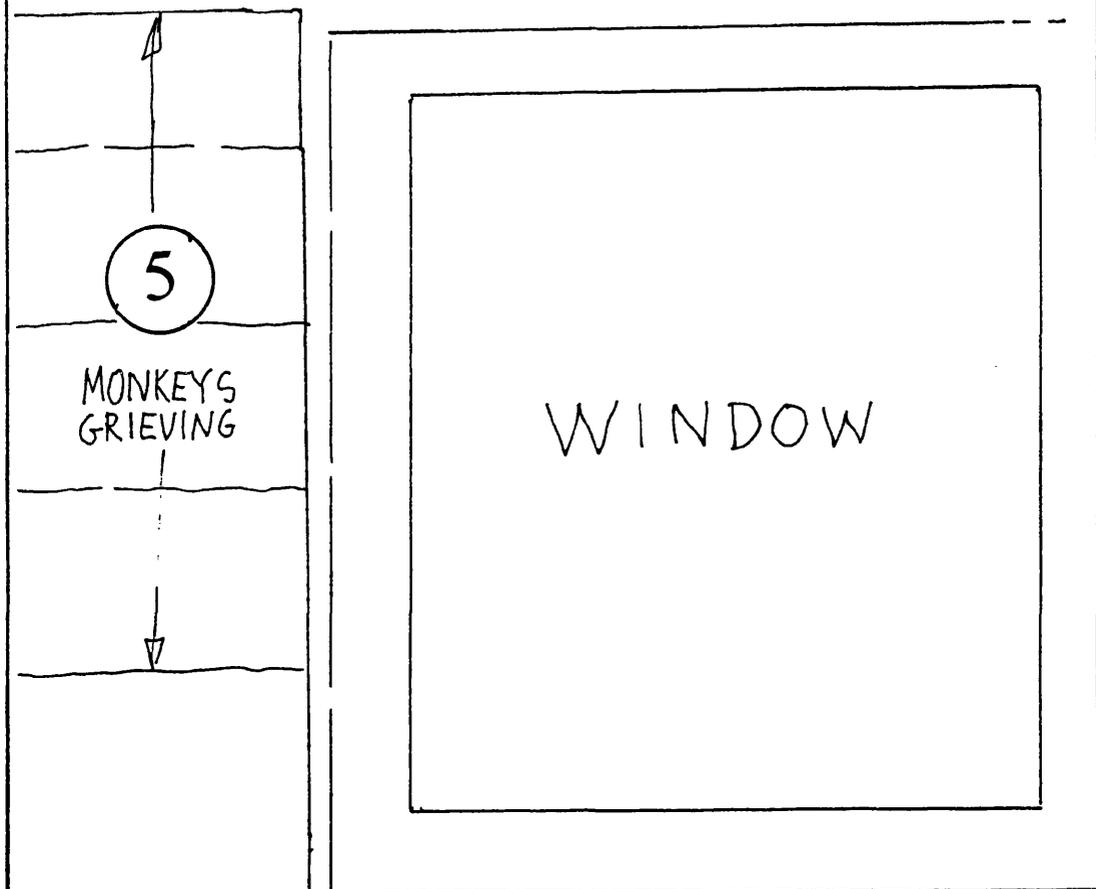
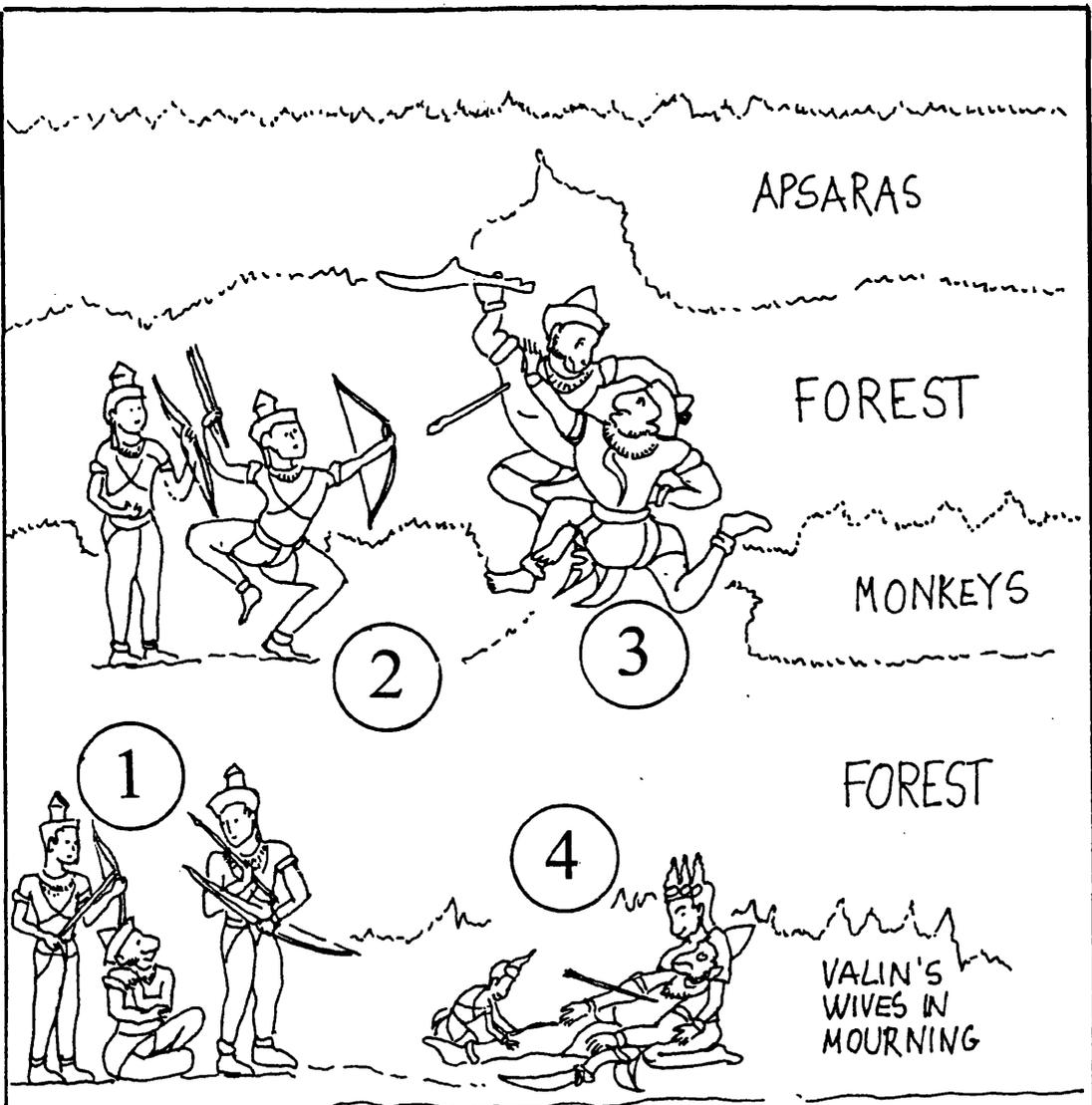
Ellipsic method²⁵, which does not develop the whole story, but utilises one or more scenes to be depicted in a single panel giving a synthesis of the elements which allow us to identify the source of the narrative. Similar to this method is the "cyclic method" of narrative representation, by which the story is rendered in various scenes each depicting a specific moment but in separate panels (Wickhoff's "episodic method" may be included in this category).

Within the ellipsic method there seems to be a 'grammar' for the order through which a story is told in a single relief. It allows us to perceive a story (or allegory) by subdividing our reading into 3 stages: the starting section of the story or plot²⁶; its unfolding; and its conclusion or the outcome. In the corner pavilions, for the depiction of a story in a single panel the sculptors utilised sometimes the ellipsic method of visual representation applied to the depiction in superimposed registers (or pseudo-registers).

The best example of ellipsic representation and temporal progression in the corner pavilions is the panel representing **Rama killing Valin** (S.8), where the scene on the upper register which anticipates the story, depicts the fight between

²⁵ Ellipsis is a canonical narrative tempo (or speed), occurring when one or more components in a situation that is being recounted, are missing. See Prince G., *Dictionary of Narratology*, no editor's name or date available.

²⁶ The *story* of a narrative is what (the basic material, or *fabula*) is presented in a certain order, as opposed to the *plot* which is the outline of situations and events. The *story* emphasizes the chronology of a narrative, while the *plot* the causes.



S.8 - The death of Valin

Sugriva and his brother Valin, as well as Rama killing Valin. The death of Valin and his mourning by Tara and other wives are represented in the lower register. The reading of this relief is quite complex, and needs some explanation because the episode of Rama's murder of Valin is narrated in 5 events. These are arranged in an ellipse of consecutive scenes woven into an organic entity, with a clear sense of continuity of time and space, e.g.:

1. Sugriva in conversation with Rama and Lakshmana
2. Rama has released the lethal arrow against Valin
3. Valin is mortally wounded while fighting Sugriva
4. Valin dies in the arms of Tara
- (1. Sugriva in conversation with Rama and Lakshmana)
5. The monkeys are grieving the death of their king

The scene of the discussion between Sugriva, Rama and Lakshmana creates ambiguity, making it difficult to decide where the starting point of the temporal progression is (see attached illustration). This scene could portray the discussion they had before the fight, and which caused Rama to promise to kill Valin. Alternatively, it could also represent the discussion held after the fight, when Sugriva expresses his sorrow at being the cause of his brother's death.

The first reading - which I favour because it contains Rama's motive to kill Valin - might be substantiated by the wish of the Khmer artists to have the scene of the murder depicted in a unified way, together with its cause: Rama's arrow - dying Valin, in a chain of cause and effect. To do so they had to depict both events on the same horizontal space, the same register, thus excluding the possibility of any other event being narrated before it on the same register. Consequently, the conversation of Sugriva with Rama, which took place before the killing, had to be depicted in the register below. Therefore the reading is not linear, left-right, top-bottom, but in a circular order 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Should one prefer to consider the second option, that of the conversation between Rama and Sugriva having taken place after Valin's death, then it would be the conclusion of the circular reading of the story, following the sequence 2, 3, 4, 1, 5. These main

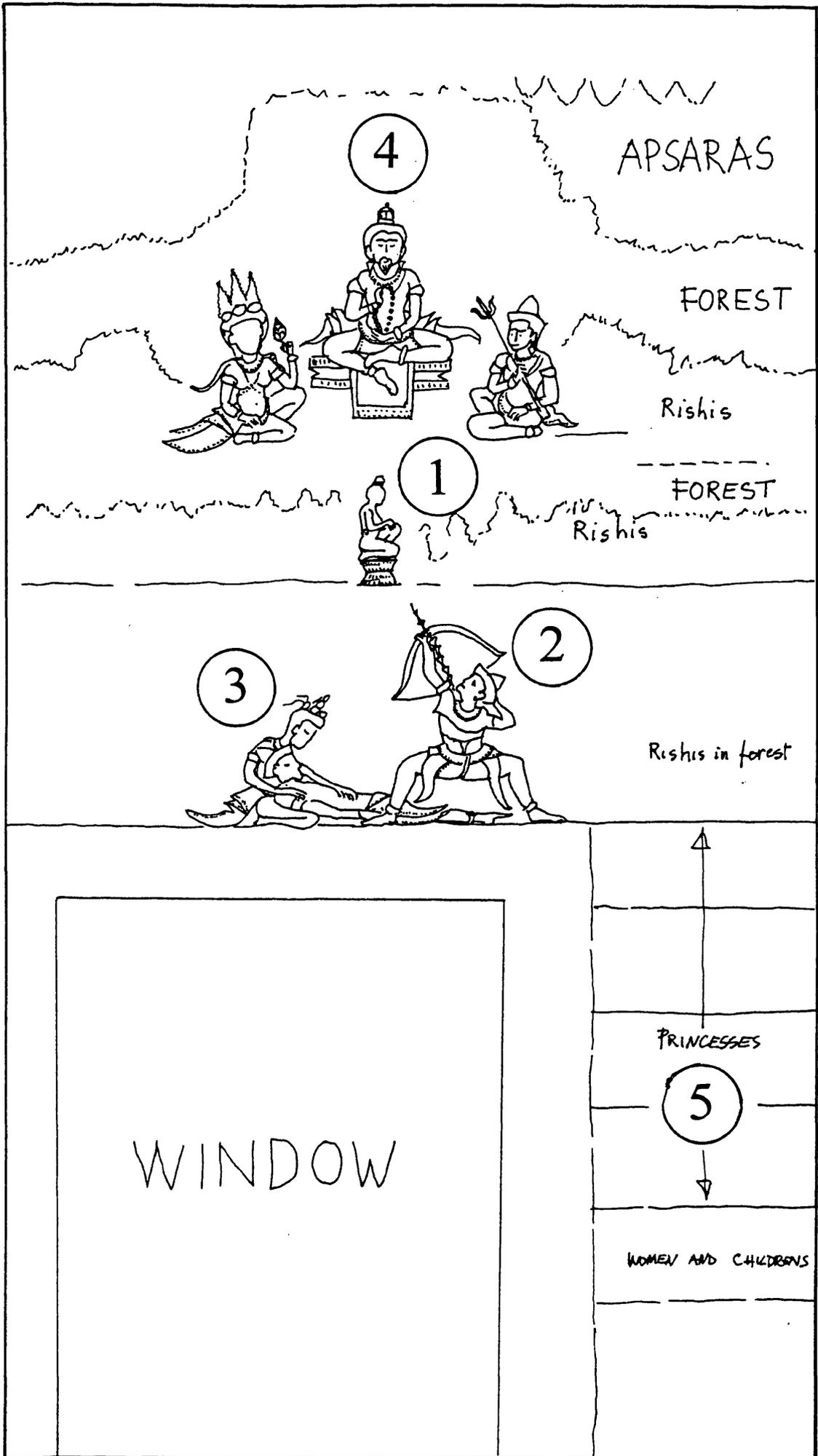
moments summarise the classic structure of the story, that is: the beginning of a narration with an action referring to a specific episode (the fight of the brothers); the middle part of the story with the consequence of Rama's promise (the killing of Valin); and the conclusion of the previous two actions, the dying Valin and the epilogue with Valin's sermon. We are filling all the gaps of the ellipsic storytelling by mentally reconstructing the missing elements on the basis of our knowledge of the original text.

The most interesting feature of this narrative is that the key element and the most meaning-rich object, the brand new shining arrow that Rama holds in his arm, functions as a prophetic vector that ends in the arrow transfixed in the body of the dying Valin. It unites thus the beginning of the story with its conclusion, reinforcing the cyclic structure of the relief narrative. This suggests that the 'order of telling' for the relief is not the same as the 'order of occurrence' of the events in the Ramayana text.

Another example of the ellipsic narrative method is to be found in the relief portraying **Shiva reducing Kama to ashes** (see detailed description of relief S.7). There, the crucial episode of the incinerating ray that emanated from Shiva's eye - the killing agent - is missing, while the representation of the dead body is highlighted, perhaps because it implied future resurrection. The relief narrates the episode in 3 events, or consecutive scenes, woven into one organic entity, as follows:

1. Shiva in meditation (different from 4)
2. Kama in the process of shooting his arrow
3. Kama dead or his reincarnation as Pradyumna
4. Shiva and Parvati
5. Princesses and women with children

The problem with this relief is that Shiva, who is the target of Kama's arrow, is the small figure in one of the middle register, which is difficult to see in the corner pavilion in normal light. Therefore, a visitor should read the story as 1,



S.7 - Shiva reducing Kama to ashes

2, 3, 4, 5 where 4 represents Shiva triumphant, flanked by Parvati and Nandin/Saialidi. Whichever number is given to the events, our order of reading reveals that the temporal sequence follows an ellipsis order.

Some observations can be made about the visual representation of time in this same relief. The rays from the third eye of Shiva, which reduce Kama to ashes, are not represented in the relief; the sculptors resorted rather to another technique for rendering such a quick event. The legs of the dead Kama are represented between the legs of the standing Kama, meaning that he must have fallen instantly on the very spot, when stricken by Shiva's burning ray and converted to ashes. The sculptors, though, preferred to illustrate him as a dead body rather than a tiny heap of ashes. Alternatively, a possibly more plausible explanation is that the dead body represents Kama's reincarnation as Pradyumna (see Part 1, S.6). In either instance, the Khmer sculptors managed to represent an instantaneous action and create a remarkable piece of visual narrative. Kama, the key element and the most meaningful character, is represented first alive and then dead or being resurrected on the same spot, thus uniting the beginning with the conclusion of the story, and reinforcing the cyclic structure of the relief narrative. This is exactly as we have seen in the relief depicting the story of Rama killing Valin.

I will conclude this chapter dealing with the 'order of telling' by reiterating the peculiarity of the narrative technique used by the Khmer for the tapestry reliefs (Part I, chapter 4.6). The protagonists of an event are framed within individual small medallions that make the woof of the composition. The story is revealed when combining the medallions along a horizontal and/or a vertical line, in quite a unique way.

Narrative relationship main wall/pillar relief

Another important element of the narrative technique lies in the relationship between the narrative of the main wall relief above the window of the corner pavilion, and that of the relief sculpted on the pillar beside the window²⁷. In most cases, the elements sculpted in the pillars are part of the narrative theme on the wall above. Their relationship is categorised in Table 1.6; the personages who take part to the story, besides the main protagonist/s, are called participants.

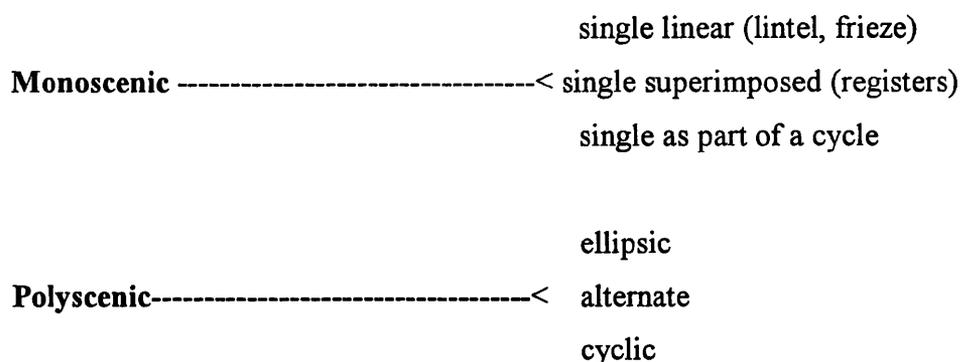
From the reading of this table, one can see that in most of the pillars, the participants are either the same depicted in the wall panel above, or are related to them. Thus, the narrative of the wall's relief carries on in the pillars. However, no major events are represented; the participating personages (participants) are simply subsidiary elements of the main event narrated in the wall panel. Sometimes they are active participants (moving, dancing, playing drums, etc.), or witnesses of the main event (sitting quietly, watching).

²⁷ Each corner pavilion has 2 walls without windows, 6 walls with one window, and 3 walls with a large door (Fig.2). The shape and arrangement of the reliefs varies according to the wall on which they are sculpted.

| | | | | | | | | |
|------|------------------------------|---------|--------|---|---|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|---|
| N.1 | Invitation to descend | Vishnu | Male | 2 | Surya & Chandra | Chariot riding | Parading | Narrative continuity |
| N.2 | Akrura | Krishna | Male | 3 | Female, princesses with 3p. <i>mukuta</i> | Under umbrellas, holding lotuses | ? Participating | ? In narrative continuity with wall's scene |
| N.5 | Sita's ordeal | Rama | Male | 5 | Seated monkeys | Finger-pointing, or one arm on chest | Participating to sorrow | Narrative continuity |
| N.7 | Rama/ Puspaka | Rama | Male | 4 | Standing monkeys | Dancing, playing music | Participating to festivity | Narrative continuity |
| N.8 | Hanuman/ Sita | Rama | Female | 4 | Female, <i>rakshini</i> | Seated, holding sword | Guarding Sita | Narrative continuity |
| N.11 | Krishna & gopis | Krishna | Female | 3 | Female, adolescent <i>gopis</i> | Dancing gopis | Participating to festivity | Narrative continuity |

Visual narrative layout or composition

A further aspect of Khmer reliefs, is their narrative layout. Since a story revolves around actions that occur in space and unfold in time, space and time are the two elements on which a categorisation, or classification, can be based. Most scholars have used space and arrangement of forms in space (layout) as the main criteria for visual narration, proposing a scheme that can be applied to a single scene/event (monoscenic) or to several scenes or events (polyscenic). I propose to use the modified basic scheme below²⁸:



This scheme is preferable to the one proposed by Weitzmann (1947: 12-46)²⁹ because it avoids the possible confusion created by his category of 'simultaneous method'. All polyscenic narratives have many events represented together on the same surface. It is reasonable to assume that in Weitzmann's 'monoscenic method' the story chosen is 'the meaningful one'; however, one must be aware that the choice of a 'meaningful' scene is related to the culture in existence at the time the reliefs were conceived and sculpted. I also consider unsatisfactory Wickhoff's classification scheme, 'complementary', 'isolated' and 'continuous', as I do Klokke's term 'culminant method'³⁰, used to define the

²⁸In this paper I use the term 'scene' in its common meaning of a visual event, and not in its definition as a canonical narrative tempo (G. Prince), involving narrative speed. I am also aware that the abstract term 'act' (something that takes place, the 'experience of an event' of Bal) would be preferable. Act is a syntagmatic constituent of an action, an action being made up by several acts (G. Prince). 'Event', by definition, is the transition from one state to another state; perhaps in some case the term 'happening' would also be suitable. Then a system which would have single-act/many-acts terminology, with one act or more acts (from actions to events) represented in a single panel, would be clearer than monoscenic/polyscenic

²⁹ in M.J. Klokke, *Tantri reliefs on Javanese candi*, KITLV Press, Leiden, 1993, p.69

³⁰ *ibidem*, p.70

choice of a single episode to represent the whole story, because different criteria may have been followed when the reliefs were conceived.

This variety of concepts reveals a problematic which could be solved by a more technical approach, by keeping the elements of classification well separated, such as visual act/event clearly distinct from the time in which it may develop. For instance Weitzmann mixes the number of scenes with the concept of time, like 'monoscenic' with 'simultaneous'. As the counterpart of 'simultaneous', I would suggest the concept of 'diachronous' (taking place in different times), while I would call 'synchronic' the representation of an event frozen in time, and 'polychronic' a sequence of events rolling in time. See for instance, the reliefs of the south-western corner pavilion representing the story of **Ravana shaking Mt. Kailasa** (S.5). It is a monoscenic layout (a single scene being represented) depicting a small fragment of a story which takes place for a few instants. We do not know, however, if we are dealing with the moment when Ravana - depicted in gigantic size - is shaking the mountain, or when Shiva awakens to punish Ravana for his outrageous intention. In both instances, though, the moments are diachronous. Khmer representations of a story provide a fragmented reading and fragmented time, where the figures, made hierarchical within the compositional space, have a specific function in the reading of the relief.

Another system of categorisation for visual narrative is based on different modes of temporal progression, that is, the way in which time is taken into consideration, avoided or deliberately subverted. A new classification of visual narrative, based on these elements, has been proposed by Vidya Dehejia³¹ in a recent paper dealing with Indian reliefs and paintings. I believe that in Khmer art, like in ancient India, the articulation of temporal succession was evidently of little consequence to the artists, perhaps because in Indian cosmology time was considered to be 'cyclical' rather than linear (the concept of cosmic and divine creation, maintenance, destruction, of cosmic Day and Night, of the Yuga, of the cycle of reincarnation, etc.). Moreover, one can speculate about whether the lesser

³¹ *India's visual narratives: the dominance of space over time*, in *Paradigms of Indian architecture*, edit. by G.H.R. Tillotson, Curzon 1997, p.101

importance assigned to the element of time in India's visual narrative was partly due to the system closely following its literary narrative, in which plots contain sub-plots, and stories are contained within stories. Popular oral telling and dramatised versions of various stories take great satisfaction in presenting the entanglement of sub-plots³². In Cambodia, an example of this kind can be found in the relief of Shiva in the Pine Forest (S.4) where, at the base of the landscape, where the main action takes place, is a row of ascetics in meditation. Two groups of them (see details in Plate 8) are depicted in the act of running towards two young *gopis*, creating a subplot that adds to the already sensual flavour of the main story.

One can raise the issue, as Dehejia has done³³, of whether the identification of several modes of visual narration detected by Western scholars is purely a research tool, or whether these modes reflect some ancient indigenous distinctions. It is evident that artistic choices were being made about the manner in which the message had to be communicated. It seems reasonable to assume that the Khmers in their theoretical framework were operating out of a tradition of instinctive disregard for the element of time, to the advantage of a spatial 'logic'.

Relationship stories narrated/original texts

Examples of discrepancies between what is narrated in the original texts and what is represented in the reliefs are extremely rare in Angkor Wat, considering the hundreds of sculptural representations in the temple. Two cases deserve particular attention. The first is that of the panel depicting **Krishna and the *gopis*** (N.11), where Krishna is depicted as Vishnu enthroned and possibly flanked by ?Balarama. In the text (chapter 29 of the *Bhagavata Purana*) we are told - instead - that the god appears as one of the *gopa*³⁴, in all his youthful beauty playing the flute, and probably without Balarama. Alternatively, we may be dealing with Krishna enacting the moment when he re-appears to the *gopis* as the supreme god who teaches them about the selfishness of human love and the foolishness of accomplishing the objects of desire (*Ibidem*, chapter 32). In this

³² *ibidem*, p.101

³³ *ibidem*, p.104.

case, though, as in the previous one, he should be alone, without Balarama. The second example is to be found in the panel portraying **Shiva in the Pine Forest** (S.4), where Shiva appears radiant and sensual, as described in the text (*Linga Purana*, Book,2, chapter 9). He is, however, framed within a door (or a construction symbolic of a temple) on top of which is a crocodile. Both are not mentioned in the written text at all. Their representation cannot be read as an artistic licence because Shiva with a crocodile over the door appears also in a wallpaper relief of the Western gopura. It may very well be the case of an illustration of a local Cambodian tradition³⁵.

Polytextuality

In few instances, the reliefs under study seem to have been inspired by more than one original text or source. This is the case of the relief narrating the episode of the Sita's *svayamvara* (N.10), where it seems that elements from the *Ramayana* occur together with those taken from the *Mahabharata* or some local legend. According to the *Ramayana*, the *svayamvara* was resolved by Rama lifting the ancestral bow, and not by transfixing with an arrow a bird behind a rotating wheel, as described in the *Mahabharata*, which is the version shown in the relief. Thus, it appears that the sculptors may have confused and mixed the two episodes, or may have followed some local tradition or textual variant unknown to us. Another example of polytextual sources for the composition has to be found in the relief narrating **The murder of Pralamba** and **The dousing of fire** (S.9), where two separate chapters of the *Bhagavata Purana* (chapters 18 and 19) are depicted on the same panel. This plurality of sources produces an ambiguous 'order of reading', as the texts are fragmented and mixed together. This polytextual narrative upsets the way we want to proceed in understanding the visual version and makes the interpretation difficult; it may explain why the meaning of this relief is not yet fully understood.

³⁴ male cowherds are called *gopa*, and female *gopis*.

3) Order of reading of the panels

To conclude the present analysis of the visual narrative, I turn my attention to the 'order of reading'. In reading the visual narrative's components found in all 12 reliefs of each corner pavilion rather than in single individual panels, the viewer cannot find a coherent narrative whole, as the order in which the stories have been depicted ('order of telling') moves diagonally back and forth. Even more puzzling are the differences between the south-western pavilion to the north-western pavilion. No 'order of telling' is recognisable, leading one to speculate that, if the Khmer artists did have an order, they followed concepts we cannot understand for the lack of textual information.

Ideally, one could 'read out' in the reliefs of the corner pavilions 3 distinct metaphorical meanings: that of the 'order of occurrence' which is the meaning imbedded in the Puranic texts, the *Ramayana* and the *Harivamsa*; the meaning of the 'order of telling' which reflects the one which the ideators/artists inscribed into the reliefs they sculpted; and the meaning which the viewer creates in his/her associative 'order of reading' of the reliefs.

1.6. CONCLUSIONS

From the analysis of the semiotics and narratology of the reliefs of the corner pavilions presented above, it seems reasonable to assume that the Khmers applied their own figurative codes and rules to the sculpting of their reliefs. They also respected a grammar of visual narration (layout of narrative elements and method of narration). The narrative techniques of the panels in the corner pavilions, pediments, half pediments, lintels and pilasters seem to follow a layout of the monoscenic type, where the depiction of a single scene/event is preferred. Layouts of polyscenic type (several scene/events depicted in the same panel) are

³⁵ The symbolism of the crocodile is discussed in the description of the relief of Shiva in the Pine Forest (S.4)

not common; two of the clearest cases have been discussed above (e.g. Rama killing Valin (S.8), and Shiva reducing Kama to ashes (S.7)).

Outstanding examples of polyscenic layout are to be found in the large panels of the gallery of the 3rd enclosure. There, in the relief depicting Suryavarman's historic procession, at least two events/scenes are shown in the same panel. The king appears twice: once sitting on his throne on Mt. Sivapada, and another time standing on the royal elephant, participating in the procession. The two scenes are represented in a linear and continuous sequence, without framing devices³⁶. The same technique is used for the large panel of the Victory of Krishna over the *asura* Bana, where Krishna appears 7 times with 8 arms and twice with 4 arms, as the main protagonist of battle moments (sub-plots) within the greater event of the mythic battle. These polyscenic techniques are quite simple compared to the complexity of Indian compositions illustrating the life of Buddha and the *jatakas*, which seem to be the norm at Sanchi, Amaravati, Ajanta and other sites (please refer the paper of Vidya Dehejia mentioned above).

With regard to the method of narration, it is evident that the simplicity of the linear method (one or more events narrated in linear continuity) was preferred by Khmer sculptors, and extensively used for the reliefs of the corner pavilions and other sites of the temple. In the galleries of the 3rd enclosure, its extreme use may have been induced by the great length of the walls and perhaps by ritual requirements. The ellipsic method (when only some events are used to give a synthesis of the whole story) goes together with the polyscenic layout. It is used in some panels in the corner pavilions (S.8, Rama killing Valin, S.7, Shiva reducing Kama to ashes) and in some pediments, notably the one showing Lakshmana wounded by the magic arrows of Indrajit (Pl.18), and the one of Rama killing Valin (Pl.23), both in gallery of the 2nd enclosure. It seems that the Khmers, through the ellipsic method, aimed not only at story telling, but also at highlighting the cause-effect signification of the story. In all these aspects,

³⁶ in this context, framing devices are the elements introduced in a linear visual narrative to separate one scene from another, like a tree, or an architectural element (usually a column)

although the stories narrated by the Khmers are faithfully derived from Indian texts, the semiotic rules, the narrative language, and the sculptural style are uniquely Khmer.

*Part II - Chapter 2***INTERPRETATION OF THE RELIEFS IN THE CORNER PAVILIONS**

After having examined the reliefs in the light of semiological and narrative techniques, I present below my interpretation of the meaning of the reliefs in the corner pavilions, individually and in relation to one another. Furthermore, I will demonstrate how they acquire further meaning, and probably their true function, when considered within the context of the reliefs found in other sites of the temple and of the architectural framework of Angkor Wat as a whole. Individually, or in thematic association, these reliefs reflect the Khmers' vision of reality, the way they conceived the world, and particularly, certain principles and concepts which may have been relevant to Suryavarman II at the time the temple was built.

2.1. THE SELECTION OF THEMES

From the inscription of Sdok Kak Thom¹ we believe that Divakara *pandita* was in charge of religious matters at the time of Suryavarman II. One can assume that he, and possibly other Brahmans dealing with the conception of the temple, selected the themes to be visually narrated in the reliefs of Angkor Wat. The selection they made may have been dictated by the need to fulfil several principles, including that of creating the most sacred construction of the time, the most outstanding temple dedicated to Vishnu, the monument which would reflect Suryavarman II's importance, and so on.

Metaphysical and religious thematic choice. As can be seen in tables 4.1.a and 4.1.b, a variety of metaphysical and religious themes were selected for the two western corner pavilions. The clearest examples are to be found in the reliefs narrating the stories of the Churning of the Ocean of Milk (S.1), Shiva in the Pine

¹ See note 1 in Part I, chapter 1

Forest (S.4), Krishna receiving the offering destined to Indra (S.12), the introduction to the descent of Vishnu (N.1), and Akrura's vision (N.4).

These themes may be only part of a more complete epistemological discourse that the Brahmans wanted to imprint into the temple. One can speculate that the original thematic program may have included the two other pavilions to the east side of the temple, thus adding 24 more panels, and completing the 'message' of the 3rd enclosure. The thematic choice for the long galleries was comparatively simple, involving only 5 mythic battles, 2 of legendary situations, and one on the theme of the Origin of our era. The creators of the temple had the opportunity to subdivide the galleries in a series of panels; instead they followed the architectural plan which placed the large relief's panels on the wall between corner pavilions and axial doors of the galleries, an unusually long space. The Khmer utilised this entire space by depicting impressive epic battles and processions with thousands of personages, which required extensive horizontal surfaces.

Thematic choice from the Ramayana. With regard to the selection of themes exclusively dealing with the *Ramayana*, it is evident that no episodes from the first two thirds of the *Bala kanda* and of the entire *Uttara kanda* have been represented in the reliefs of the corner pavilions. This is not surprising since some scholars consider these parts later (12th century²) additions to the Valmiki text and therefore not belonging to the classic mythological tradition. They were excluded also from the *Ramaker*, perhaps because lacking dramatic events that could produce strong visual effects in reliefs. It seems that the Khmers had a preference for visual representations of fights and battles between gods and demons or wicked people, for the acrobatic humorous adventures of monkeys, and for the colossal epic battle of Kurukshetra. From the life of Sita, they favoured only two episodes: her captivity (represented by Sita languishing under the *ashoka* tree; N.8) and the ordeal of fire (N.5). The story of Ravana abducting Sita is not depicted in the corner pavilions; it is, however, illustrated in a small half pediment of the NE part of the temple. Instead, Viradha's attempt to kidnap her is

represented in the corner pavilion (N.6), as well as in half pediments from other locations. Rama instead is omnipresent, always paired with Lakshmana, holding bow and arrows, like an heroic god. None of the prodigious adventures of Hanuman are represented in Angkor Wat, and he is rarely individually recognisable.

Thematic choice from the Puranas. The thematic choice of Puranic myths and Krishna's legends is more difficult to assess, due to the large repertoire. When comparing the selection in Angkor Wat with that in the temples of Bapuon, for instance, the absence of stories of Krishna's childhood is noticeable. Only the episode of the god as a young boy pulling the heavy mortar (over the lintel in the south-western corner pavilion, S.6) is represented, while his dramatic escapes from the murderous attempts of Kamsa are avoided. Stories dealing with the adolescent Krishna are the most common; they include the episode in which Krishna receives the gifts destined to Indra (S.12), when he lifts Mt. Govardhana (S.2), and that of his apparition to the *gopis* (N.11). These themes of youthfulness may refer to the young age of the Suryavarman when he was crowned king (?14-16 years old³). As in many other Khmer temples, stories of Krishna's adulthood after the killing of Kamsa are missing.

Shaivite thematic choice. In Indian mythology, Shiva myths and legends are comparatively fewer than those dealing with Vishnu, and this is reflected in Khmer art. Some important Shaivite stories, however, are represented in Angkor Wat amongst the innumerable depiction of Vaishnava events. The most popular is the one of Shiva reducing Kama to ashes (S.7), or squashing the hideous Ravana under the weight of Mt. Kailasa (S.5), followed by his mysterious apparition in the Pine Forest (in a doorway under the icon of a small crocodile, S.4), and of his betrothal (S.11). These 4 stories are all in the south-western corner pavilion. There are no depictions of the god dancing the *tandava* (it appears, instead, on pediments of the SW quadrant of the temple), the destruction of the Daksha sacrifice, intimate events with Parvati, or any story dealing with his son Ganesha,

² Goldman R.P., *The Ramayana of Valmiki*, Princeton Library of Asian Translations, 1984, Vol. 1, p.15

³ See note 6 in chapter 1.2.

a deity almost entirely ignored in Angkor Wat⁴, except in the late relief of the Victory of Krishna over the *asura* Bana⁵ and that may be an addition of the 16th century.

Thematic choice and *shastras*. It is possible that the selection of themes to be illustrated in the corner pavilions, and in the whole temple, may have been encoded into Khmer manuals dealing with the architectural (*vastushastras*)⁶ and sculptural canons (*silpashastras*)⁷. In this hypothesis, the literate Brahman class⁸ was the reader and the writer of the *shastras*. Besides containing a general theoretical overview of temple construction and decoration, those who made the thematic choice may have had a deep knowledge of the classic Indian texts. In these presumed manuals there may have already been a selection of themes from the Indian epics, or even different forms of narrative, with different incidents and characters being emphasised to the detriment of others. Some may have stressed theological concepts (the origins, the gods) others the prowess of the heroes (battle scenes, martial arts, right to the throne) or sentimental affairs (abduction, love stories). In other instances, they may have praised secular values (royal establishment, life at court) or spiritual ones (penance, asceticism, the *rishis*), and so forth.

The criteria for the exclusion of meaningful events by the creators of the reliefs, and their original selective choice, are difficult to detect, particularly when considering the innumerable possibilities for exclusion. The very general observation that events related to the amorous encounters of Krishna or Rama have been excluded, as well as Krishna's pastoral life, would seem to suggest that the Khmer preferred scenes of action to the detriment of the contemplative ones. It is obvious that these would not enhance the heroic image of the king. In relation to the *Ramayana*, it is surprising to notice the absence of any representation of the

⁴ Although rarely seen in Khmer reliefs, Ganesha was popular in sculpture.

⁵ Roveda V., *Khmer Mythology*, Thames and Hudson, 1997, p.45

⁶ Stella Kramrisch, *Hindu Temples*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1976, pp.232-295

⁷ Sivaramurti C., *India, Ceylon, Nepal, Tibet*, in 'Storia universale dell'arte, UTET, Torino, 1988, p.17, and Coomaraswamy A.K., *The transformation of nature in art*, Dover, New York, 1956, p.166

⁸ On the assumption that in the Khmer country, like in India, the highest cast of the Brahmins was the holder of all cultural traditions, it derives that it was also the distributor of the cultural heritage to non- or partially-literate societies, either in writing or by oral transmission (see Jack Goody: *Literacy in traditional societies*, Cambridge Univ.Press, 1968)

episode in which Rama killed Shuparnakha, Ravana's sister⁹, the incident that triggered all that followed, from the abduction of Sita to the great battle of Lanka. The event of Sita's abduction is also not sculpted, as well as the ensuing stories of Jatayu and Sampati, royal vulture friends of Rama, who witnessed Sita's abduction: these had nonetheless been well illustrated in the humorous reliefs of the Bapuon temple.

When comparing the reliefs of the corner pavilions with those from other sites in Angkor Wat (large panels, pediments and lintels) or other Angkorean temples (Banteay Srei, Bapuon, ^{Prasat Khna} ~~Wat~~ San Kev, Banteay Samre), one can notice that the same stories and events have been selected again and again, almost as if following a canonical rule. It may be that this adherence to Indian texts was demanded by brahmins in charge of conceiving and designing of the narrative reliefs, and who may have considered essential to preserve classic traditions and to avoid the introduction of local elements. The ancient Khmer bards could also have endlessly repeated the stories which excited people's imagination, or the stories which suited the ideology and taste of the elite, to the detriment of other important stories.

Earlier thematic choice. The thematic choice for the narrative reliefs of Angkor Wat may have been influenced by reliefs in older temples, like Banteay Srei (967 AD), and Bapuon (c.1060 AD)¹⁰.

Banteay Srei provides us with small pediments and lintels which give the first indication of Khmer preference for Puranic stories, like that of Ravana shaking Mt. Kailasa, the rain of Indra (which precedes Krishna lifting Mt. Govardhana), and Krishna killing enemies in whichever form they appear. Several images of Krishna - or Vishnu - killing various monsters while holding them by the hair, or splitting them in two parts, also appear there, together with the popular story of Shiva reducing Kama to ashes. Shiva is also rep[resented] dancing, and on his bull with Uma, or as a *kirata* contesting Arjuna the priority of the killing of the boar. The *Ramayana* repertoire in Banteay Srei includes Sita's abduction by

⁹ perhaps because it would reveal an unchivalry and cruel side of Rama's character

Viradha and Ravana, the ferocious hand to hand fight of Sugriva with Valin, and the return of Rama, Sita and Lakshmana to Ayodhya on the Pushpaka chariot. Of the *Mahabharata*, preference is given to the single fight between Bhima and Duryodhana rather than to dense battle scenes.

The temple of Bapuon supplies a greater variety of themes than that of Angkor Wat thanks to the technique of sculpting considerably smaller panels (at the most 60cm long, and 40cm high; on the gopuras of the second enclosure). Here, it is important to notice the presence of a rich repertoire of stories dealing with Krishna's early childhood (the exchange of children, the massacre of innocent children, the desolation of Vasudeva and Yashoda), none of which is represented at Angkor Wat. In common is, instead, the representation of Krishna subduing the naga Kaliya; of the god slaying the bull-monster Arishta, and perhaps the elephant Kuvalayapida¹¹. At Bapuon there is an even greater variety of stories selected from the *Ramayana*, particularly of Rama and Hanuman confronting all sorts of *rakshasas*, on foot or on chariots, in the battle of Lanka. A panel depicts Rama and Lakshmana as prisoners of the magic arrows of Indrajit. In another panel, Garuda (or a flying Hanuman, with his simian tail!) rescues and frees them. The cycle of adventures of Kumbhakarna is illustrated in a few panels. Other panels tell of Rama's alliance with Sugriva, of Sita prisoner of Ravana, seated under the *ashoka* tree (with one arm sustaining her reclined head in a gesture of great desolation), and exchanging jewels with Hanuman; and probably of Sita's ordeal of fire (with Sita holding her arms above her head). At the Bapuon there are also several Shaivite stories which deal with the life of ascetics; the most famous is illustrated in three superimposed panels narrating the story of Arjuna and the *kirata*, which is concluded in a separate fourth panel depicting Shiva rewarding Arjuna with the magic weapons. Battle scenes from the *Mahabharata* are also depicted, the most striking one representing Bhishma dying on a bed of arrows. Other panels depict stories from daily life, a theme that will be abundantly resumed at Bayon.

¹⁰ For references to the temples and visuals mentioned below, please refer to Roveda V., *Khmer Mythology*, Thames and Hudsons, 1997

¹¹ A full inventory of the narrative reliefs of the Bapuon will only be possible when the temple's restoration is completed.

As one can see from this brief inventory, the reappearance at Angkor Wat of old themes - although in different form and style - seems to support the hypothesis that Khmer temple-planners and sculptors may have used sculpture manuals or *shastras* illustrating the themes to be executed in their sacred monuments. They may also followed the examples of earlier temple. It is undeniable that there is a close analogy not only in the thematic choice which was illustrated in older temples, but also a continuity of iconographic models right down to the small details. For example, at Bapuon (southern gopura of the 2nd gallery) and at Angkor Wat (pediment of the SW corner of the 1st enclosure) Krishna subdues Kaliya while seated astride the *naga* in the attitude of splitting the monster's head in two. This fashion is not faithful to the original text where the god smashes Kaliya's head by the pounding of his feet, as in Indian iconography. The posture of Hanuman exchanging jewels with Sita prisoner of Ravana is also identical in both temples, as it is the stereotypic pose of Sita sustaining with one arm her reclined head in a gesture of great desolation for being prisoner of Ravana.

Some images in the pediments of Banteay Srei may have been literally copied at Angkor Wat. The Banteay Srei Ravana (in the act of shaking Mt. Kailasa) is the same as the one appearing in the SW corner pavilion (S.5), and all the elements of the pediment in which Sugriva/Valin are fighting, reappear in the same corner pavilion (S.8). In here, however, the dying Valin is posited below the two monkeys fighting, and below Rama releasing his lethal arrow into Valin's back. In the Banteay Srei pediment, as well as in one lintel¹², the legs of the fighting Valin and Sugriva are depicted in characteristic interweaving, casting the model for the fighting monkeys which will reoccur in Angkor Wat and many other temples. The image of Krishna killing Kamsa of Angkor Wat's main tower pediment facing south, is reminiscent of the Banteay Srei pediment¹³: in both Krishna grabs his enemy by the hair, and holds a double-bladed axe in his right hand. Also common to both the pediments, is Krishna with the hairstyle of a *gopa*

¹² For illustrations, V. Roveda, *Khmer Mythology*, Thames & Hudson, 1997, pp.41 and 88.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p.45

(cowherd): the only difference is that, in Angkor Wat, instead of a single-knotted hair tuft, he has three.

4.3. THE NARRATIVE PROGRAM

When looking at how the themes in the 12 panels are arranged on the walls of each of the cross-shaped corner pavilion, we can see the difficulty of any attempt to resolve the narrative program - if any - by combining the panels according to a temporal sequence, by their thematic or allegoric content. Indeed, an excessive effort to try to discover a structure or a rule may easily lead to over-interpretation.

Thematic program by textual combinations. A first approach would be simply to combine the stories narrated in the panels of each corner pavilion, and then compare and contrast them with other panels or combinations of panels in the other pavilion. But before doing so, it is useful to look at the textual combination summarised in the Tables 4.1. a and 4.1.b. The reliefs from the SW pavilion refer mainly to Puranic texts, with only 2 events out of 12 being from the *Ramayana*. In the NW pavilion, instead, the themes from the *Ramayana* dominate (8 out of 12). Amongst the Puranic themes of the SW corner pavilion, the number of Shaivite stories is high (4 out of 10); there are no Shaivite events in the NW pavilion, nor in other panels of the temple. Moreover, the Puranic and *Ramayana* themes are not shown according to a temporal sequence, whether one visit the corner pavilions in either clock- or anti-clock wise directions. The program of visual images taken from different texts is apparently organised in a way seemingly devoid of programmatic connections.

Pairing by narrative allegories. Pairing the themes may reveal a narrative program, but the possibilities of pairing one relief with another (see fig.9) are related to the multiplicity of allegoric meaning of each panel. For instance, the panel of the story of Krishna and the *gopis* (N.11) which is allegorical of the surrender of the individual to the Supreme Soul and of the need for devotion, is charged with such a specific meaning that its pairing with another panel is

problematic. There is in fact an iconological analogy with the relief narrating Shiva in the Pine Forest (S.4; SW corner pavilion). In both reliefs small groups of agitated women appear joyously reacting to the god's apparition. There is, however, a difference in their allegoric meaning. In the episode of the Pine Forest we are dealing with renunciation of the worshipper in order to become acceptable to Shiva, and with immediate liberation through devotion. In the story of Krishna and the *gopis*, the allegory lies in the need of love for the god, and of total union with Krishna through *bhakti*.

Other associations are simple and obvious. The panel portraying 'The introduction to the descent of Vishnu' (N.1) may be pared with that of Akrura's vision (N.4), as both refer to the divine revelation of Krishna. In the SW corner pavilion, the panel of Ravana shaking Mt. Kailasa (S.5) and Shiva reducing Kama to ashes (S.7), may allegorically refer to victorious spirituality and the triumph of asceticism. There are pairings that are blatant but hide their allegorical meaning, being events that are a prelude to very significant developments in the story. For instance, the pairing of the panel depicting the alliance of Rama and Vibhishana (N.9) with that representing the alliance of Rama and Sugriva (N.3); or the panel of the killing of Kabandha (N.12) and the killing of Marica (S.3).

Eleanor Mannikka¹⁴ has put forward a theory of allegorical meanings for the reliefs of the corner pavilions based on combining the themes of the western corner pavilions according to the pattern of the swastika and the lotus flower. This novel approach is worth discussing because, as Mannikka puts, it would lead to a better understanding of the pattern of the thematic distribution in the reliefs in the corner pavilions. In the swastika pattern arrangement of the panels from the NW corner pavilion¹⁵, one of the swastika's arms connects the story of Rama on the Pushpaka (N.7) with that of Krishna bringing back Mt. Maniparvata (N.2) on the basis that both allude to 'victory'. The other arm of the swastika combines the scene of the Homage to Krishna (interpreted in this thesis as Akrura's vision, N.4) with that of the Homage to Vishnu on a mountaintop (interpreted in this thesis as Krishna and the *gopis*, N.11) because both imply 'homage' to a god. Mannikka's

¹⁴ Mannikka E., *Angkor Wat*, University of Hawaii' Press, 1996, p. 182

further pairing according to the opposite swastika configuration, associates the story of the Introduction to the descent of Vishnu (N.1) with that of Sita meeting Hanuman (N.8), on the basis that both mean a 'promise to rescue'. The other arm of the swastika puts together the episode of Sita's ordeal (N.5) with that of Sita's *swayamvara* (N.10), since both are considered 'tests', presumably of strength. Moreover, according to Mannikka, the counter-clockwise swastika (solar symbol) unifies male-dominated scenes of victory or homage, while the clockwise swastika (lunar symbol), groups female, Sita-centred, stories. In order for the above configurations to work, a statue of Vishnu must have existed at the centre of the swastika pattern of the NW pavilion¹⁵, and the sculpture of a linga at the centre of the 4-petal lotus pattern of the SW pavilion. According to my observations, this is improbable because there are no holes on the floor at the centre of the pavilions marking the base of a pedestal on which the statue was placed, as instead is clearly visible on the floor at the centre of the cruciform pavilion. This on the assumption that, as I believe, the floor slabs of the western pavilions are still the original ones.

The patterns of allegorical meanings put forward by Mannikka are questionable when compared to the stronger symbolism of the story depicted on the panels, either in isolation or in combination with others, as can be seen from Table 4.1.a and 4.1.b. For instance her Homage to Krishna that is interpreted here as Akrura's vision (N.4), implies the deeper concept of revelation of the divinity of Krishna than a simple act of homage. Mannikka's Homage to Vishnu on a mountaintop is here seen as the story of Krishna and the *gopis* (N.11), with all its religious implications (see below). Her pairing of the physical strength that Rama displays at the *swayamvara* should be more meaningfully correlated with the mighty power of Krishna lifting and carrying back Mount Maniparvata (or, of Krishna dragging a heavy mortar, depicted in the SW pavilion). Similarly, the moral strength which Sita displays during her ordeal of fire would be similar to the one she needed to endure the cruel long captivity with Ravana. Finally, one can notice that the swastika scheme of Mannikka's can be replaced by simpler

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 184-185, fgs. 6.8 and 6.9.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, pg.209.

direct diagonal lines; equally, the lotus configuration by a cross. Despite her meticulous analysis of the geometric patterns, she does not unravel a narrative sequence linking the stories depicted in each corner pavilion or between the southern and northern corner pavilion.

From the above discussion, it seems that it is not easy to perceive meaningful pairing and combinations of the reliefs' stories, and that a clear evidence of a thematic or narrative program is problematic. The system of references not only requires the interpretation of one panel in terms defined by another, but also the possibility to define a narrative connection through analogy. This shifting from one panel to another forces the viewer's attention to define these relationships. For example, in the SW corner pavilion, combining our observation of the relief of Krishna lifting Mt. Govardhana (S.2) with that of Shiva in the Pine Forest (S.4) should lead us to compare Shiva's exhibition of sexuality towards the sages' wives in order to teach their husbands with Krishna's exhibition of miraculous strength, displayed in order to protect his cowherd friends. Seemingly, by comparing the relief of Shiva reducing Kama to ashes (S.7) with that of the death of Valin (S.8), one would be brought to ascertain that, in both stories, the villain is punished by the gods, and that both had sound objectives. Kama's sacrifice was necessary for Shiva to unite with Parvati and procreate, and Valin's death was vital to Rama in order to gain Sugriva's alliance and his army, which would allow him to destroy Ravana and regain his wife.

It is more likely that the Khmer themselves may have combined panels into other associations based on principles that were meaningful to them, probably of a cosmological nature, and of which we do not have any documentation. However, I believe that they may have intentionally used mythological stories as metaphors for events in the life of Suryavarman II. For instance, in the case of the pairing of the Churning of the Ocean of Milk (S.1) and of Krishna lifting Mt. Govardhana (S.2), the allegory of the divine intervention and the right to rule are combined with the king's concern and protection for his people. Mythic material becomes relevant through the use of extended analogies, which were often the product of conventions. This allusive art, which depended so much on an intimate

familiarity with myths and with the lives of the heroes, has almost certainly affected the programs chosen for the reliefs.

When visiting a corner pavilion, the reliefs may be read by coupling certain panels, or in other combinations with each other in order to achieve a satisfactory interpretation of their individual and collective meaning. When observing the relief narrating the event of Krishna lifting Mt. Govardhana after having seen the one depicting the Churning of the Ocean of Milk (on the opposite wall), the reader may combine the symbolism of the two events and enhance his/her praise for the divine power of Vishnu and his avatar. The viewer then, by shifting the attention from here to the reading of the nearby panels depicting the story of Ravana shaking Mt. Govardhana and of Shiva reducing Kama to ashes (on the adjacent wall), may further reinforce his/her opinion on the rightfulness of the powerful divine intervention. This process forces the viewer to define the relationships between the events narrated, and to superimpose the meaning of each individual panel to that of the following one. The larger allegorical plan thus generated creates a remarkable hermeneutic field¹⁷ in each pavilion as a whole.

Narrative program depicted in the pediments over the lintels. In the corner pavilions, the reliefs in the flat pediments over the doors' lintels deal exclusively with Vishnu and his *avatars* of Krishna and Rama, no Shaivite stories being represented. In the SW pavilion, three scenes narrate events of Krishna's life: Krishna dragging the mortar (S.6), murder of? Pralamba (S.9), and Krishna receiving the offerings destined to Indra (S.12); only one story comes from the *Ramayana* (Rama killing Marica, S.3). In contrast, all the pediments over the lintels of the NW pavilion are devoted to *Ramayana* stories, with the two panels dealing with alliance (of Rama with Sugriva, N.3, and with Vibhishana, N.9), and facing each other. In their peripheral placement, high above the doors' lintels, the reliefs appear to constitute a semi-independent narrative cycle of the *Ramayana*. Starting from Rama killing Kabandha (N.12), Viradha's attempt to abduct Sita

¹⁷ Brilliant R., *Visual narratives*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1986. In the analysis of the narrative program of the corner pavilions, I noticed surprising analogies with what was observed by Richard Brilliant for Roman frescoes of the 1st century BC. The visual processing

(N.6), Rama's alliance with Sugriva (N.3), and ending with Rama's alliance with Vibhishana (N.9). As in the case of the large panels, this narrative program eludes any counter-clockwise or clockwise path. The same applies to the SW corner pavilion, where 3 lintels tell stories of Krishna's childhood (S.6, S.9, S.12), while the fourth is about Rama killing Marica (S.3).

Elusive narrative program. From what has been discussed, it becomes clear that the stories depicted in the panels of the corner pavilions are not arranged according to the narrative sequence found in the original texts (*Ramayana, Harivamsa, Puranas*). The order – if any – is elusive to us.

It may be that the casual arrangement of the stories narrated in the reliefs could produce its own plot, a 'post-cyclical plot'¹⁸, of which we may make sense because of our familiarity with the subject and plot of the story of each panel. However, the complexity of the chosen arrangements is nearing the limit beyond which our attention collapses into an associative or meditative state. Perhaps the designers to achieve this goal deliberately exaggerated this complexity. We become the creators or co-conspirators of the story; we bring the narrative about by our thoughts, leading us away from the reliefs into reverie. The narrative of gods and heroes extend into the present the mythical world of the Khmer. As Richard Brilliant said, 'myths are useful because they transmit certain truth in an intelligible form, unlimited by mythic time or by story time'¹⁹.

If the original intention for the arrangement of the episodes is out of reach to us, the fact remains that, through the visual representation of myths and legends from the Sanskrit texts that were more meaningful at the time of the building of the temple, the Khmer charged the corner pavilions with intense metaphysical and allegoric paradigms. That these reliefs were an essential element in building the sacredness of the temple will be discussed in the conclusions.

The spirit of meditation created by the difficulty in deciphering the complexity of the sequence of myths and legends depicted in the reliefs is

of a story required a translation from words to images in the similar manner that was comprehensible to the Roman and Khmer artist.

¹⁸ *ibidem*, p.58

increased by the panels receiving unusual lighting conditions when the temple was in use²⁰. The very bright light of the windows is effectively diffused by their elaborate balustrade, unevenly illuminating the dark pavilion's high ceilings and closed doors, creating the illusion of an unreal, mystical world inside the confines of the chamber.

Thematic pattern and the mandala. The sculptural reliefs of the corner pavilions have been examined in great detail in search for a pattern of thematic distribution or any meaningful arrangement of their narrative. Unfortunately it is difficult to reach any final conclusion because the majority of the pediments and a high percentage of half pediments and lintels have disappeared, or are in such a poor state of preservation that any meaningful reading of their content becomes doubtful. In addition, one must keep in mind that perhaps not all the pediments, ½ pediments, tapestry and pillars' reliefs were completed at the same time. It may even be possible that some of them were completed in the 16th century, as is suggested by differences in style of sculpture and iconographic variations (best example: death of Valin of the 2 courtyard, N door of w gallery of the 2nd encl., facing east).

The architectural design of the temple has traditionally been based on a mandala pattern. In particular, Mannikka²¹ assumes that for Angkor Wat it is the *Vastupurusamandala* diagram, since it takes into account constellations and planetary gods (*devas* and *nakshatra*) which she has taken as the key elements for her research into the astronomical and numerical symbolism of the temple. In Indian architectural tradition²², the mandala is based on the square and presents different designs according to the number of squares in the grid. The mandala with 49 squares seem to be typical of Angkor Wat²³, while in India²⁴ it is the one with 64 equal squares which has a specially sacred significance, although the one with 81 elements is also common. In both cases, it is imperative for the *Vastupurusamandala* to be square, the perfect square being sacred in the hierarchy

¹⁹ *ibidem*, p.60

²⁰ With the 4 doors closed and statues and ritual paraphernalia stored in the pavilion.

²¹ *Angkor*, 1996, p.55.

²² Kramrisch S., *The Hindu temple*, 1991. In here, the author deals amply with the topic of the mandalas in Indian architecture.

²³ Mannikka, p.56

of Indian architectural symbolism, and much more meaningful than the circle. At Angkor Wat, only the 1st enclosure has this shape, all other enclosures being rectangular. When drawing diagonal and orthogonal lines along the cardinal and sub-cardinal points starting from the centre of the temple, no meaningful thematic arrangement is visible. And this applies also to each of the western corner pavilions. The problem is that, although the *Vastupurusamandala* may have been applied to Angkor Wat for astronomical and astrological purposes, in itself it does not refer to Puranic myths and legends, and therefore is of no assistance to my research into the thematic distribution of the panels. Perhaps, other mandala diagrams should be considered and indeed the entire plan of the temple is likely to have been based on a mandala unknown to us.

4.4. INTERPRETATION OF SYMBOLIC MEANINGS

I proceed now into the presentation of my interpretation derived from the reading of the reliefs from Angkor Wat. I argue that the Khmers intended to communicate philosophical and religious principles through the visual representation of myths and legends and that they must have been aware of the communication power of the symbols and visual allegories which made up their paradigmatic choice.

The two tables that follow (4.1. and 4.2) present, in a schematic way, a summary of the stories illustrated, the texts they come from, and the interpretation of their symbolism. The narrative technique used in the depiction of events from each story is also defined. The italics refer to reliefs over the lintels.

²⁴ Kramrisch S., *The Hindu temple*, 1991, p.46

Table 4.1.a- The content of the SW Corner pavilion reliefs

| No. | STORY'S TITLE | TEXT | DEITY | SYMBOLISM | Narrative technique |
|------|--|---|--------|---|---------------------|
| S.1 | Churning of Ocean of Milk | Ramayana Mahabharata Bhagavata P. 8. 7 | Vishnu | - Beginning of all events - <i>Dharma</i> 's re-establishment - Divine intervention - Future benefits - Obedience to god's instructions - Symbolism of the mountain, Mt.Mandara | linear |
| S.2 | Krishna / Mt. Govardhana | Bhagavata Purana 10.24 | Vishnu | - Protection of subjects - Destruction of enemy - Benevolent punishment - Symbolism of the mountain | linear |
| S.3 | <i>Rama killing Marica (lintel)</i> | Ramayana, 3 | Vishnu | - Victory over deception - Punishment | linear |
| S.4 | Shiva in the Pine Forest | Linga Purana, 2 | Shiva | - Victory over the senses - Triumph over temptations | ellipsic |
| S.5 | Ravana shaking Mt.Kailasa | Ramayana,7 | Shiva | - Triumph of spirituality - Victory on enemy - Symbolism of the mountain | ellipsic |
| S.6 | <i>Krishna dragging mortar (lintel)</i> | Bhagavata Purana, 10. 9 | Vishnu | Accomplishment of <i>karma</i> | linear |
| S.7 | Shiva reducing Kama to ashes | Saura Purana, 6. 25 | Shiva | - Victory over love/lust - Symbolism of the mountain | ellipsic |
| S.8 | Death of Valin | Ramayana, 4 | Vishnu | -Victory over usurper -Accomplishment of <i>karma</i> | ellipsic |
| S.9 | <i>? Pralamba & Dousing of fire</i> | Bhagavata Purana, 10 | Vishnu | ? | linear |
| S.10 | Water festival | no references to texts | nil | - Celebration of royalty | linear |
| S.11 | The betrothal of Shiva and Parvati | Vamana Purana, 25.1 & 26.1 | Shiva | -Loyalty, importance of tapas -Symbolism of the mountain | ? ellipsic |
| S.12 | <i>Krishna receiving offering destined to Indra (lintel)</i> | Bhagavata Purana, 10 | Vishnu | -Victory of new ideology -Symbolism of the mountain -Subjects's obedience | linear |

Table 4.1.b - The content of the NW Corner pavilion reliefs

| No. | STORY TITLE | TEXT | DEITY | SYMBOLISM | Narrative technique |
|------|--|------------------------|--------|--|--------------------------------|
| N.1 | Introduction to the descent of Vishnu | Vishnu Purana, 5. 3 | Vishnu | - <i>Dharma's</i> re-establishment - Divine duty - Revelation of divinity | linear with ?temporal sequence |
| N.2 | Krishna/ Mt.Maniparvata | Bhagavata Purana, 8. 6 | Vishnu | - Restoration of order - Victory over chaos - Symbolism of the mountain | linear |
| N.3 | <i>Rama's alliance with Sugriva</i> | Ramayana, 4 | Vishnu | -Alliance, diplomacy, strategy | linear |
| N.4 | Akrura's vision | Bhagavata Purana, 10 | Vishnu | - Devotion - Revelation of divinity | ellipsic |
| N.5 | Sita's ordeal of fire | Ramayana, 6 end | Vishnu | - Sacrifice - Purity | linear |
| N.6 | <i>Viradha abducting Sita</i> | Ramayana, 3 | Vishnu | - Violence & its punishment | linear |
| N.7 | Rama on Pushpaka chariot | Ramayana, 6 (very end) | Vishnu | -Triumph over evil and adversity, karma | linear |
| N.8 | Sita meeting Hanuman | Ramayana, 5 | Vishnu | - Loyalty, hope | linear |
| N.9 | <i>Rama's alliance with Vibhishana</i> | Ramayana, 6 | Vishnu | - Alliance, diplomacy, strategy | linear |
| N.10 | Sita's svayamvara | Ramayana, 1 | Vishnu | -Test of strength - Initiation, competition | ellipsic |
| N.11 | Krishna and the gopis | Bhagavata Purana, 10 | Vishnu | -Victory over the senses - Devotion - Need of penance - Symbolism of the mountain | ellipsic |
| N.12 | <i>Rama killing Kabandha</i> | Ramayana, 3 | Vishnu | - Destruction of evil | linear |

The symbolism Krishna-Vishnu. In the temple's reliefs, the depiction of Vishnu and Krishna with 4 arms (*Caturbhujā*) is noticeable. The inscriptions of the Phimeanakas, Preah Vihar, and Thvar Kdei²⁵ support the popularity of the *Caturbhujā* cult in Cambodia; but it was only at Angkor Wat that it found its most monumental manifestation.

In Khmer iconography, Vishnu is represented not only as himself on Garuda, his *vahana*, but can also appear in the form of any one of his *avatars*, most frequently Krishna. The reverse is thus possible, that Krishna can be represented as Vishnu, with his own attributes and *vahana*. In several reliefs depicting stories where in the Sanskrit texts Krishna is the protagonist, Vishnu is sculpted instead. For instance, in the panels portraying Krishna bringing back Mt. Maniparvata (N.2), Krishna and the *gopis* (N.11), Krishna receiving the offerings destined to Indra (S.2), and the relief with the story depicting the murder of ? Pralamba & the dousing of fire (S.9). Either Krishna is represented - as in the latter relief - as Vishnu, with crown and four arms holding the usual attributes, or he is depicted as a *gopa*, the goatherd Krishna, with his characteristic hairstyle and no crown. In this fashion, Krishna appears also in the reliefs that narrate the story of Krishna lifting Mt. Govardhana (S.2) and Akrura's vision (N.4).

The Khmer may have perceived Krishna as identical to Vishnu, his human manifestation. The *Bhagavata Purana* states that they are the same (1,3, 27): "Krishna is Bhagavata himself". Krishna is looked upon as a full manifestation of Vishnu, he is one with Vishnu himself in a manner that Rama is not. This explains why Khmer artists represent him indiscriminately, sometimes as Krishna or as Vishnu. A good example of this can be seen in the relief where Krishna receives the offering destined to Indra (S.12), because in this story the ultimate recipient of worship is Vishnu. Furthermore, in the long panel of the 3rd enclosure (16th century) depicting the Victory of Krishna over the *asura* Bana, it is Vishnu who appears 6 times with 8 arms and 10 heads, and 4 times mounting Garuda. Instead, according to the original Indian texts, it should be Krishna in company of Balarama and Pradyumna.

²⁵ Coedes G., *Les bas-reliefs d'Angkor Wat*, B.C.A.I., 1911, p.210

The depictions of Krishna with 4 arms may have been an iconic convention: for the Khmers, the 4 arms were the conventionalised signs that denoted Vaishnava divinity.

Metaphysical meaning. Three of the stories depicted in the corner pavilions denote a direct metaphysical meaning: the Churning of the Ocean of milk (S.1); the Introduction to the descent of Vishnu (N.1); and Krishna receiving the offerings destined to Indra (S.12). The first one refers to the myth of creation, to Vishnu creating things (*amrita*, deities, *apsaras*, mythic animals, etc.), and bringing order to earth. The second refers to Vishnu incarnated into human form and descending on earth as Krishna in order to save and redeem humankind. This last relief may instruct us about the replacement of the pre-existing worship of Indra with that of Krishna, and may allegorically refer to the supremacy of the Vaishnava doctrine and of the cult of the mountain in Cambodia. The story of Krishna lifting Mt. Govardhana (S.2) in order to protect his people from the flood sent by Indra alludes to the reassurances that the new god (Krishna) is protecting his people in his capacity of divine preserver and restorer (Vishnu).

The panel representing the Introduction to the descent of Vishnu (N.1) is a text in itself, containing - amongst others - the fundamental Pancharatra's concepts of creation and *avataras*. In Sanskrit, the name *avatara* means 'descent', and here it applies to Vishnu descending on earth in one of his manifestations, an event of his own free choice and not to the law of Karma. This involves taking the form of human life - including conception, birth and natural death - for the sake of a specific cosmic purpose. Vishnu as a creator creates himself, as a preserver preserves himself, and as a destroyer destroys himself (*Bhagavata Purana*, Book 1, 2.66). The story telling the descent of Vishnu into the earthly manifestation as Krishna and Rama, with the mission to put an end to evil forces, contains also the concept of the perfect god-hero, reflected in Rama, the ideal man towards which ordinary mortals should strive. They are allegories that were very convenient to Khmer kings who assimilated themselves to gods and epic heroes to justify their right to rule over the Khmer.

Vishnu incarnates at the end of each Yuga because he says (*Baghavat Gita* (4.7): “whenever *dharma* is forgotten, whenever lawlessness prevails, I manifest myself: in every age I return to deliver the righteous, to destroy the wicked and to establish *dharma*”. This brings about another important concept, that of cosmic time. The age to which Vishnu refers is that of 4 periods into which a world cycle is divided. First the krita-yuga, the golden age when there is unity, one god, one veda, one ritual. Secondly the tetra-yuga when righteousness begins to decline by one quarter; thirdly the dvapara-yuga, when righteousness again declines by a further quarter, and the vedas split in 4; and finally the kali-yuga, when there is a further decline by one quarter, and disease, despair, and conflict dominate. At present we are in the fourth stage which began in 3102 BC. The other important ‘teaching’ conveyed by this myth, expressed in so much detail in the relief, can be gained through the astronomical and cosmogonical meaning of the divinities who, headed by Brahma, visited Vishnu to ask him to ‘descend’ on earth; they are described in detail in Part II.

The concept of revelation of divinity. The story of Akrura’s vision depicted in the reliefs N.4 of the NW corner pavilion is, in my opinion, very important because it reveals the divine origin of Krishna. What Akrura miraculously saw under water, while making his ablutions in the Kalindi River, were the images of Krishna and Balarama. However, during his second immersion, he saw Balarama being eulogised by the Siddhas²⁶, snakes and *asura*, and another deity of blue complexion, dressed in a yellow garment holding the lotus, the conch-shell, the mace and the discus, embellished by the Srivasta²⁷ and Kaustubha²⁸ (*Bhagavata Purana*, Book 10, chapters 39-40). It was Krishna in his divine form assimilated to that of Vishnu. Before this episode, Akrura considered Krishna to be a mortal young man and a friend of the cowherds; now Krishna revealed his divine status as a god and *avatara* of Vishnu. This story reinforces that of the divinity of Krishna implicit in the myth of the Introduction to the descent of Vishnu, in

²⁶ semi-divine beings of great purity and holiness

²⁷ a particular mark, said to be a curl of hair, on Vishnu’s ^{or} Krishna’s chest, in a shape similar to a flower or a swastika.

²⁸ the famous jewel produced during the Churning of the Ocean of Milk, worn by Vishnu or Krishna.

another panel of the same pavilion (N.1); and of the crucial divine intervention by Vishnu in the Churning of the Ocean of Milk. In this way, the ideators of Angkor Wat reliefs were adding further references to Vaishnavite (Pancharatra) texts to complete the visual expounding of essential precepts.

The concept of the *dharmā*²⁹ seems to constitute a thread connecting the themes of several reliefs in Angkor Wat. Its most relevant points are to be found in the reliefs of the corner pavilions and of the corridors of the 3rd enclosure. The essence of the theory of the *dharmā* is illustrated in the relief of the introduction to the descent of Vishnu (N.1). It depicts the myth of Vishnu agreeing to incarnate (as an *avatara*) and descend on earth to terminate a most decadent and corrupt era, re-installing the *dharmā*, and starting a new golden era. The panel illustrating the Churning of the Ocean of Milk (S.1), narrates the episode when, through the production of the *amrita*, the *dharmā* is restored after having been upset by the continuous fights between *devas* and *asuras*. The meaning of the episode of Rama killing Valin (S.8), and of Rama's alliance with Sugriva (N.3) and Vibishana (N.9) I have discussed in other parts of this thesis (Part I). Here I want to mention that Rama's actions, even the cruellest, were deemed necessary by Hindu faith for the re-establishment of the *dharmā* that Ravana and his party were bringing to an end, underlying thus the ethical value of the *Ramayana*.

On a grand scale, concern with the *dharmā* is evident in many of the battle scenes that decorate the long galleries of the 3rd enclosure. The battle of Kurukshetra (symbolic of a phase of destruction) occurs when the *dharmā* is brought to a crisis by the fratricidal encounter between the Pandavas and the Kauravas; this bloody combat can be seen as the sacrifice needed for the restoration of the *dharmā*. In the relief portraying the Historic Procession, Suryavarman II's competence in maintaining the law of *dharmā* on earth is clearly demonstrated by his royal authority. In the relief showing the Heavens and Hells

²⁹ In Hinduism, the *dharmā* is the cosmic law and order that make possible life and the universe. It refers to the behaviour appropriate for the maintenance of that order. The Puranas, while not denying the possibility of synthesis of the two value systems of *dharmā* and *moksha* (release from rebirth), emphasise the importance of *dharmā* over *moksha*. The release is downplayed in favour of social duty and the love of god, because the value of life on earth seems to be more important than the release from it. See Dimmit C., & Van Buitenen J.A., *Classical Hindu Mythology*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1978, p.11

the necessity to respect the *dharma* are visually emphasised, as well as the punishments for those who do not do so. For this scene of the Churning are valid the same comments made for that in the corner pavilion relief. The choice for the reliefs of the northern half of the temple, The victory of Vishnu over the *asuras*, The battle between Krishna and Bana, The battle of the *devas* and *asuras*, and - finally - the battle of Lanka, all emphasise the importance of the concept of the battle as sacrificial combat³⁰, which has the restoration of the *dharma* as the final objective. The battle of Lanka represents the climactic act of destruction of Ravana's evil forces and of Ravana himself, the agent who had brought about a series of catastrophes against to perfect functioning of the *dharma*.

According to Madeleine Biardeau³¹, the maintenance of the *dharma* requires the presence of a good king, whose punishing (*danda*³²) power commands respect, but who submits to the rules of the Brahmans, who are the guardians of the *dharma*. Just as an *avatara* is needed to resolve a cosmic crisis, a king is important for the re-enforcement of order on earth. In total contrast, an earthly king who is intoxicated by his power, oppressing the Brahmans in the hope of gaining the celestial kingdom all for himself, would be identical to a king of the *asuras* like the infamous Hiranyakasipu, Bali, Ravana, and others. An evil king who, having rejected his human origin, takes advantage of the power of a boon received from a god or of the power acquired through *tapas*, and upsetting the equilibrium of the *dharma*, inevitably starts a catastrophe. This time of crisis triggers the intervention of an *avatara*, who establishes the passage from one *yuga* to another, from a time of crisis to a golden age. On a symbolic level, any usurper king can perceive himself as needed to restore the *dharma* of a kingdom, and even equate himself to an *avatara* of Vishnu, believing thus in a divine mission. This was very relevant to Khmer kings, the majority of whom were not the rightful heirs of their predecessors.

³⁰ Legendre H., Les Bas relief du Temple d'Angkor Wat et le Projet Royal d'un renouvellement Temporel, in *The Southeast Asian environment*, D.R. Webster (Edit.), University of Ottawa Press, Ottawa, 1983, p. 67

³¹ *Etudes de mythologie Hindoue*, BEFEO, 63, 1976, p.155.

³² *Danda* is the sceptre, or the baton of punishment (and, indirectly, of command). In iconography, it may refer to the image of a god/king holding a sceptre, stick, sword, or mace.

The symbolism of kingship. We know from epigraphic and historic data that the role of kingship was essential in Khmer society. While uniting the various principedoms of the country, it was a force controlling their attempts of decentralisation.

Suryavarman II had to establish his kinship on several basic concepts. As a Vaishnava king he had to follow the *avatara*'s model, and possibly believe himself to be an *avatara*, a human incarnation inspired by his god to perform certain deeds on earth. For a king following the path of Vishnu the most important duty was that of re-establishing the *dharma* in the Khmer territory, equated to the Three Worlds of Vaishnavism. By the Khmer he could be perceived to be - similarly to Vishnu - the preserver and restorer of the *dharma*.

Solange Thierry has suggested an interesting parallelism between kingship and the myth of the Churning of the Ocean of Milk³³. For her, the King, by equating himself to Vishnu, created large basins, *barays*, moats, and canals, as if they were the Sea of Milk, thus transforming the muddy and uncultivated land into a "lake of ambrosia". His mountain temple, Angkor Wat, was like the mythic Mt. Mandara used as the axial pivot for the churning. Because of this, it was also the axis of an inexhaustible prosperity: "With the procreation and the joy of the Universe in mind", the King churned his moats and basins, and from them sprang the irrigated rice fields, and ultimately, not without laborious efforts, the ambrosial rice³⁴.

More examples of kingship's symbolism are to be found in other reliefs. One is that depicting Krishna lifting Mt. Govardhana, in the southern corner pavilion (S.2), and the other that of Krishna receiving the offering destined to Indra, which is illustrated in another wall of the same pavilion (S.12). This latter story implies the undermining of Indra's power to the advantage of Krishna new 'religion'. Krishna's need to lift Mt. Govardhana is symbolic of the god's concern to protect his people from the misadventures caused by another less powerful god

³³ Thierry S., *The Khmers*, Kailash Edit., Paris, 1997

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p.115

(Indra). It may also refer to a god protecting those who - abandoning a previous cult - have adopted the Vaishnava belief. On an earthly level - instead - it may allude to king Suryavarman's duty to protect his people from the miseries caused by lesser Khmer kings, and enemies like the Chams and the Dai Viet. In these stories the Khmer may have also perceived the equivalence of the king with Krishna, of secular and divine ruler. The story of Krishna lifting Mt. Govardhana is one of the most frequently reoccurring in other sites of Angkor Wat, in pediments, pilasters and doorjambs. Finally, another example of kingship symbolism can be found in the relief depicting the Churning of the Ocean of Milk, constantly used by the Khmer to evoke the beginning of the rule of the new king, bringing prosperity to the Universe.

The theme of usurpation. - This theme was central to Angkorean kings, considering that the majority of them did not attain sovereignty through paternal lineage. It is known that Suryavarman II raised to power by dispossessing and probably killing his granduncle, king Dharanindravarman³⁵. Therefore, inspired by his Brahmins, he may have found some characters of the Ramayana quite appropriate to his situation. I refer to the stories of Rama killing Valin (S.8) and of the Alliance of Rama with Sugriva (N.3), both dealing with the motif of usurpation. In the first one, Rama supported Sugriva in the episode of the usurpation of Valin, his stepbrother, in order to re-establish the *dharmā*. Furthermore, since Valin was son of Indra and Sugriva the son of Surya, the shifting of suzerainty from the lunar to the solar dynasty justified Sugriva usurping his stepbrother. Suryavarman II may have considered himself as a solar monarch, and compared himself to Rama who had to kill Valin and support Sugriva's project of usurpation to avoid the cosmic crisis. In the second story, the pact of the Rama/Sugriva alliance, it is the usurper Sugriva who is indispensable to Rama for recovering Sita and to put an end to Ravana, thus re-establishing the *dharmā*.

³⁵ Jacques C., *Angkor*, Thames and Hudson, 1997, p. 150, and stele of Prasat Krun, K.288, stance CVIII in Coedes G., *Inscriptions du Cambodge*, IV, 1952, p.230).

The concept of victory. This concept is developed in many stories depicted in the corner pavilions, as well as in other sites (pediments, lintels, etc.) of the temple. For example, in the SW corner pavilion the emphasis is on the extolling of the Vaishnava ideology victory over the cult of Indra (Krishna and the offerings destined to Indra, S.12), victory over evil spirits (Ravana shaking Mt. Kailasa, S.5), and the murder of? Pralamba (S.9). The stories illustrated in the panel of Rama killing Marica (S.3), Shiva in the Pine Forest (S.4), and Shiva reducing Kama to ashes (S.7) allude to victory over deception, lust and the weakness of the senses. The principles enhanced by these panels do not refer only to the gods, but also, or perhaps mainly, to King Suryavarman II. Through these allegoric visual representations, the King may have been building the sacredness of his kingship, claiming similarity to his divine protector.

The concept of strength. The story of Krishna lifting Mt. Govardhana and subduing the *naga* Kaliya (Pl.32 d) are amongst the most characteristic of the god great physical power. It was apparent since his youth, when as a little boy he dragged a heavy mortar and easily uprooted 2 trees (see relief S.6). A comparison of Krishna and Hercules' strength is quite common in the literature, besides that of his strong appetite. It is beyond doubt that spiritual power is expressed in all religious stories, and that Krishna strength and prowess could be seen as symbolic of the qualities most needed by Khmer kings. Physical strength, beside moral strength, was a requisite of Khmer kings for enduring the hardship of frequent war expeditions.

The cult of the mountain. The theme of the mountain is consistently represented in several of the panels of the corner pavilions³⁶. In the Churning, it is the mythic

³⁶ The Funan kings from southern Cambodia, called themselves 'King of the Mountain' and from it comes the Chinese designation of this country as Fou-nan (*b'iu-nam*, from the old Khmer *bnam* and later *phnom* = mountain). Furthermore, the symbolism of the Mt. Meru materialised in their temples was central to Khmer cosmogony and architecture. The mountain became the object of a cult in 802 AD. when king Jayavarman II in a ceremony at the top of Mt. Kulen considered this mountain a copy of Mt. Meru, where it was appropriate for the essence of royalty to reside into the linga erected at the centre of a temple. From that date onwards, the cult of the mountain formally became a royal cult.

Mt. Mandara that is used to churn the Ocean of Milk³⁷. It is the same mountain, called by the different name of Mt. Maniparvata, that Krishna has to bring back to the spot of the churning. It had been dropped into the ocean by the clumsy *devas* and *asuras* while frantically attending the churning. In another of Krishna's myths, we are told that the god asks his cowherds to venerate and make offerings to another mountain, Mt. Govardhana rather than Indra, causing the latter to send a deluge. This seems to be the first Puranic story that initiates the cult of the mountain. It is then the same mountain that is uplifted by Krishna to protect his friends in the story narrated in the panel S.2, discussed in detail elsewhere. In another myth, it is Mt. Kailasa (the sacred abode of Shiva) which has the important role of crushing Ravana with its weight, at the order of Shiva, when the hideous *rakshasa* attempts to disturb him from meditation. Beside these famous mountains, visual representations of rocky hills or peaks are common among almost all the narrative reliefs; they are subtle visual examples of mountain symbolism. Some of the best example are to be found in the panels of Shiva in the Pine Forest (S.4), Shiva reducing Kama to ashes (S.7), Shiva receiving homage (S.11), and of Krishna and the *gopis* (N.11). The rocks that constitute the mountains are graphically represented by superimposed imbricated lasagnes.

The symbolism of the tree. Faithful adherence to details of the *Ramayana*'s story in the reliefs of the corner pavilions can be seen in the beautiful rendering of the acacia tree under which Sita lamented when prisoner of Ravana, depicted in the panel of the north-western pavilion entitled 'Sita meeting Hanuman' (N.8). The love of Khmer artists for magnificent trees is reflected in the reliefs showing Vishnu and the *gopis* (N.11) and Ravana shaking Mt. Kailasa (S.5). The tree is depicted as the apex of the triangular composition that converges to the god protagonist of the story, clearly alluding to its symbolism. Hindu scriptures explain this through the mouth of Krishna in the *Bhagavat Gita*³⁸, when he uses the allegory of the branches of trees which take root and so create new offshoots, to describe the endless *samsara* in which the spirit is enmeshed. He says that this

³⁷ Madeleine Giteau has been the first to notice that the Khmers confused Mt. Mandara, the axial pivot of the churning, with Mt. Meru which is the axis of the earth (in *Le barattage de l'Océan au Cambodge*, BSEI, 1951), p. 141

³⁸ Maxwell, *The Gods of Asia*, Oxford University Press, 1997, pp.91-92

tree with its prolific roots must be cut down with the powerful weapon of non-attachment. The weapon of salvation is the axe that cuts down the entire tree of *samsara*. It is only the *maya*, the web of illusions that are mistaken for reality, that supports the material world, and through Vishnu's teachings humankind can be freed from infatuation with the world. Vishnu provides the axe with which to sever one's attachment. This explains why, in iconography, the axe is one of the god's major attributes, besides the conch, the discus, and the lotus (or the egg-shaped fruit). In Indian art, Buddhist reliefs of the Shunga period (? 200-100 BC) were the first to show deities standing under trees, and in the Kushana period (2-3rd century AD) many images had a tree carved at the back.

The Pancharatra texts mention also the association of the axis of the world with a branching tree (*visakha*). The trunk is also the column sustaining the world, while the branches are extending to the 4 directions of the cosmos. The tree is a metaphor for the cosmic nature of Vishnu who personifies both the universal principle, stable and indivisible, and the plurality of the creation³⁹.

Shaivite myths. There are four panels depicting events from Shiva's myths, all confined within the south-western corner pavilion; as mentioned above, there are no other narrative reliefs of this cult in other sites of the temple. The presence of specific events in Shiva's life in a Vaishnava temple, and so many in a single room, where they account for 1/3rd of the total number of the representations, must have been of significance to those who planned Angkor. The four stories depicted in the corner pavilion are: Shiva in the Pine Forest (S.4), Ravana shaking Mt. Kailasa (S.5), Shiva reducing Kama to ashes (S.7), and the betrothal of Shiva and Parvati (S.11). Curiously, these Shaivaite stories show a relationship with the Vaishnava doctrine.

In the episode of Shiva in the Pine Forest, narrated in the *Brahmada Purana* (Book 1, chapter 2), Brahma, when asked for advise by the sages, replied that 3 were the recognisable forms of Shiva (Rudra): "his dark form was Agni, his

³⁹ Lobo W., in *Angkor et dix siècles d'art kmer*. R.M.N., Paris, 1997, p. 260

passionate form Brahma, and the form of goodness was known as Vishnu”⁴⁰. The Puranas expand the perception of the Trinity (Shiva, Brahma and Vishnu) by adding the cosmological and cosmogonical concepts of the 3 main levels of the triple universe (earth, ocean, sky-paradise). The universe is destroyed by fire at the end of each aeon (*kalpa*) and remains submerged in the cosmic waters until it is time to be created anew⁴¹. According to the Pancharatra doctrine of Creation, it is Vishnu who brings about the dissolution of the Universe and its recreation after his long periods of sleep. From this one can see how the episodes of Shiva in the Pine Forest is related – albeit indirectly - to the Vaishnavite beliefs.

In the episode of Ravana shaking Mt. Kailasa where Shiva was frolicking with Parvati, the connection with Vaishnavism lies in the fact that the misadventures of Ravana are not narrated in texts other than the *Ramayana*⁴². Furthermore, the *rakshasas*, so often depicted in Angkor Wat and of which Ravana is the supreme king, were amongst the most renowned enemies of Vishnu. Vishnu accepted the gods’ invitation to descend on earth for the very purpose of slaying these monsters (Bana, Kalanemi and Ravana).

In the episode of Shiva reducing Kama to ashes, the connection Shaivism / Vaishnavism is even more subtle. It is well known from the Puranas that Kama, after having been reduced to ashes by Shiva, was reborn as Pradyumna, son of Krishna and Rukmini⁴³. And as mentioned in Pat I, chapter 3, according to the Pancharatra belief Pradyumna was one of the main emanations (*vyuha*) of Vishnu.

The state of preservation of the relief I have tentatively interpreted as the representation of the betrothal of Shiva and Parvati (S.11) is so poor that its

⁴⁰ This 3 forms refers also to the 3 “strands” or qualities of matter (*gunas*): *sattva* (goodness or light), *rajas* (dust, passion or activity) and *tamas* (darkness or inertia), which must always be balanced. They are called “strands” because they are inextricably intertwined like the strands of a rope.

⁴¹ Each *kalpa* consists of 4 ages (*s*), named after 4 throws of the dice: the first, the *Krita Yuga* is the best; it is followed by the *Tetra Yuga*, the *Dvapara Yuga*, and finally the *Kali Yuga*, the present age.

⁴² Coedes G., *Les bas-reliefs d'Angkor Vat*, B.C.A.I., 1911, p.210

⁴³ *Ibidem*

reading is almost impossible; therefore it is difficult to perceive a story, let alone a possible connection with Vaishnava doctrines.

On the assumption that the interpretation of these stories is correct, it seems that they are all allegories of sensuality and eroticism, in keeping with Shiva's role in fertility. In the first, Shiva appears as a naked young man to seduce the *gopis* in the Pine Forest; and in the second, Ravana is prevented from travelling to Mt. Kailasa, where Shiva and Parvati are making love. The third story relates to Kama's attempt to make Shiva to unite with Parvati to procreate; finally, the fourth deals with the betrothal of Shiva and Parvati that anticipates their love and union. In conjunction with this topic is the fact that Shiva's myths include the motif of interruption⁴⁴. Kama interrupts Shiva's yogic trance to make him copulate with Parvati; Shiva is stopped by the sages from seducing the *gopis* of the Pine Forest; Ravana is prevented from interrupting Shiva's and Parvati's love-making. In Indian mythology, the interruption of a sexual scene is regarded as a sin. Metaphorically, however, the interrupter is considered a messenger who unites the worshippers with their gods⁴⁵.

Associated with Shiva is a multitude of ascetics (*rishis*), as they are expected to appear when their divine master is around. It is also worth noticing that Shiva's image is sculpted in the western end of the large panel or the 3rd enclosure, in the relief illustrating the Battle of the *devas* and *asuras*, where he is the object of veneration on the part of Vishnu. It might be that Shiva's myths could have been used by the ideators of the temple to satisfy the king's need for reaffirming the importance of asceticism, penance and *tapas*⁴⁶, the danger of false asceticism and the weakness of many so-called sages.

The symbolism of the cardinal orientation. In Khmer art and architecture certain divinities are often considered to be symbolic of specific cardinal points, at least with regard to the emplacement in temples of their freestanding statues. In

⁴⁴ Doniger O'Flaherty, *Shiva, the erotic ascetic*, Oxford University Press, 1973, pp. 308 and 310.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p.310

⁴⁶ *Tapas* is considered a form of power, or heat, obtained from asceticism; in practical terms, it means the merits that an ascetic (*rishi*) can gain from the exercise of penance.

the arrangements of the narrative reliefs in the corner pavilions, however, it seems that the ideators of the temple did not take this tradition into account. It is thus surprising to find panels with Shiva's stories in the south-western corner pavilions, in a southerly location, since Shiva is normally associated with the north-easterly cardinal point of Indian cosmology.

There is - though - a general trend to orient sculptural panels along a north-south or east west alignment. In fact, the reliefs of the Churning of the Ocean of Milk are almost always sculpted on walls oriented N-S, mostly facing west, with the exception of the large panel of the 3rd enclosure, which faces east. Also the reliefs of Krishna lifting Mt. Govardhana, in the corner pavilion and elsewhere in the temple, are always facing west, suggesting an allegorical replacement of Mt. Govardhana with the idealised Mt. Meru emerging at the back of the relief in the form of the central sanctuary and its massive tower.

Multiple allegorical meanings. As shown in Table 4.1a and 4.1b, in the column entitled symbolism, I suggest that each panel may often have multiple meanings, derived from the complex symbolism of the original stories found in the sacred texts. The first example to consider is that of the story of Krishna and the *gopis* (N.11), which is probably a prelude to the *rasa lila*. In Hindu tradition, the *rasa* is an allegory of the individual soul crying out to the Supreme Soul. Since it is enacted by Krishna's *Yoga-maya* (*Bhagavata Purana*, Book X, chapter 29.1). It implies that the surrender of the individual to the Supreme Soul is possible only with the help of yogic powers and through Krishna. By putting the *bhakti* of the *gopis* to test the faithfulness of their love for him, the story of Krishna is an allegory of the devotion needed to be experienced by the god's worshippers. As a result, this panel may be read as an allegory of the duty of women to be chaste. The story of Sita's ordeal of fire (N.5) narrates the cruel test which is imposed on his wife by Rama, who needed to have proof that she had kept her chastity when held prisoner by a man (Ravana), even though the latter had abducted her with the intention of possessing her. Sita comes out of the pyre's flames untouched and even more beautiful than ever; the story of the ordeal is thus a symbol of Sitas' loyalty and innocence.

A vivid example of multiple meanings can be seen in the relief telling the story of the Churning of the Ocean of Milk (S.1), which - beside being a myth of creation - carries also other meanings: that of the importance of divine intervention expressed by Vishnu incarnating as a turtle to support Mt. Mandara; of the need for the faithful to obey Vishnu's instructions in order to achieve a goal (the *amrita*, elixir of immortality); and for the realisation of future benefits, that are symbolically represented by the *amrita*. The stories of the Ramayana can easily be interpreted from an allegorical point of view. Diplomacy and strategy are extolled in the story of Rama's alliance with Sugriva (N.3), and of Rama's alliance with Vibhishana (N.9). Symbolic references to loyalty and love are evident in the episode of Sita meeting with Hanuman (N.8), where Sita demonstrates her loyalty and love to Rama by quietly withstanding the horrors of her captivity by the devilish Ravana. Hanuman's behaviour too is an exemplary example of loyalty towards his patron, as he obediently carries out Rama's difficult orders.

4.5. SYMBOLIC MEANING OF THE RELIEFS AS A WHOLE

From the above critical interpretation of the corner pavilions' reliefs and - to some extent - of reliefs in other sites of the temple (Part II, ch.4), it is possible to put forward some generalisations referring to mythological personages and to the themes illustrated. This will be of great help in the overall interpretation of the meaning of the overall temple, as exposed in the chapter of the conclusions.

Representation of compassion. From closely examining the reliefs one gets the impression that they illustrate a sense of compassion in Vishnu's actions, as expressed in all his forms (including his 10 avatars) of preserver and protector god, who pervades the universe in all its multitudinous phenomena, and who takes the shape of animal or man to assist the forces of good in the world whenever evil threatens to prevail. The sense of compassion that Vishnu seems to connote may simply be a reflection of the syncretism in vogue at the time of the building of the temple, bringing Buddhist compassion to colour the Hindu myths.

The presence of this compassion element in the symbolic representations of Vishnu stories occurs frequently at Angkor Wat. The best examples are to be found in the reliefs narrating how Krishna subdued the naga Kaliya (western pediment of the central tower) and set him free to return to his abode and family, rather than killing him. More examples are shown in the reliefs illustrating how Krishna lifted Mt. Govardhana (S.2) and doused the forest's fire (S.9) as a gesture of commiseration towards his cowherds; how Krishna brought back Mt. Maniparvata (N.2) which the *devas* and *asuras* had inadvertently lost in the ocean. The participation of Vishnu to the Churning of the Ocean of Milk (S.1, and large panel of the Eastern gallery, southern wing), and his consenting to descend on earth as Krishna (N.1) can also be seen as actions driven by compassion towards the participants in the creation and towards human people.

Elements indicative of a feeling of compassion can be found, I suggest, in the several reliefs depicting the death of Valin, to be found in the SW corner pavilion (S.8), on two pediments of the 1st inner courtyard (see plates 19, 23 top, and 25 left), a half-pediment of the 3rd enclosure, and in the tapestry reliefs from various sites of the temple. I would like to remind the reader that in the episode of the death of Valin, Rama - elsewhere an exemplary and ideal model of virtue and chivalry - concealed himself behind trees, and without warning or challenge, shot Valin engaged in hand-to-hand combat with Sugriva. The main symbolism of this story (and relief) is that of the necessity to re-establish the *dharma*, which Valin had upset with his demonic actions, through the hand of Rama, even if this exposes Rama's treachery in killing Valin in an ambush (*Ramayana, Kishkinda kanda*, chapters 16-24, see Part II). Valin is the sacrificial victim; but he can also be seen as a personage who accepts his own *karma*, the law of consequences of his actions in life, in the expectation of being reborn as a better being. This is probably the reason why the story was so popular at Angkor Wat⁴⁷ and in several other temples.

⁴⁷ It is also present in almost all the Angkorean temples. It has a dominant position in the eastern pediment from the Gopura II of Banteay Srei, the earliest temple with important narrative reliefs.

The Khmers, in their visual interpretation of the story, highlighted the personage of the dying Valin - the chest pierced by the arrow - surrounded by his beloved wives, son, and friends; they gave to Rama a minor visual appearance, even subsidiary to that of the two monkey brothers while fighting. This can be interpreted in two different ways. Firstly, Valin's sacrifice would liberate him from his bad *karma* and Rama's⁴⁸ arrow would be the symbol of release, of liberation. Secondly, that an element of compassion may have been introduced for the dying Valin because of his exemplary conduct in death, the morality of his sermon while dying, and, ultimately, moved by the immense sorrow felt by Tara, Valin's wife, for the coming to an end of a great heroic figure. In this process, the injustice Valin suffered in the hands of Rama was overshadowed. All these elements induce a way of reading the reliefs that brings in a strong element of compassion.

A similar situation can be found in the depiction of Lakshmana seriously wounded by Indrajit's magic arrows to be found in the pediment of the second courtyard (see Pl. 18). Here also, the battle between the two protagonists is not shown, while the emphasis is placed on the compassion for the delirious Lakshmana lying on the ground and being commiserated by his wife and friends.

The un-chivalrous Rama. The core-issue of the episode of the death of Valin, discussed above, is not why Rama killed Valin (to re-establish the *dharma*), but the way he killed him, as Valin repeatedly points out while dying (*Ramayana*, Book IV, chapter 17). The whole story is quite intriguing, since it discloses the intimate characters of its protagonists. The details that Sugriva recounts to Rama about his enmity with his brother Valin are quite odd; Sugriva suffers from paranoia⁴⁹, he lives in constant fear of being persecuted (*Ramayana*, Book IV, chapter 46) and murdered by his brother. But in fact, Valin never intended any harm to his brother, deliberately refraining from killing him during the several confrontations they had. Even Sugriva (chapter 24) tells Rama that Valin had

⁴⁸ Personal communication from Marie Christine Duflos of the Musee Guimet, February 1998.

⁴⁹ J.M. Masson, *Fratricide among the monkeys*, JAOS, 95, 1975, p. 672

refused to kill him in battle, just asking him to go away, almost in paternal attitude towards the younger brother, and goes so far as to admit that Valin acted justly and that he, Sugriva, acted out of anger, like a monkey. ~~After all, Valin was the rightful ruler, being the elder brother, and it was Sugriva who had taken his wife Tara.~~

Rama's character reveals a great flaw: to have killed Valin from a concealed position, contrary to the laws of war that he, as a *kshatriya* prince was morally bound to uphold, and of which he considers himself to be the great protector (chapter 18, addressing Valin). What made Rama decide tempestuously to kill Valin, before listening to Sugriva's full story, revealing the truth, and without knowing the circumstances ? It is Rama who first mentions murder, Valin only requests help. Almost as an afterthought Rama asks Sugriva what the reason of the hatred between the two brothers was. When Rama asks for details (chapter 8) of the enmity, he -at the same time - also assures Sugriva that he has already decided upon Valin's guilt. For Rama, the time taken to hear the story will be just sufficient for deciding to string his bow (chapter 8) in preparation for the murder.

Perhaps a justification of this behaviour can be found in Rama and Sugriva being *rajyat vibhrasta* (dethroned) and *krtadara* (wife-deprived), a common misadventure that naturally makes the two initiate a friendship. Rama, imbued with the feeling of loss and separation that permeates all of Book IV, is psychologically predisposed to feel a strong bond with Sugriva. As Sugriva says that he lives in fear (chapter 5), in the forest without his wife, Rama responds immediately, without knowing the facts, promising to kill Valin. But there are no excuses why Rama, after having heard Sugriva's story, would not reconsider, becoming thus guilty of premeditation, nor for the way he rebukes the dying Valin. After all, it was Sugriva who took over his brother's domain, including his wife Tara. Sugriva was infatuated with Tara and this is one of the reasons why Rama almost ended his friendship with him. His addiction to Tara had caused him to overlook the passing of the rainy season and delayed putting into action

his part of the bargain that sealed (or caused) the friendship, namely the search for Sita (chapter 30). For some reason, Rama believed that Valin had made love to Sugriva's wife Ruma, regarded as his sister and daughter-in-law, and death was the punishment for incest. Moreover, Rama was under the impression that he, having made the promise to kill Valin, could not break it. At the end, Rama declares that he feels no distress or remorse for what he has done, because Valin was - after all - only a monkey, a wild animal, to be hunted by fair means or foul.

Besides what seems to us a conflict in the figure of Rama, the Ramayana's book of the *Kishkindha kanda* uses the episode of Rama killing Valin to convey, beyond the specific story, some very important didactic principles through each of its characters. In chapter 17 we are told that the dying Valin asks Rama what merit he would hope to earn by striking him from behind while engaged in combat with another, and what would he answer to an assembly of virtuous people for having committed such a reprehensible deed. The regicide - continues Valin - the brahmanicide, the slayer of the cow, the thief and the one who finds pleasure in the destruction of other beings, the unbeliever and the one who weds before the elder brother, all these enter hell. The informer, the miser, the one who slays his friend or defiles his guru's bed, undoubtedly descends the region of evil-doers.

In chapter 18, Rama replies to Valin by stating that, despite having been addressed in such an inappropriate way by him in his "simian folly", he was filled with good-will towards him, but he accuses Valin of having violated justice and acted for lust, ignoring his royal duties. He had a marital relationship with Ruma, Sugriva's wife, who was his sister-in-law, and the man who makes his daughter, sister or sister in law an object of lust, is punishable by death. Moreover, righteousness demands that a younger brother (Sugriva), a son and a virtuous disciple should be regarded as one's own offspring. Rama calls him a heedless monkey surrounded by irresponsible simian counsellors, a king who has acted in opposition to the Law of Righteousness (*dharma*), and therefore due to die. Rama reproaches Valin for not submitting to the penalty imposed to those who do wrong in order to be washed free from every stain and ascend to heaven like the gods and those who do benevolent deeds. Other kings have practised penance, subduing

their passions. Valin did not treat him with the respect and regard due a king, and this is bad because kings are like gods who, assuming human form, dwell on earth. Therefore, Rama concludes, his death was decreed in accordance to his *dharma*, and not the result of Rama's personal impulse.

In this dialogue between the two protagonists are encapsulated all the most important ethical and social principles of the time, in particular those that governed the relationship between father and daughter, daughter-in-law, sister, brother and son as well as with the guru and the cow. These precepts were presumably equally essential to the Khmer elite; Suryavarman II may have considered very appropriate the condemnation of regicide, the importance for kings to perform penance, and most of all, Rama's concept that "kings are like gods" on earth.

In the depiction of this story, it may be that the Khmers have deliberately shifted the attention away from Rama's murder of Valin to the figure of the dying Valin, not so much in a gesture of compassion, but mainly because Suryavarman II and his Brahmans were convinced that Rama acted rightfully. The visual emphasis is on Valin being punished for wanting to usurp Sugriva kingdom. For the Khmer, Sugriva was the rightful king, implying that - similarly - Suryavarman II's grandfather (Jayavarman VI) was the rightful successor of Khmer royal ancestors, and not an usurper starting a new dynasty, and that anybody who attempted to usurp Suryavarman II's kingdom deserved death.

Krishna's human aspect. Vishnu's central character as guardian, protector and preserver of the world remains consistent whenever he appears. Moreover, it is through the symbolism of Vishnu that the complete identity of god and universe is made clear, which also implies the full identity of god and man, evident in Rama and Krishna.

The divine-human duality of Krishna is clear in the stories narrated in the *Puranas* and *Harivansa*, and in here I would like to stress the human element. The life of Krishna can be separated into three periods: childhood (ending after the lifting of Mt. Govardhana), youth (starting with the episode the theft of the

clothes), and adulthood (starting after the killing of Kamsa), as described in the *Bhagavat Purana* and in the *Vishnu Purana*.

In his early years, Krishna, as a solar god and hero, is an infant prodigy with wondrous feats to his credit. Like other god-boys Arjuna, Karna and Rama, he performs wonderful tasks and prodigies by killing monsters before reaching manhood. Krishna's legends provide a full list of his fantastic actions: he kills the moneysress Putana, the ass Dhenuka, the bull-demon Arishta, the horse-demon Kesin, destroys the twin Arjuna trees, slays the demon Pralamba, the elephant-demon Kuvalayapida, the demon Chanura. He tears the rope with which he was bound (hence the epithet Damodara), fights and subjugates the serpent Kaliya, and lifts a mountain (Govardhana) with a finger.

When Krishna becomes a youth, his charm takes on a sexual connotation⁵⁰. This is evident from his wandering around the woods at night, in amorous mood, singing and playing the flute to lure the cowherds' women. Even more when he becomes the centre of the circular dance *Rasalila* (called also *Rasamandala*), in the course of which he multiplies his forms to gratify the desire of each one of the women (*Bhagavata Purana*, Book 10, chapters 29-31). Following this episode, the *Brahmavaivarta*⁵¹ narrates of Krishna's love-play with the beautiful girl Radha, and the act of love is described in affectionate detail, from the arousing to the consummation of desire. The role of Krishna as lover of the cowherd-women and of Radha symbolise not only identity of opposites in divinity, but also the unity of the human polarities of the god through the metaphor of sex, and the longing of the human soul to experience spiritual unity with the god.

From the texts, the assertion that Krishna (*Bhagavata Purana*, Book 10, chapter 33, verse 26) "enjoyed all those nights without losing a single moment of enjoyment...but he controlled all his energy within himself" does not leave any doubt about sexual enjoyment - although as Yoga's master he may have refrained

⁵⁰ Dimmit C. & Van Buitenen J.A., *Classical Hindu mythology*, Temple University Press, 1978, pg. 103

from ejaculating. When, in the text, doubts are raised about the propriety of Krishna's conduct in admitting of his "seducing sensually the wives of others" (chapter 33, verse 28), it is said that, the 'mighty rulers' can do so, and only them, but that commoners cannot emulate the acts of God as this is against their precepts (chapter 33, verse 32). The concept of 'mighty rulers' may have been taken literally by king and princes to abuse their subjects.

The *Rasalila*'s event and what follows can be considered as young Krishna initiation, his rite of passage from childhood to adolescence, while the murder of Kamsa his entering into manhood to become the guardian of his Yadava clan. The persistent definition of his age as a young pre-puberal boy in the Puranas and *Harivamsa* may reflect an inhibition on the part of the writers to expose the real sexual nature of his acts, and their consequences. Indologists, do not seem to see Krishna's sensual aspect in this way. As Goldman (1978 and 1984-90) has emphasised, there is a general lack of interest, or even hostility towards a modern vision or a psychoanalytic interpretation of classic Indian texts. Commentators to the *Bhagavata Purana*⁵¹ find it difficult to understand why Krishna, the protector and upholder of morality, acted otherwise during the *Rasalila* by inflicting 'outrage on the wives of others', and find all sorts of reasons to deny it. The list is quite long: that extraordinary persons cannot be judged by ordinary standards, that Krishna's behaviour was an attractive device to introduce ordinary people to spirituality, and that the *Rasalila* was intended for extinguishing carnal desires. After all, Krishna had resorted to the *Yoga-maya* for the purpose of the sport with the *gopis*, since he had already triumphed over sex; the word 'playing' used in the text would not connote sexuality, being the same verb as used for Krishna playing with boys, and so on. Other Indian scholars believe that, since there is no evident reference to Radha in the *Bhagavata Purana*, she was 'extorted by acrobatic feats of grammar and logic' from a line (30.28) of chapter 10. Or that by making the non-existent Radha a married wife of Krishna, the social impropriety of playing the *rasa* with the maid-servants of one's wife would not be exonerated, and so on. In general these commentaries

⁵¹ One of the late Puranas, composed around 1000-1100 AD.

⁵² *Bhagavata Purana*, Part 1, 1967, edited by J.L. Shastri, Introduction, p.12

agree in regarding the Krishna of the *Rasalila* and Radha as the metaphysical Krishna and not with the historical Vasudeva Krishna, and that the author of the *Bhagavata Purana* intended to depict a symbolic event about the metaphysical Krishna and not involve the historical Krishna. The text emphasises that the attachment of the *gopis* may be physical, but any strong feeling, say sexual love, hatred or affection, directed towards the Lord, would lead to *moksha*.

Critics have commented on the propriety of a devotional text like the *Bhagavata* to include such highly erotic episodes and their visual description. Various attempts have been made to overcome these problems. Some authors⁵³ believe that the whole episode of Krishna and the *gopis* is symbolic, not factual, denying historicity. Many others believe that Krishna was only a boy of 10-11 at that time, so that the erotic description of him and the *gopis* are only 'exaggerations', thus accepting historicity and denying any ethical problem. G.V. Tagare⁵⁴ is of the opinion that in this episode the historical Krishna Vasudeva becomes the metaphysical divine Krishna, holder of the *Yoga-maya* divine powers.

Krishna moves between two levels of existence, the human and the divine. What seems a miracle to men is simply a display of his divine nature. Paradoxically, it is through tricks and miracles that the god Krishna continuously reveals the ultimate unity of existence.

Significance of Shiva's myths. In the myth of Shiva reducing Kama to ashes (S.7), the conflict between Shiva and Kama is a central element. Shiva is the natural enemy of Kama (god of desire) because he is the epitome of chastity, the eternal *brahmacarin* (the ascetic who has renounced everything). But, as a typical paradox of Hindu mythology, Shiva's chastity is set against his own lust; it is almost impossible to find a myth in which Shiva remains chaste after the original promise to be so⁵⁵. Although the original significance of Shiva burning Kama is unequivocally anti-sexual, immediately after it, Shiva is seduced by

⁵³ Swami Tapasyananda, in his comments to the *Srjmad Bhagavata*, Vol. III, p.11, Madras 1981

⁵⁴ in his introduction to the *Bhagavata Purana*, Part I, pg. XLIX, Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi, 1976

Parvati and by the *tapas* (exercise of penance) she has performed in order to seduce him. Yet, in terms of opposition and reversal, Kama is chastised in his own right, not for interrupting the love play, but for attempting to stimulate it and, as soon as Shiva burns Kama, Shiva does what Kama was tempting him to do anyway.

The interaction between Shiva and Kama is that of two supposedly opposed fires: the fire of desire and the fire of asceticism. But the ascetic fire from Shiva's eye merges with the fire with which Kama pierced Shiva, and finally penetrates the hearts of lovers. As Shiva and Kama are both creators⁵⁶, their roles are closely intertwined in the creation myths and can be interchanged. However, though Kama is merely one aspect of Shiva, the reverse is not true. Shiva is the god of virility, Kama the god of sensuality. Shiva burns Kama because of Kama's frivolous approach to a matter than for Shiva involves the procreation of the cosmos, rather than the titillation which is Kama's trick of the trade.

The myth of Shiva in the Pine Forest (S.4), discussed by Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty⁵⁷ in her comprehensive study on Shiva, is a typical example of paradoxical mythology. Although eroticism and acts of seduction permeate the story, it is primarily concerned with the sages' transformation, and Shiva is the centre around whom the other characters revolve. His seduction, or attempt to seduce the wives of the sages, has the objective of demonstrating a metaphysical truth. The error of the sages is based on conflicts of power, or conflicts of social roles that Shiva wants to correct.

Shiva opposes the *tapas* of the sages not out of fear of their power, but out of belief that *tapas* alone were insufficient as a path to Release. He also wanted to punish the hypocrisy of sages who pretended to perform *tapas* while enjoying their wives. He - the supreme ascetic - considered them false ascetics, ignorant of the *dharma*, and not free from lust, fools that have undertaken the vows out of senility! The episode reveals the true nature of the sages who react by castrating

⁵⁵ Doniger O'Flaherty, *Shiva, The erotic ascetic*, Oxford University Press, 1973, p.141

⁵⁶ *ibidem*, p.171

Shiva, and by abandoning their dignity because of their mad lust. Their hatred of Shiva's virility may be based upon their own repressed sexuality, and this is what Shiva wants them to admit. Shiva designed the lesson, and purposely came into the Pine Forest to test them, and bring them into enlightenment.

To be a trickster⁵⁸ and have 'burlesque ideas' is an innate part of Shiva. This is clearly revealed in this myth in two ways: sometimes he pretends to seduce the sages' wives in order to reduce their *tapas*, sometimes in order to teach them a lesson. Seduction is a variation of the general method of subverting virtue or *tapas*. Shiva retains his ambiguous status as the god who is both seducer and seduced. As a true ascetic, he is only tempted by the wives of the sages, and as a hypocritical ascetic he seduces them, while as a supreme god, he brings about the seduction of the sages.

Shiva enters the Pine Forest as a Pashupata, a member of the sect (also called Kapalika) which believed that anyone injuring another would lose his good *karma* to the injured person. By false accusation, the accused would get the merits of the other, and his bad *karma* would go to the accuser. Therefore, Shiva plays "the lecher" in order to stimulate slander, acquiring *tapas* by this means, and transference of the *karma*. Brahma elucidates this, in another way, when the sages go to seek his advice. He tells them that they have ill-treated Shiva himself, and that one should never do that to a guest, for the guest then takes the good *karma* of the host and leaves his own bad *karma* behind. The sages were performing *tapas* without knowing the true nature of God; they were obtaining great powers by prayers and sacrifices, competing with Shiva. By seducing their wives, Shiva not only cause them to lose their powers, but also transferred those powers to himself.

⁵⁷ *ibidem*

⁵⁸ The trickster appears in myths and folk tales of every traditional society; his figure links culture, sex and laughter, shaping the perception of reality. See Pelton R.D., *The trickster in West Africa*, Univ. of Calif. Press, Berkeley, 1980; also in Joung C.G., *Man and his symbols*, Aldus books, London 1972, p.113

4.6. THE RELIEFS AND THE SACREDNESS OF ANGKOR WAT

The richness and multiplicity of allegorical meaning of reliefs described above do combine with the intense architectural symbolism of Angkor Wat. The innumerable sculptural reliefs' function by accumulating and transmitting the image of a sacred universe where the gods, in their divine or human manifestations, reside. There, they can explain the unknown and make understandable the fears and anxieties of individuals; there, they mediate to make divine aid available. All this sums up into the creation of a sacred universal meaning, a metaphysical meaning, well beyond that of the highest visual manifestation of devotion towards Vishnu.

It is my opinion that this sacredness was the main objective for which the temple was built, an objective well above that of its temporal symbolism, that is, the concrete exaltation of the living king and his power. Through the sacredness of 'his' temple, the king could perceive himself as living in the world of the Indian myths and legends, reinforced by Vaishnava and Shaivite devotion, the cult of ancestors and Brahmanical precepts. The past of Khmer history could be identified with old Hindu myths and legends; the present was where a great king performed great deeds and earned merits along the traditional precepts of the ancestors. This universal attitude had to have priority on the 'state', since the concept of a Khmer kingdom - with its own identity - was not yet developed ⁵⁹.

Today's visitor to Angkor Wat will find the temple bare, after centuries of violation and plundering, and most of all, devoid of any sacred atmosphere. In an attempt to empathise with Khmer culture, one must imagine what it was at the time of Suryavarman II, with all the accessory buildings packed in the courtyards. A great number of statues of the gods, covered with colourful cloths and jewels, were filling the rooms that are now bare passages with all the doors missing. Most of the wall surfaces were decorated with beautiful low-reliefs,

⁵⁹ Walters O.W. *Khmer Hinduism in the 7th Century*, in *Early South East Asia*, edit. by R.B.Smith and E.W.Watson, Oxford Univ. Press, 1979,p.427

possibly originally painted. Moreover, all the ceremonial paraphernalia, the flag and lamp standards, the variety of offerings, and the multitude of priests and attendants animating it would have been present.

The concept of the 'sacred' is important because wherever sacredness is attributed to any particular moment, powerful emotions and attitudes are involved. As Jane Hubert has pointed out⁶⁰, even if we can define the meaning of the word 'sacred' in our own language, it may be that when applied to different cultures and religions of a different time, we will make an inadequate translation of the word (or words) that denote sacred concepts. All concepts expressed in a specific language are necessarily limited by that language. The word 'sacred', however, has by now become universally accepted, even though it is clear it includes variations in the concept it denotes and in what it includes or excludes⁶¹. Sacred places are vested with an identity which involves both the supernatural sphere and the power of social self-definition and personal self-identity; their meaning, however may have been different in the past, or may shift again in the future. Defining a specific place as sacred implies that it carries with it a whole range of rules and regulations regarding people's behaviour in relation to it, and implies a set of beliefs to do with the non-empirical world, often in relation to the spirits of ancestors, as well as of powerful gods or spirits.

The transformation of Angkor Wat from an Hindu temple-~~mausoleum~~ into a Buddhist monastery in the 16th century resulted in the existence of a dual system of beliefs, possibly according to a pattern of continuity that went back to a pre-existing sacred location, maybe of prehistoric or Preangkorean times. This long sacred heritage continued through time, until Angkor Wat had assumed a historical and political significance as well. It is currently the emblem of the country, placed on the national flag and on contemporary banknotes of high value,

⁶⁰ Hubert J., *Sacred beliefs and beliefs of sacredness*, in Carmichael D.L. (Edit.), *Sacred Sites, Sacred Places*, Routledge, London 1994

⁶¹ In English (Jane Hubert, in Carmichael 1994, p.11)...“the word 'sacredness' is derived from the Latin and is defined as *restriction through pertaining to the gods*”. The concept of sacred implies restriction and prohibitions on human behaviour- if something is sacred then certain rules must be observed in relation to it, and this generally means that something that is said to be sacred, whether it to be object or site (or person), must be placed apart from everyday things or places, so that its special significance can be recognised, and rules regarding it obeyed.”

where it simply symbolises modern Cambodia. Even the Khmer Rouge, who did not dare to attack its power and vandalise the monument, somehow respected Angkor Wat.

In the belief of the late Angkorean time, the sacred complex at Angkor Wat amongst forests, surrounded by moats and canals, with 4 gopuras, sequences of enclosures, several cloisters and staircases, rooms with hundreds of pillars, and the *vimana* at the top of a structure which is difficult to reach, unquestionably recalled the dwelling of Hari (Vishnu) in his continent, the Harivarsa. In this respect, Jean Filliozat⁶² published, in 1961, a fascinating theory. In the *Kurma Purana* (chapter XLVII, *slokas* 8-18) the continent of Vishnu, the Harivarsa, is briefly described as a marvellous imaginary continent outside India, inhabited by people of different complexion and long life expectation. In it, there is the magnificent palace of Hari (Vishnu). The description of its character and structure do not find any correspondence in Indian architecture, where monumental steep-structures of difficult access are unknown. Thus, a temple outside India must have inspired the grandiose description of the *Purana*, and the perfect example has to be found in the temple of Angkor Wat. It is a Vaishanava *vimana*⁶³ at the top of a pyramid, which can only be accessed through climbing a steep staircase. Furthermore, numerous representations of beautiful girls (*devatas* and *apsaras*), symbolic of devotion and eternal beauty, occur all around the temple, and surround the central shrine from all directions. These features are not to be found in Indian temples. Therefore, one can ask if the description of the Harivarsa's temple of Hari, in the *Kurma Purana*, was a pure flight of the imagination, or if it had been - at least in part - inspired by a knowledge of Angkor Wat which had reached India. The manifested absence in India of a representation of the Puranic temple of Hari may suggest that the writer of the *Purana* did have some notion of

⁶² Filliozat J., *Le temple de Hari dans le Harivarsa*, Arts Asiatiques, VIII, 1961, p.195

⁶³ Kramrisch S., *The Indian temple*, p.132. *Vimana* is the name of the temple built according to tradition (*shastra*) by the application of various proportionate measurements. By temple is understood the main shrine only, in which the *garbhagrha*, the womb, is contained. Proportionally measured throughout, the *vimana* is the house and body of the god.

The difference with between the Indian and Khmer temple is significant: the former is a place for worshipping a divinity that is within reach, having descended into the temple to save humankind. The Khmer temple - instead - particularly the mountain temple, is a representation on earth of the

the monumental beauty of a construction consecrated to Vishnu outside India. We know, from inscriptions, that several Brahmans travelled from India to the Khmer country, and may have taken back ideas about the prodigious temple to which they may have contributed. At the time of Suryavarman II, Angkor Wat was splendid and closer than ever to the Puranic description. About 150 years later, we are told by Zou Da Quan, the Chinese envoy to Cambodia, that the Bayon temple was covered in gold and the Bapuon sanctuary in bronze. Recently, during repair works of the main tower of Angkor Wat, damaged by a thunderbolt, traces of stones gilded with gold leaf have been discovered⁶⁴.

Filliozat's hypothesis implied an edition of the *Kurma Purana* much later than the 6th century. He believes that the description of the Hari's sanctuary was an addition of the first half of the 12th century, as a result of information that had reached India about the prestigious look of a real Vaishnava temple abroad. The opposite, that the monument of Suryavarman II had been built and decorated according to the *Kurma Purana* description, known in Cambodia before the building of the temple, is also plausible but less believable. The Purana's description does not find any equivalent in the Indian tradition of decoration and architecture. The mountain temple of Angkor Wat - on the contrary - is part of the autonomous architectural development of Khmer traditions. It is unique because it is a mountain temple dedicated to Vishnu, not Shiva as usual, and has many representations of a court of beautiful women (dancing girls, *devata*), and perennially praying *yogini* surrounding their god⁶⁵. The general structure of Angkor Wat can be understood within Khmer art and architecture much better than the monumental conception of the Purana does with India's art and architecture. The ideal beauty of the Harivarsa continent most surely corresponds to the real beauty of the Khmer country.

Jean Filliozat's theory highlights the possibility that the cultural exchange between India and the Khmer country may not have always been one way, with

celestial abode of the gods, where the king of humans is enshrined as their representative. Khmer temples are "cosmico-political" (Filliozat J., *ibidem*, p.196) rather than religious constructions.

⁶⁴ Personal communication by Jean Christophe Simon in 1997

India having supremacy. The Khmer model may have really been assimilated by the Indian author/s of the *Kurma Purana* for its originality and splendour. Moreover, the conceptual autonomy of Angkor Wat and its possible identity with the Harivarsa's temple of Hari emphasises the celestial and sacred significance of Angkor Wat.

⁶⁵ The use of reliefs of *devatas* in various sites of the temple becomes common in temple's decoration after Angkor Wat.

Part II - Chapter 3**CONCLUSIONS****3.1. NARRATIVE RELIEFS OF THE WESTERN CORNER PAVILIONS**

In the descriptive part of this thesis (Part I), the reliefs of the western corner pavilions of Angkor Wat have been examined in the light of the Indian texts¹ which clearly provided the inspiration for the Khmers. This link has been used as the basis for my critical discussion of the stories depicted (Part II). Previous interpretations were confirmed and new ones have been tentatively proposed; furthermore, identifications are suggested for two un-identified panels: the one of 'Akrura's vision' (N.4) and of 'Krishna and the *gopis*' (N.11). The panel depicting 'Shiva receiving homage' (S.11) remains unexplained, although the identification of Shiva is confirmed by close examination of his iconography.

3.2. VISUAL NARRATIVE LANGUAGE AT ANGKOR WAT

On the basis of the visual elements employed in the reliefs, it is evident that when Khmer artists sculpted the walls of Angkor Wat, conventions for the representation of images were in place, requiring a common visual vocabulary and grammar (Part II, chapter 1). Paradigms of size, emplacement, layout, iconographic conventions, combined with the sculptural style of the reliefs, contributed to create a 'Khmerness' typical of Angkorean art, and distinct from Indian art. Although the art's content (the text) is taken from Indian sources, the form (the language) is unmistakably Khmer.

There is notable homogeneity in the sculptural style of the reliefs that decorate the western corner pavilions as well as the reliefs of the galleries of the 3rd enclosure and other sites of the temple. The main exception are the narrative reliefs in the NE quadrant of the 3rd enclosure which have been discussed above

¹ Not in Sanskrit, but in the English translations by H.P. Shastri and his team. See chapter on bibliography.

(see Part I, chapter 4). Subtle differences exist in the depth of the carving and some slight stylistic variations, almost certainly due to different workshops, or teams of sculptors. In general, all the narrative reliefs of the temple appear to be contemporaneous to its construction (with exception of the panels in the NE quadrant).

At Angkor Wat the techniques of visual representation, or visual narration, were employed with a high degree of sophistication. In the corner pavilions, for the first time in Khmer art, the artists had to face large rectangular surfaces (higher than wider), almost square, on which to depict stories. They resolved the task through a well-spaced layout, with the figure of the main personage/s acting as the centre around which other personages and the background were integrated. The various figurative elements - like words - were composed in phrases drawn from the Hindu story. When a single register was inadequate for the visual narration of a story, multiple registers were used within the same panel. The linear 'order of telling' narrating an event as a frieze, was used in the large panels of the galleries of the 3rd enclosure. In the corner pavilions the representation of events in a more contained physical space required the adoption of the more complex 'elliptic method'. Out of a complex and lengthy story, the artists selected a few 'culminant' moments, which would convey the original event narrated (e.g. Rama killing Valin, S.8, Shiva reducing Kama to ashes, S.7) from the original Hindu texts. The few doubtful interpretations of reliefs are due to the poor state of preservation that makes the reading fragmentary. Never before in Khmer art had this visual narrative technique been used so efficiently. It appears to have been taken as a model for the reliefs of Banteay Chmar and the Bayon.

By extending the analysis of the narrative and semiotic elements of the corner pavilions' reliefs to those from other parts of the temple, the mythological-temporal allegories construct a discourse that requires the full attention and participation of the visitor. It emerges that the two western corner pavilions appear to be unique repositories of metaphysical meanings, more than other sites within the temple. They had a status of greater significance over the 8 large panels of the

long galleries, and even more so if the 2 eastern corner pavilions would have been decorated with 24 similar sculptural panels.

3.3. THEMATIC ARRANGEMENT OF THE NARRATIVE RELIEFS

In this thesis, it has been shown (Part II, chapters 1 and 2) that the reliefs of the western corner pavilions are not arranged according to a clear thematic order creating one or multiple narrative cycles. We cannot say if this random arrangement was of no importance to the Khmers, or if it was intended to create an associative/meditative state in the visitor. Alternatively, the panels may have been arranged according to a cosmological plan or a *mandala* that eludes us at present. If a 'logical' arrangement is out of reach to us, the fact remains that, through the visual representation of myths and legends from the Sanskrit texts, the Khmers charged the corner pavilions with intense metaphysical and allegorical meanings (chapters 4.2 - 4.4). As hypothesised above, the full thematic program may have originally included the two eastern corner pavilions that, however, have been left without any sculptural narrative reliefs.

As shown in Part II, chapter 2, the reliefs of the corner pavilions generate a rich symbolic aggregate, with a variety and depth of meanings that must have been an intrinsic part of the overall religious and mythological symbolism of the temple, and which was also expressed in association with its architecture (chapters 3.2 - 3.4). Although these reliefs do not seem to integrate with specific sets or cycles from other sites in the temple, particularly with those in the adjacent galleries, they do, nevertheless, function as some of the most important elements that contribute to establish the sacredness of the temple.

Despite the danger of all generalisations, it is possible that the apparent lack of an organisational or syntagmatic program governing in the narrative found in the panels of the corner pavilions could extend to the entire temple. This syntagmatic lacuna may be related to the larger architectural *mandala* plan of the temple (also unknown to us) or to a different conceptual use of time and space. In Cambodia, as in India, the articulation of space and temporal narrative succession

may have been of little consequence to the artists, because in Indian cosmology time was considered to be cyclical rather than linear. Time follows cosmic cycles, in a number of periodic acts of creations and destruction; it continuously creates new cycles, new recurring units of time (the smallest being the *yuga*). Moreover there was a literary tradition for producing sub-plots in complex narrative². In visual narrative, this may have allowed the creation of semi-independent narrative cycles within the grand visual discourse of the entire temple. This could be the case of the *Ramayana* depicted in the pediments over the lintels in the corner pavilions, as well as of other mythological events depicted in panels, pediments, pillars, and so on in other sites of Angkor Wat (Western Gopura, Cruciform cloister, libraries, and so on).

The apparent lack of thematic arrangements of the stories depicted does not preclude the fact that the Khmers may have combined panels in order to produce some particular associations of allegorical significance, with the intention of creating a meaningful unity between mythological stories and events of the life of Suryavarman II.

3.4. THE MEANING OF THE NARRATIVE RELIEFS OF ANGKOR WAT

From the interpretation of the symbolism of the reliefs of the western corner pavilions (Part II, chapter 2), it is possible to hypothesise that they are an extolling of Vaishnavite ideology, through the exemplary actions of Vishnu's incarnation as Krishna or Rama, besides being charged with theogonical concepts and moral precepts. It is obvious that their symbolism refers not only to the gods, but also, or perhaps mainly, to king Suryavarman II, who may have planned to use these visual allegories to build the sacredness of his kingship and reinforce his legitimacy as a ruler. This hypothesis is here exemplified and demonstrated well beyond the various short mentions scattered in Khmer critical literature.

A better understanding of how these concepts contribute to the creation of a religious and social discourse, and reflect Khmer vision of reality at the time of

² Endless examples typify the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Harivamsa* and the *Puranas*.

the building of Angkor Wat, is achieved through the analysis of the reliefs from other sites of the temple. These include the reliefs of the large panels in the galleries of the 3rd enclosure, those of the tapestry type on doorjambs, of the lintels and the pediments (see Part II, Chapter 2) bring in additional elements (myths and legends) which complete the narrative 'text' within the wider context of the temple's architecture.

The large panels of the galleries appear to powerfully render the cycle of Vishnu's divine actions, from his contribution to the creation of original order to his final assistance in the judgement of human souls. Again, this too can be seen as symbolic of the king's cycle as ruler, from his enthronement as a monarch to his final position, after his death, as the judge of the Khmer people, deciding if they merited heaven or hell. This would tie-up with the theories suggested by Bosch and Mannikka discussed in chapter 1.3.

The narrative reliefs of the tapestry type, those on the door pillars and of the lintels of various sites in the temple, depict single episodes or syntheses of events taken from the legends of Vishnu, Krishna and Rama, plus the popular Churning of the Ocean of Milk. Finally, the many pediments of the temple's complex architecture, all narrate mythological stories or events not dissimilar to those previously discussed, thus reinforcing the overall symbolic message connoted by the temple's decoration.

I suggest that although Suryavarman II may have built Angkor Wat as a sign of his profound devotion to Vishnu, he also wanted to use its symbolism to construct and visually validate his kingship and attest his divine-inspired temporal power. The visual representations (reliefs, sculptures, etc.) symbolic of the relation between earthly and heavenly order, divine splendour and spectacle, needed to be prominent with the intent of bringing out the exemplary figure of the king having the right to rule on earth in intimate association with the divine (*devaraja*, *chakravartin*). Narrative reliefs, like rituals and festivals, may have had multiple meanings: representations of cosmic order, pictures of secular stability in times of strife, reinforcement of the official hierarchy, and a display of Brahmanic and royal unity after the traumas of Cham wars and pryncedoms' rebellions.

Suryavarman II may have aimed at constructing an apotheosis of himself and his own dynasty and achieving the legitimisation of his relatively 'parvenu' dynasty, started only some 30 years before by his maternal grandfather Jayavarman VI.

The making of temples and images, however, was a means to validate power. In this respect I agree with Robert Brown's assumption³ that through the making of temples and images the Khmer kings and their elite could fulfil the necessity to create channels of communication and interaction with their gods. Gods and men were living together in different categories but not in kind. The spiritual and mundane worlds were undivided, with the gods the means to the power and goals of this world. The Hindu gods reached Cambodia and become manifested in the images and myths depicted in its reliefs; the Khmers "activated" them to fulfil their own needs. This divine manifestation extended also to the person of the king who was perceived as an incarnation or a descendant of a god. However, at times secular power was as important as the religious one, as attested by the magnitude of Suryavarman II's ruling activity. The emergence, recognition and coronation ceremonies of the kings were fundamentally secular occasions where the officiating clergy provided only assurance and blessing. As the monarch who built and donated temples as gifts to his subjects, the king reaffirmed his superiority and autonomy as the pre-eminent person of the kingdom, subject to no one, and ruler of all. But as the man who also enjoyed the exclusive right to give gifts to the gods, the king also demonstrated his dependence on the celestial hierarchy for his earthly power, and his need for divine protection. Possibly, his reliance on the Brahmans was complete, and of this they were fully aware.

3.5. NARRATIVE RELIEFS AND SACREDNESS OF ANGKOR WAT

Although there does not seem to be a unified narrative plan for the temple's reliefs, individually and in some combination they contribute to construct an overall meaning directed towards the activation of the sacredness of

³ Brown R.L., *The Dvaravati Wheels of Law and the Indianisation of Southeast Asia*, E.J.Brill, Leiden, 1996, p.195

the monument. The basis for this conception - in my opinion - lay in the use of Indian texts to introduce, or reinforce, values in Khmer culture, in a process of denotation/connotation that must have been specific to the time of Suryavarman II. If the *Puranas*, *Harivamsa*, and *Mahabharata* were addressing general philosophical, religious, moral and political principles, the *Ramayana* emphasised personal values in the figure of the protagonist - Rama the hero - who could be easily identifiable with that of the king.

How and why the Khmers made a selection of particular incidents from the Sanskrit texts may have expressed their view of reality and provided an effective means for conveying political views and inculcating religious teachings. However, our scholarly interpretation may be false because the selection may not have been done by the creators of the temple, but inherited from the manuals (*shastras*) on architectural and sculptural canons imposed by the orthodox tradition. No innovation may have been tolerated by the literate brahmins in charge of the ideation and design of the narrative reliefs, who considered essential the preservation of atavic traditions and the avoidance of introduction of local folklore elements. Furthermore our considerations are based only on the reliefs that have survived the destruction of time, being thus fragmentary.

From the outset, on stepping into the temple from the main entrance, the Western Gopura, one suddenly enters a sacred space and a surreal world of images. The magnificence of this gopura is meant to indicate to the pilgrim that - besides entering the temple/city and abode of Vishnu - he is initiated into the mysteries of Vaishnavite beliefs. Its ritual importance has never been emphasised enough by previous scholars⁴, thus neglecting the spiritual and religious significance that the Khmers paid to this ritual 'passage'. After this introduction, the pilgrim will be facing an even vaster, richer and more complex sacred space enlightened by narrative and decorative reliefs engraved - with great refinement - on all its available architectural surfaces.

⁴ as it is that of the causeway over the moat; the access to it through large steps and the long walk on it are the first acts of the initiation which is to be completed in the western gopura.

The approach to the divinity of Vishnu, high in the temple (1st enclosure), where the king himself and his brahmins ascended to him by walking up the very high steps, emphasizes the analogy of ascending Mt. Meru. Probably only a few selected other people could reach the top of the sacred structure in order to come to the presence of the great statue of Vishnu and venerate the god by making offerings. The other elements, which make this place particular holy and significant, are its centrality within the temple complex, that is also symbolic of the centre of the Universe and of the Khmer kingdom. Furthermore its *sancta sanctorum*, with Vishnu's statue at the centre, had opening oriented along the E-W and N-S alignments of the cardinal points.

To all effects, one of the functions of these reliefs was to embellish the temple, the abode of the god, or even to transform Angkor Wat into a celestial palace. The hundreds of celestial courtesans (*devatas/apsaras*) depicted over the walls on the temple, in the galleries and towers of the four enclosures were part of the temple's cosmic *mandala* design.

In Cambodia, as in India, it was considered beneficial to sacred monuments to be decorated with tales from Sanskrit texts and scenes from the life of the king. When one contemplates the many narratives that are placed beyond the reach of easy observation by pilgrims, monks and patrons, it seems that this fact is discounted. They must have deemed them necessary for the complex functioning of the temple and for fulfilling its sacredness.

From a global point of view, one can see that there is a sort of filtering of themes from the outside towards the centre of the temple, from complex mythological and epic stories towards single mythic events of great symbolic significance. Equally, this process moves from 'below' (the gopuras and the galleries of the 3rd and 2nd enclosure) upwards (to the shrine), in a sort of three-dimensional *mandala*. The greatest variety of themes takes place in the 3rd enclosure with its pediments, half pediments, lintels and large panels with

narrative reliefs taken from the Puranic myths of Vishnu and Shiva and the stories from the Ramayana and *Mahabharata*, as well from historic events. A similar, but greatly reduced thematic variety subsists in the 2nd enclosure, where, nevertheless the *Ramayana* prevails. The decoration of the cruciform cloister that unites these two enclosures is purely of Vaishnavite content, probably due to its ceremonial use Vaishnavite events. When one reaches the 1st enclosure, a change towards prevailing Puranic myths can easily be noticed: there are no more pediments with chaotic battle scenes or Ramayana stories, but only the symbolic actions of Vishnu or Krishna, especially in the central tower, as if to irradiate them to the four cardinal directions and so make them clearly seen.

From the above, it appears that the 1st enclosure, with its magnificent central tower, was the realisation of Mt. Meru and the ultimate shrine of Vishnu. The impact that one feels when reaching it is all the greater because one is facing it after emerging from the intimate, shaded surroundings of the cruciform cloister, or the darkness of the second enclosure's gallery. Just the view of its elevation is imposing: from ground level to the top of the main tower it is about 65 m ⁵. After climbing the high and steep main staircase, in itself an arduous act of 'separation' from the rest of the temple, one reaches the gallery of the first enclosure, with its very large windows with stately balusters, and pillared galleries on the inside. The white Cambodian light streams from everywhere, making these the brightest and most sunny corridors of Angkor Wat, suggesting a masterly planned use of light's symbolism by the Khmer architects. The elevation is so high, the light so intense, and the decoration so sophisticated that one feels completely detached from the world below.

All together, the narrative reliefs are texts that are part of the larger context of the temple as a whole, completing its extensive hermeneutic field. This, together with the architectural symbolism of Angkor Wat, creates the image of a universe ruled by the gods, in their divine or human incarnations. All this comes together into the production of a sacred meaning, a metaphysical meaning, well beyond that of the highest visual manifestation of devotion towards Vishnu. I

⁵ Equivalent to a modern 20-story apartment building, Mannikka, 1996, p.238

believe that the construction of this sacredness was the main objective for which the temple was built. Through the sacredness of 'his' temple, the king could perceive himself as living in the Khmer world of the Indian myths and legends, reinforced by Vaishnavite and Shaivaite devotionism, the cult of ancestors and Brahmanical precepts.

Part II - Chapter 4**GLOSSARY**

Adityas, a group of celestial deities including Indra and Vishnu

Airavata, sacred elephant transporting the god Indra. Also one of the elephants that support the four quarters of the world.

Amrita, the nectar of immortality

Ananta, the multi-headed serpent on which Vishnu rests during his withdrawal from the world.

Anantasayin, epithet of Vishnu when resting on Ananta

Angada, the monkey warrior son of Valin

Angkor, capital (from *nagara*)

Apsara^s, celestial water nymphs, wives of the Gandharvas (celestial musicians)

Arjuna, the king of the Haihayas, of the Pandava tribe

Ascetics, sages who practised austerities

Ashokavana, the *ashoka* bush

Ashtadikpalas, (sentinels of the eight directions)

Asura, devilish monsters, anti-gods

Asvins, Vedic twin gods

Avalokiteshvara, "Lord of compassion", the most venerated Bodhisattva

Bali, a king of the demons

Balarama, elder brother of Krishna

Banteay, citadel, temple with enclosure walls

Bhakti, religious devotion to a supreme god, especially Krishna

Beng, pond

Cakravartin, Indian royal title

Chandrasaha, the glittering scimitar, Ravana's sword, which he received from Shiva as a boon.

Daiityas and *Danavas*, two classes of demons

Dasaratha, king of Kosala and father of Rama

~~*Devaputtas*, flying male celestial beings~~

Devaraja, 'god who is king', the divinity who rules the country

Devi, title given to Parvati, wife of Shiva

Dharma, order and custom which make life and the universe possible; behaviour necessary for the maintenance of order; rules which govern society; social duty.

Dvarapala, door's guardian divinities

Ganas, Shiva's attendants

Gandharvsa, heavenly musicians

Garbhaghra, inner chamber of the shrine

Garuda, king of the birds, vehicle of Vishnu

Gopa, male cowherd

Gopis, female cowherd

Gopura, large door of the temple

Hamsa, sacred goose (or swan), vehicle of Brahma

Indra, the king of the Gods

Indrajit, son of Ravana

Janaka, king of Mithila, father of Sita

Kalanemi, an asura enemy of the gods

Kiratas, a race of hunters

Kompong, ~~area~~ village by the river

Kurma, king of tortoises

Lakshmana, one of Rama's brothers

Mahendras, mythological mountain at the centre of the Ocean

Mahout, the man who drives the elephant

Meru, the mountain home of the gods

Mandala, (circular) geometric figure representing the cosmos

Mandapa, antechamber, a pavilion in front of the main shrine

Mandara, mythological mountain of the gods, the king of mountains, used to churn the Ocean of Milk

Modaka, a sort of sweetmeat liked by Ganesha

Moksha, release from transmigration, from rebirth

Muni, holy sage

Nagas, a class of semi-divine snakes

Nandi, the sacred bull of Shiva

Narasimha, “man-lion”, one of Vishnu’s *avatara*.

Parvati, Shiva’s consort known also as Devi, Uma etc.

Phkak, characteristic Khmer weapon, long handled club with two blades inserted at an angle.

Phnom, hill

Prakṛti, in Samkhya, the original germinal matter from which the material universe evolves; synonym of Pradhana

Prasada or prasat, sanctuary tower

Preah , Prah, Pra, belonging to anything sacred, holy

Purusa, in Samkhya, the principle of consciousness which interact with Prakirti.

Rahu, mythical demon said to cause eclipses of the sun or moon by assuming the shape of a meteor.

Raikakshyaka, crossband over the chest

Rajalalisatana, a way of sitting with one knee high, used mainly by princely people.

Rakshasa, demons

Rakshini, female rakshasa

Rasa lila, a circular dance

Ravana, the demon king of Lanka

Rishi, a great sage or illuminated being

Sampot, short skirt around the waist, for men (sarong for women)

Samkhyas, a school of philosophy stressing the dualism of material nature and consciousness

Samsara, transmigration of the soul; reincarnation

Sarabhanga, ascetic group visited by Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana

Shiva (the auspicious), god of ascetics, and of cosmic destruction and creation

Shri, Vishnu's wife, Lakshmi

Sita, (the furrow), wife of Rama, daughter of Janaka

Shastra, instruction-book, manual

Skanda, the god of war, son of Shiva

Spean, bridge

Sras, pond, water basin

Srei, woman

Sri, a wife of Vishnu

Sugriva, monkey king ally of Rama

Surya, sun god, father of Sugriva

Sushena, monkey general, father of Tara, Valin wife

Stung, river

S^vayamvara, a ceremony where a bride can choose her consort

Tapas, the ascetic self-restraint and self-mortification to which one voluntarily subjects in order to gain uncommon powers

Tara, wife of Valin

Thom, large, big

Tilottama, female divine being created by the gods to pacify two fighting asuras who were creating havoc on earth

Trijata, a female rakshasa who spoke in favour of Sita

Trivikrama, epithet of Vishnu when making three steps

Uma, daughter of the Himalayas, wife of Shiva

Vahana, mount or vehicle of a god

Varman, protector

Vat, Wat, temple monastery, pagoda

Vihara, rectangular building to house a Buddha sculpture

Vahana, sacred animal, mount of the gods

Valin, king of the monkeys, son of Indra, brother of Sugriva, and husband of Tara

Valmiki, sage composer of the Ramayana

Varuna, god of the ocean

Vasudeva, ^{foster}father of Krishna

Vasuki, great king of the snakes

Vibishana (terrifying), rakshasa brother of Ravana, who left Lanka to join Rama

Vimana, the temple built by the proportionate measurements of the *shastras*

Viradha, rakshasa who attempted to abduct Sita

Vishnu (the pervader), supreme god, the Maintainer of the Universe

Yakshas, semi divine beings, protectors and owners of wealth, associated with Kubera

Yama, king of the dead, sovereign over hell

Yuga, one of the 4 ages of the world (Krita, Treta, Dvapara and Kali)

Part II - Chapter 4**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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Vittorio Roveda

**NARRATIVE RELIEFS FROM THE
SW & NW CORNER PAVILIONS
OF ANGKOR WAT**

PART III
Illustrations

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1999

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All the photographs have been taken by the author, with the exception of a few which have been reproduced from the following books:

Le Temple d'Angkor Vat, by Finot L., Parmentier H. et Coedes G., EFEO, 1927-32: Plate 1 top left, 2 top, 6 bottom, 5 top, 7 bottom, 8 top, 10 top, 12 bottom, 13 top & bottom, 15 left & right, 16 bottom.

Angkor Wat, Time, Space and Kingship, by Eleanor Mannikka, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 1996 : Plate 5 bottom, 6 top & bottom, 7 top, 11 top, 14 top.

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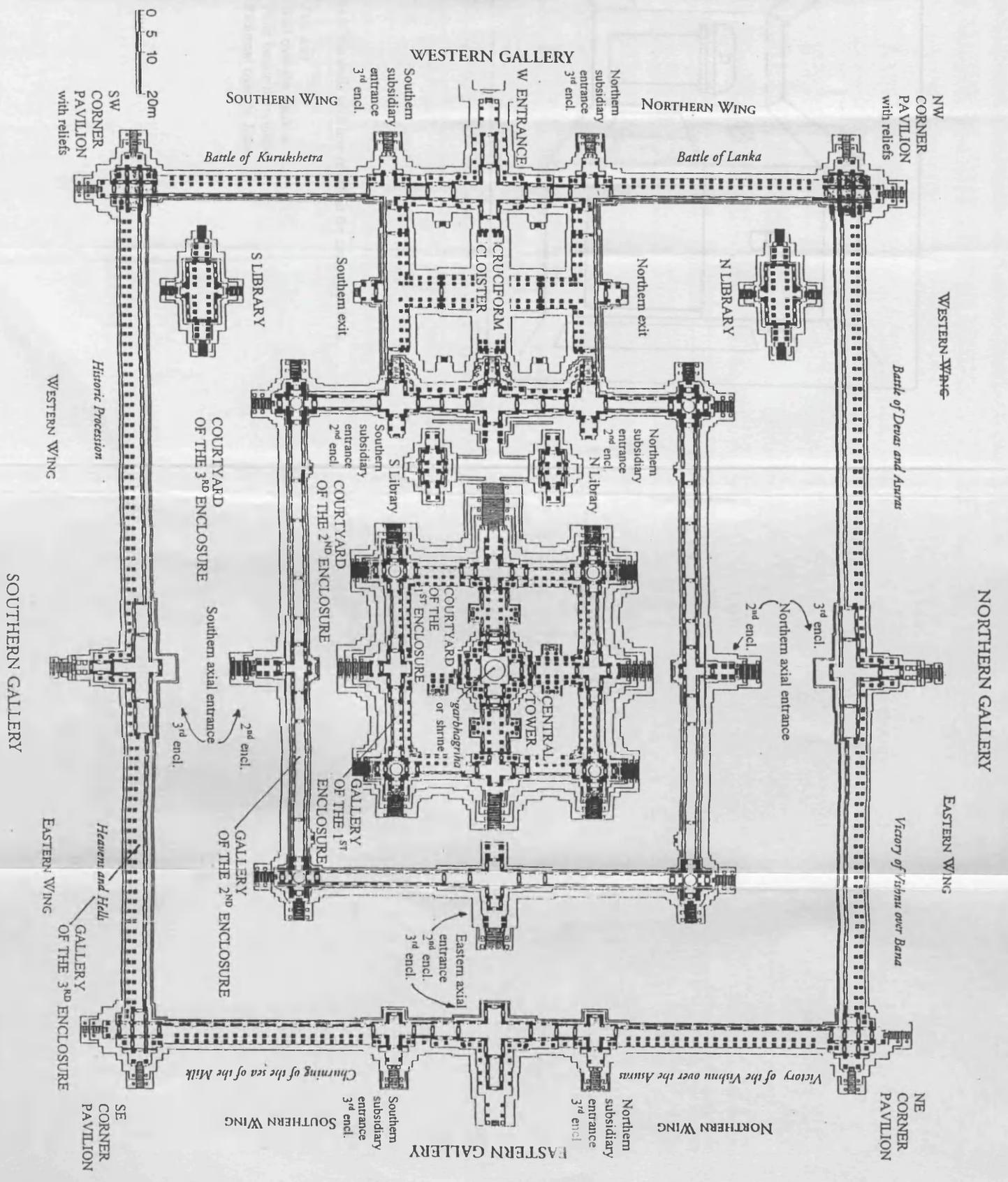


Fig. 1 - Plan of the temple of Angkor Wat and its nomenclature

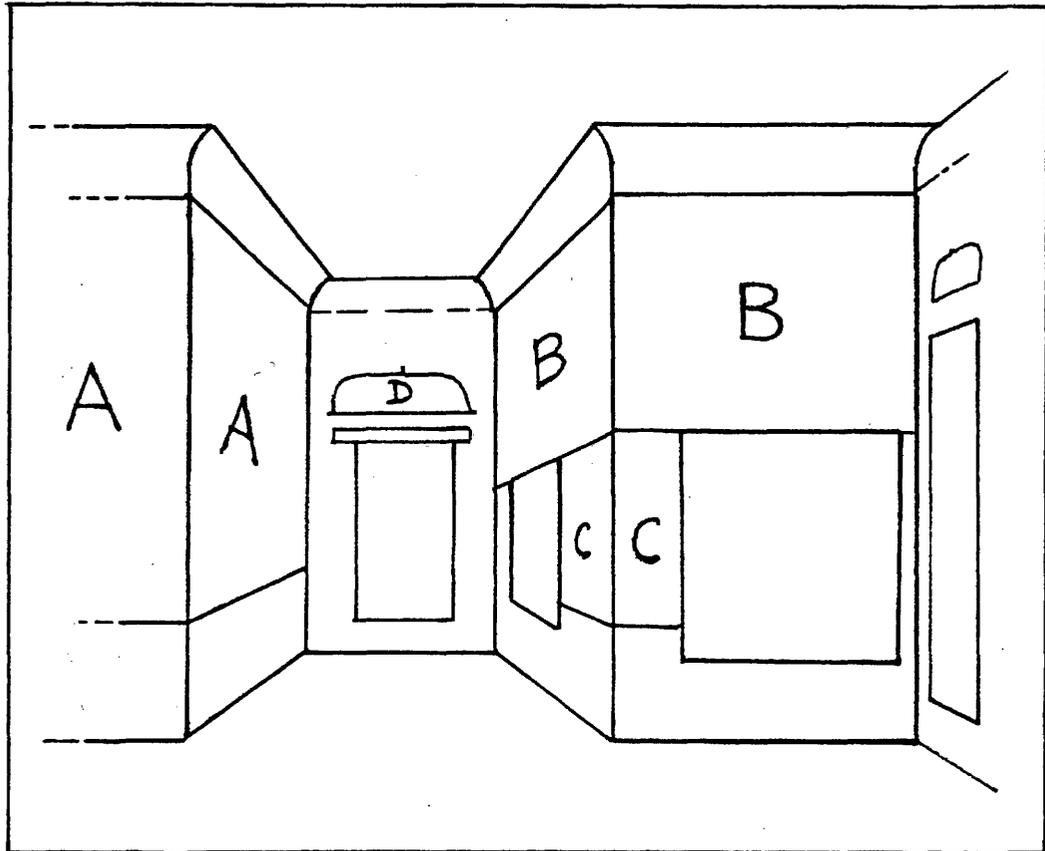


Fig.2 - Nomenclature of the walls with low-reliefs in the corner pavilions.

- A = Full wall
- B = Wall over the window
- C = Pillar beside the window
- D = Pediment over the lintel

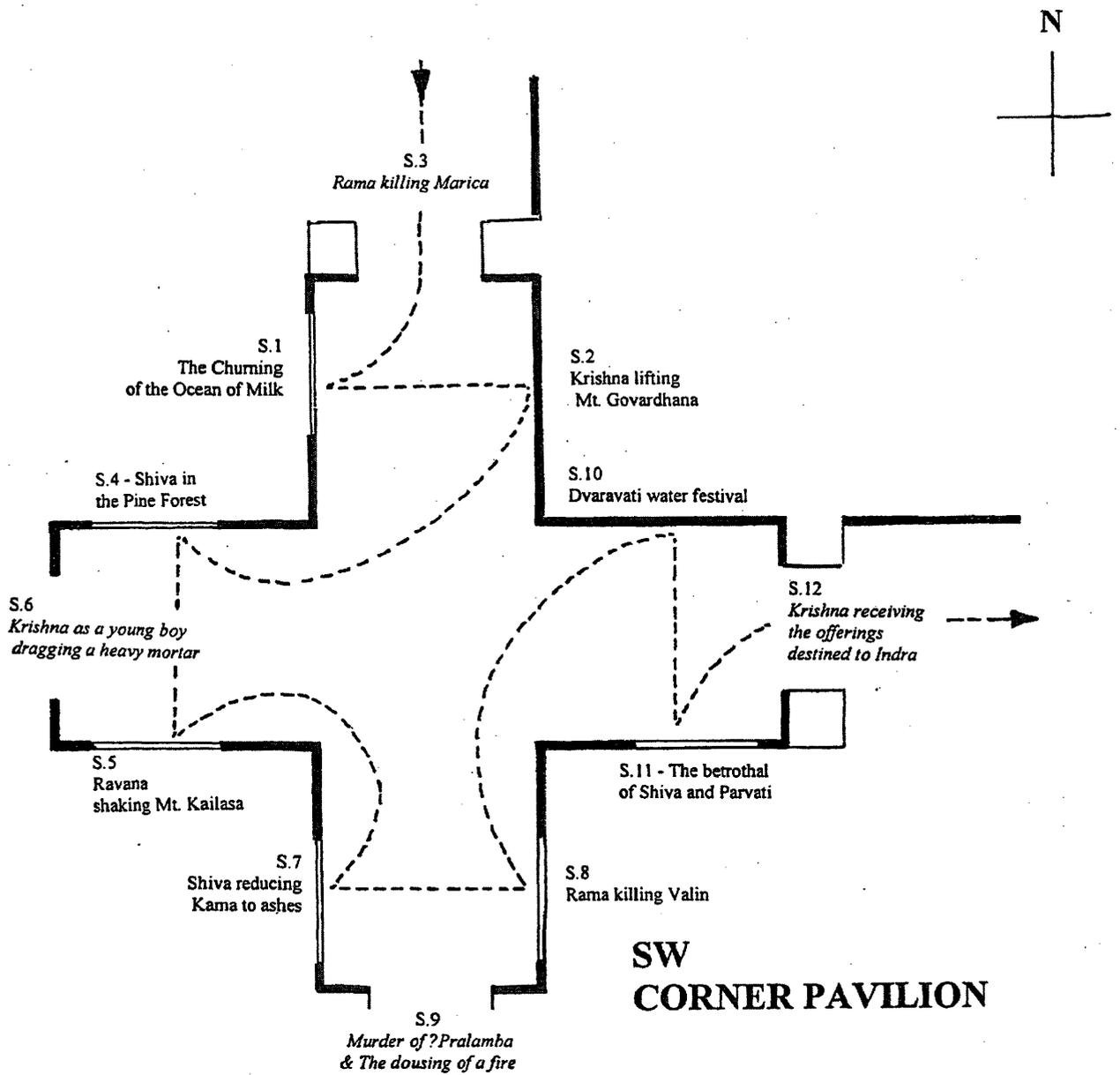


Fig. 3 Proposed visiting order for the SW corner pavilion

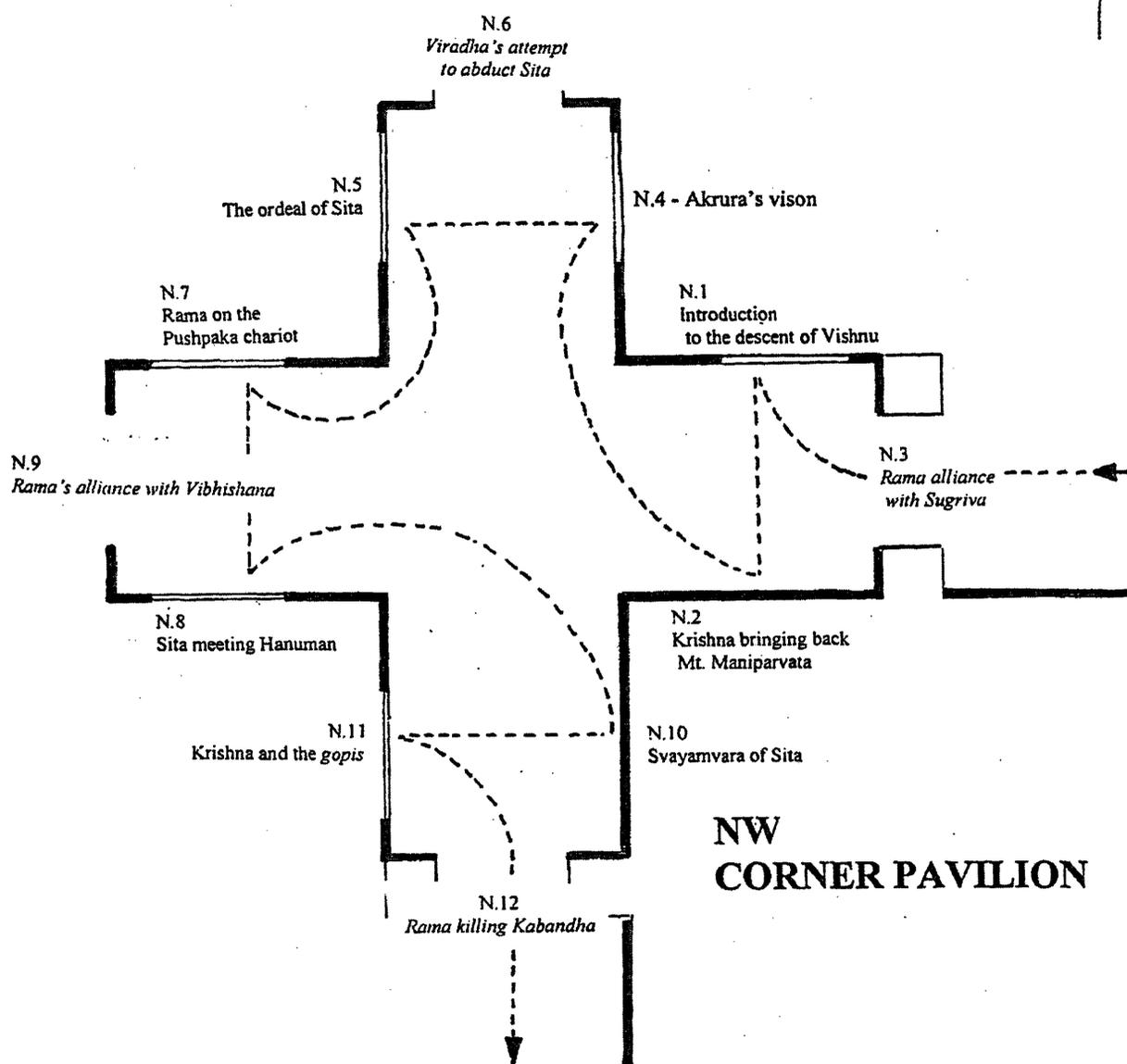
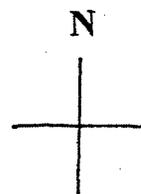


Fig. 4 - Proposed visiting order for the NW corner pavilion

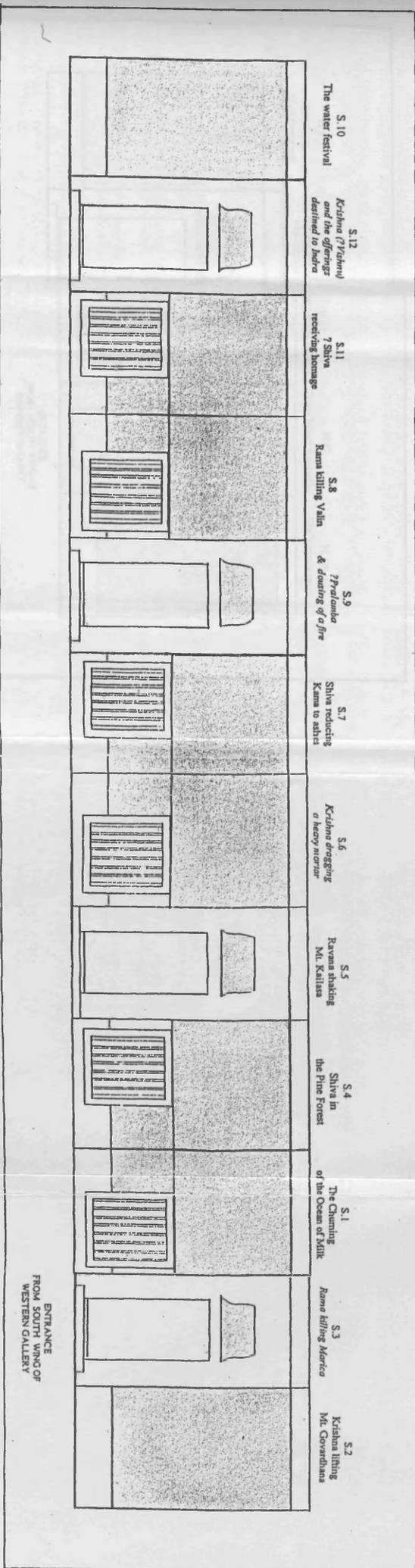


Fig. 5 - Arrangement of reliefs in the SW corner pavilion

NW Corner Pavilion

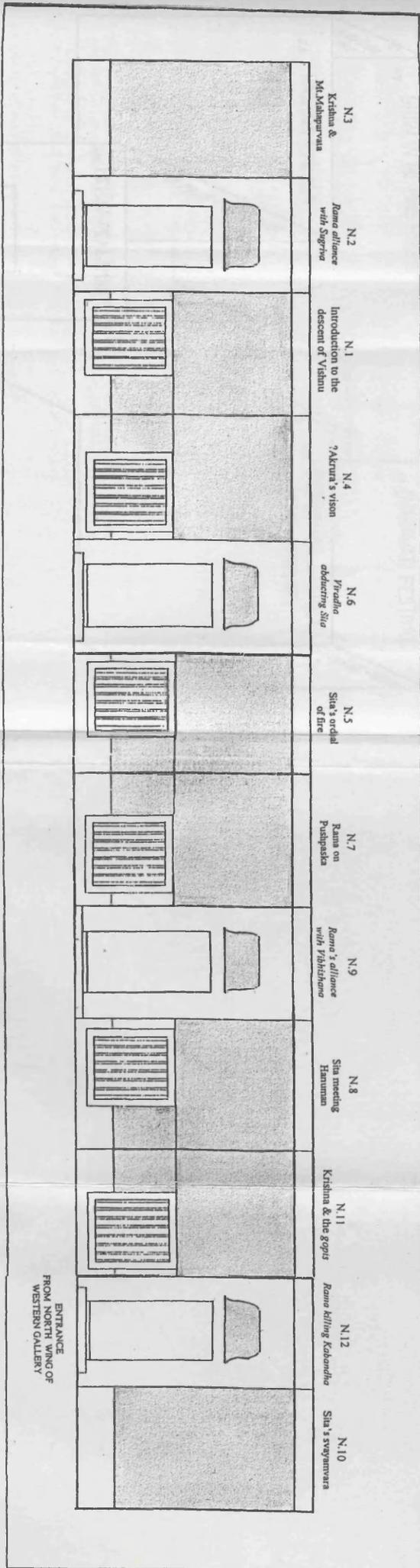


Fig. 6 - Arrangement of reliefs in the NW corner pavilion

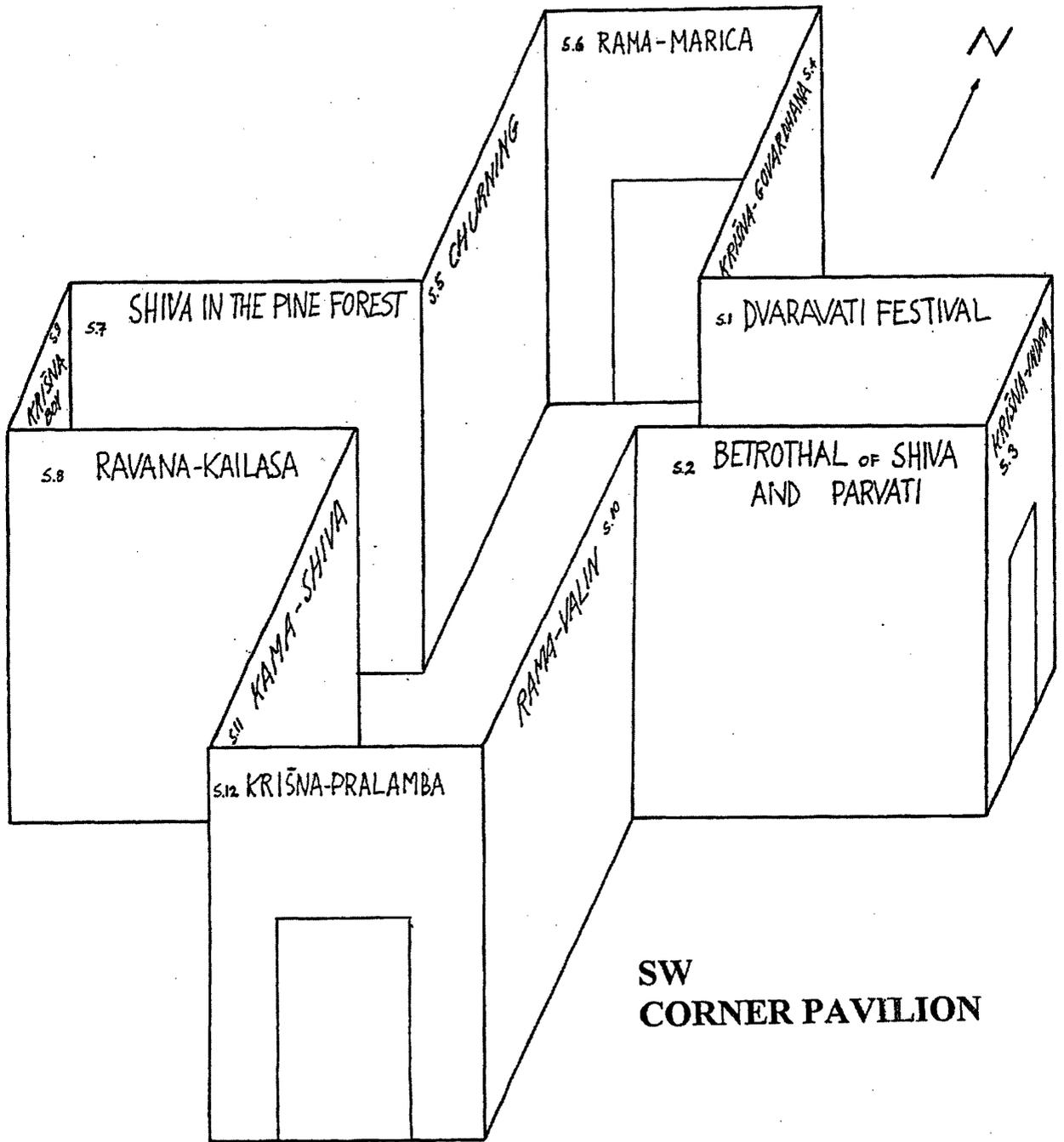


Fig. 7 - Thematic distribution of reliefs from the SW corner pavilion

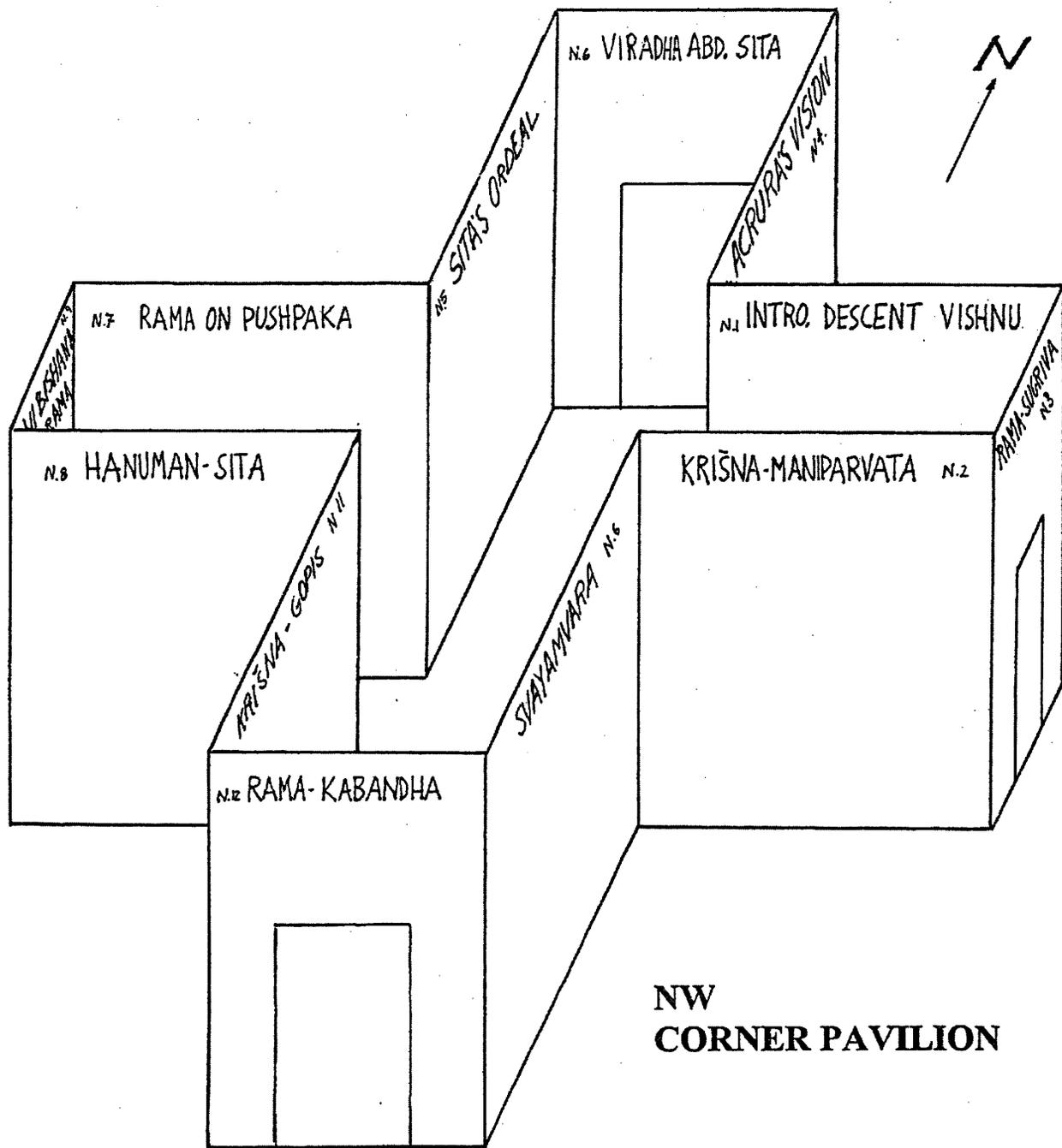


Fig. 8 - Thematic distribution of reliefs from the NW corner pavilion

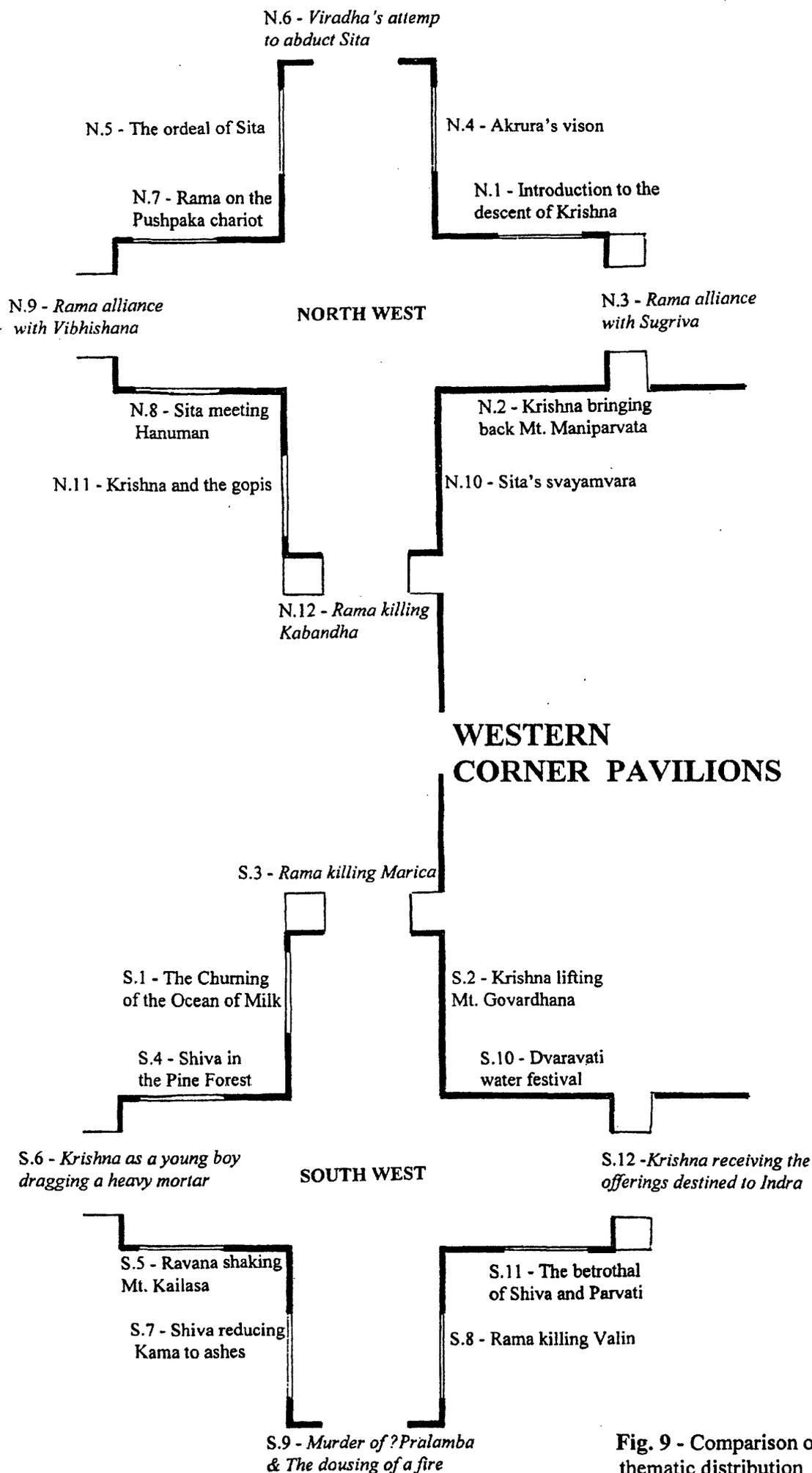
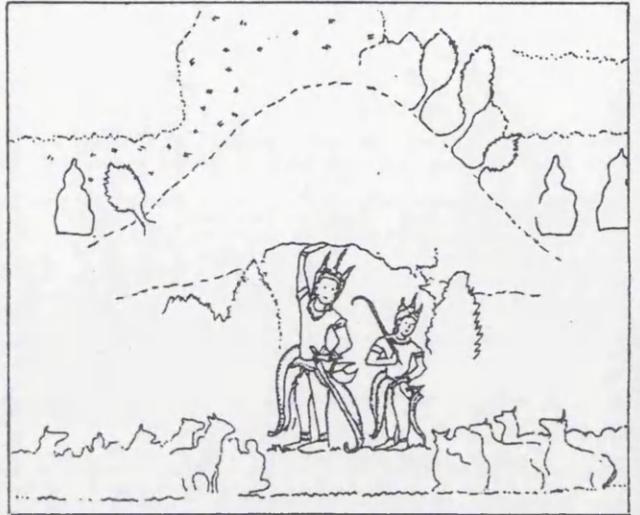


Fig. 9 - Comparison of thematic distribution in both western corner pavilions.



S.1 - The Churning of the Ocean of Milk



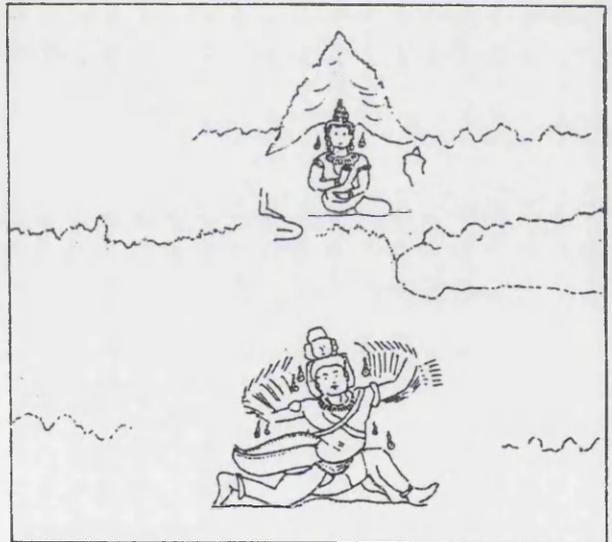
S.2 - Krishna lifting Mt. Govardhana



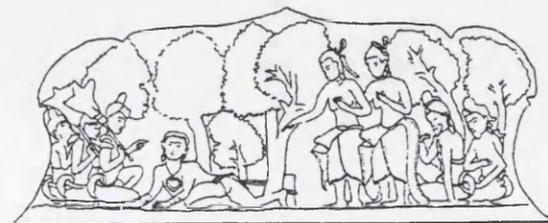
S.3 - Rama killing Marica



S.4 - Shiva in the Pine Forest (S.4)



S.5 - Ravana shaking Mt. Kailasa

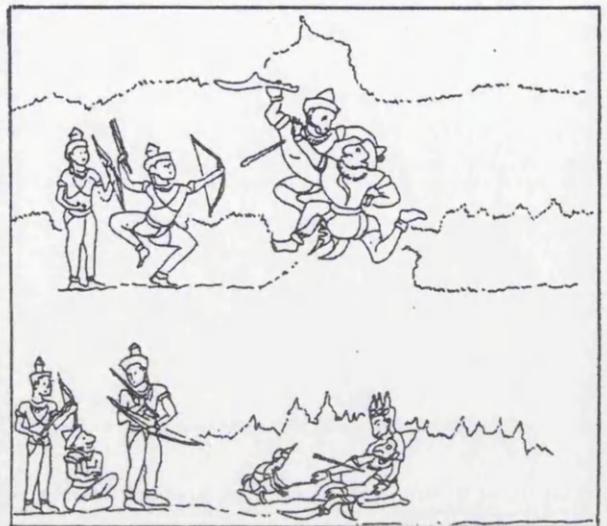


S.6 - Krishna as a young boy dragging a heavy mortar

Fig. 10 - SW corner pavilion.
Visual summary of 6 relief panels



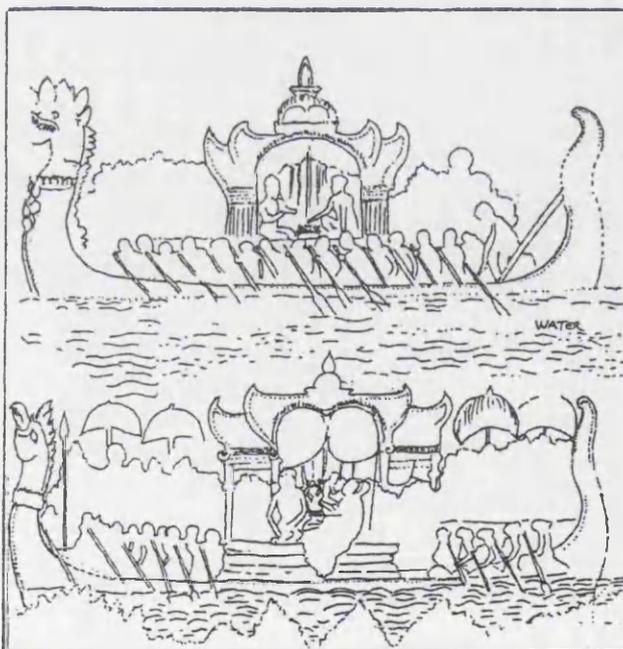
S.7 - Shiva reducing Kama to ashes



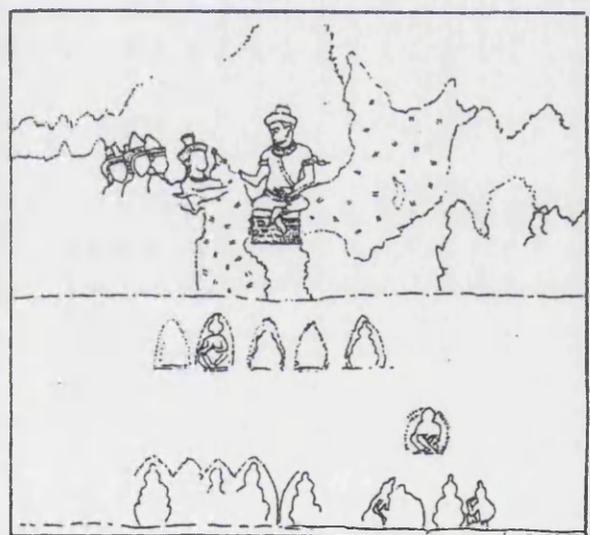
S.8 - The death of Valin



S.9 - Murder of ?Pralamba & The dousing of a fire



S.10 - Dvaravati water festival

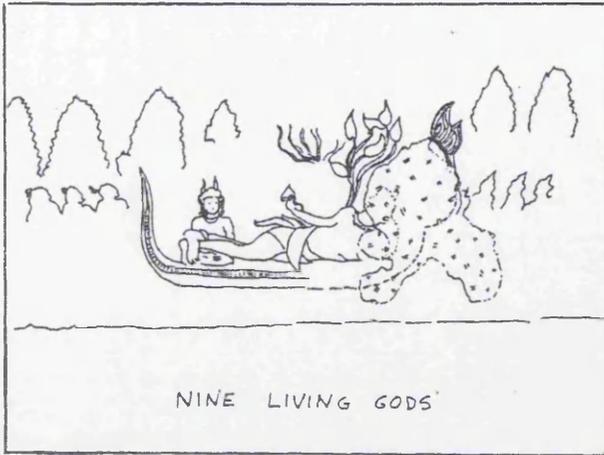


S.11 - The betrothal of Shiva and Parvati

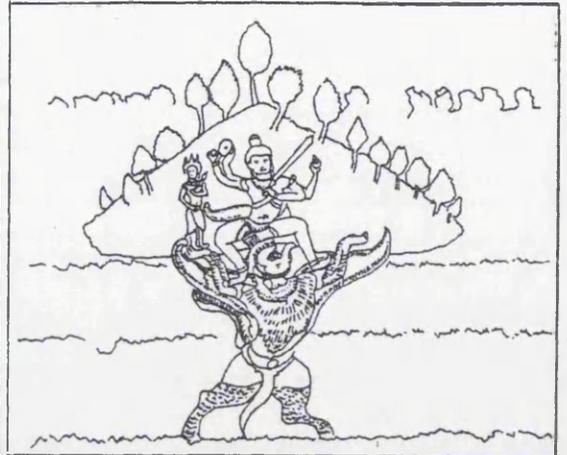


S.12 - Krishna receiving the offering destined to Indra

Fig. 11 - SW corner pavilion.
Visual summary of 6 relief panels



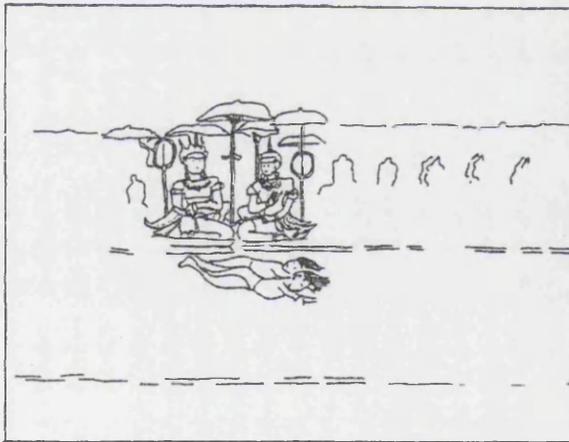
N.1 - Introduction to the descent of Vishnu



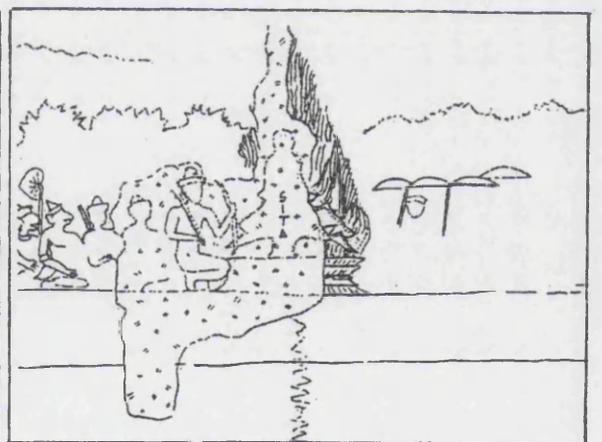
N.2 - Krishna bringing back Mt. Maniparvata



N.3 - Rama alliance with Sugriva



N.4 - Akruva's vision (N.4)

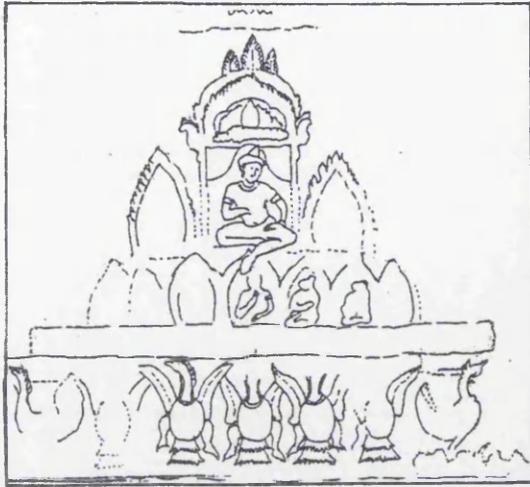


N.5 - The ordeal of Sita

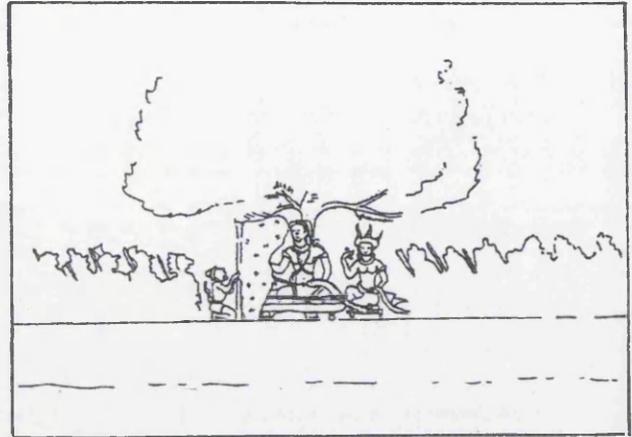


N.6 - Viradha's attempt to abduct Sita

Fig. 12 - NW corner pavilion.
Visual summary of 6 relief panels



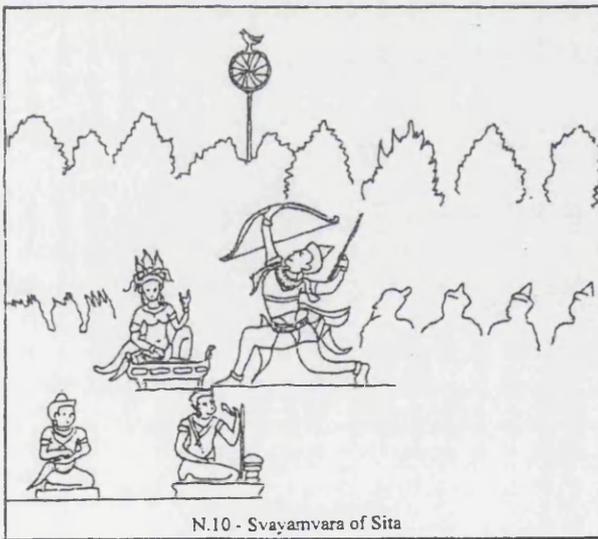
N.7 - Rama on the Pushpaka chariot



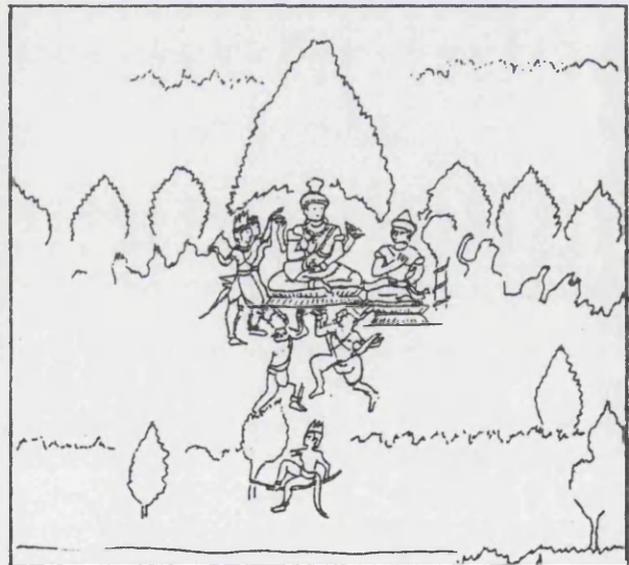
N.8 - Sita meeting Hanuman



N.9 - Rama's alliance with Vibhishana



N.10 - Swayamvara of Sita



N.11 - Krishna and the gopis



N.12 - Rama killing Kabandha

Fig. 13 - NW corner pavilion.
Visual summary of 6 relief panels

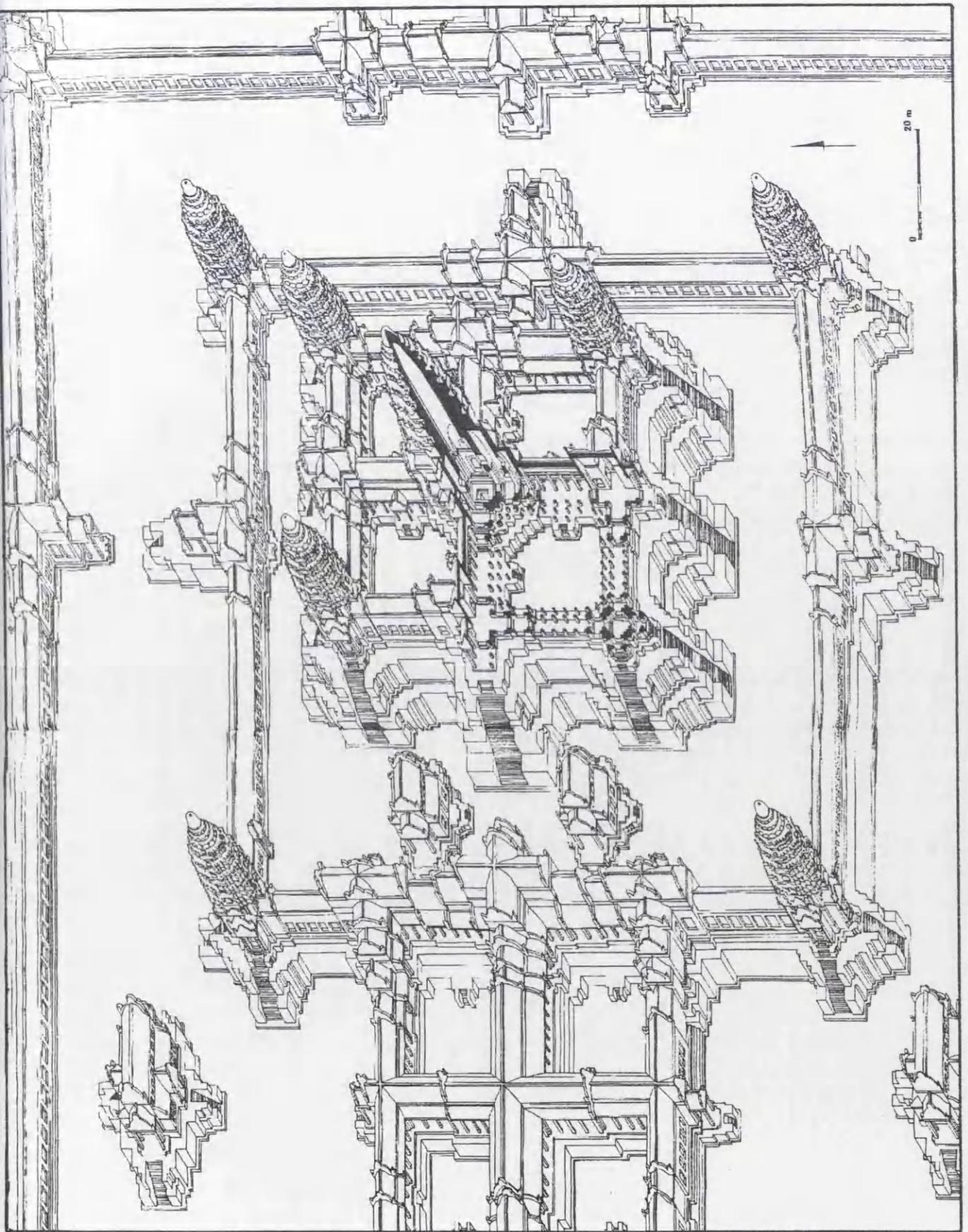


Fig. 14 - Axiometric view of the central part of the temple
(from Dumarcai J., & Smithies M., *Cultural Sites of Burma, Thailand,
and Cambodia*, Oxford University Press, 1995, p.96-97)

Fig. 15 - This drawing shows that, although the temple is made of 3 terraces, the number of terraces increases to 5 if one considers the cruciform terrace in front of the western entrance of the 3rd enclosure and the long terrace. The number 5 is of particular importance to the Pacharatra, as demonstrated by the 5 towers of the central sanctuary.

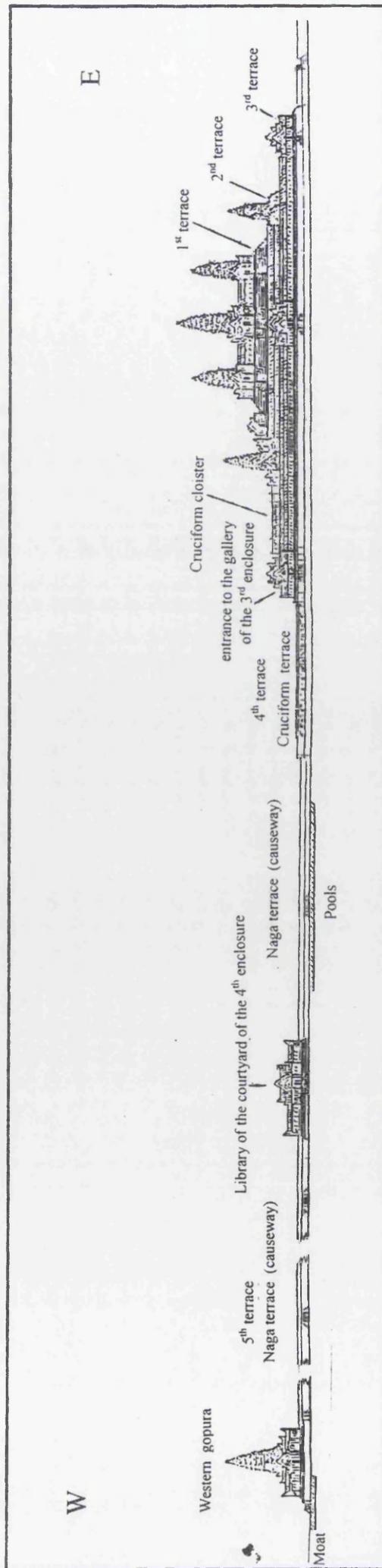
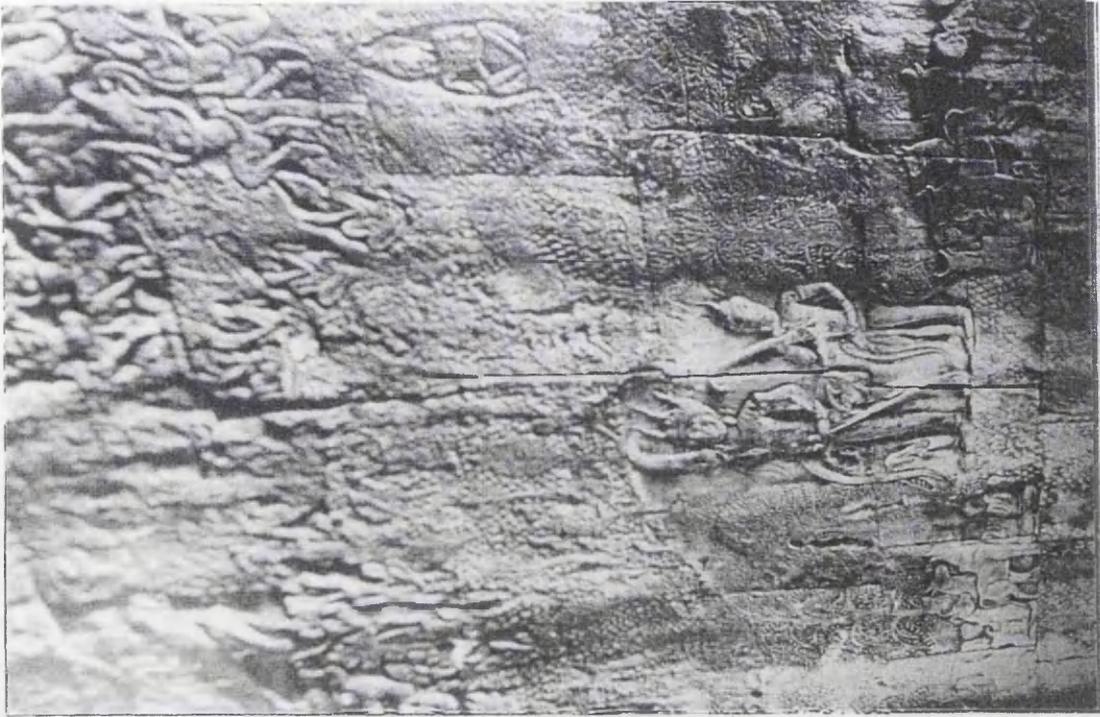
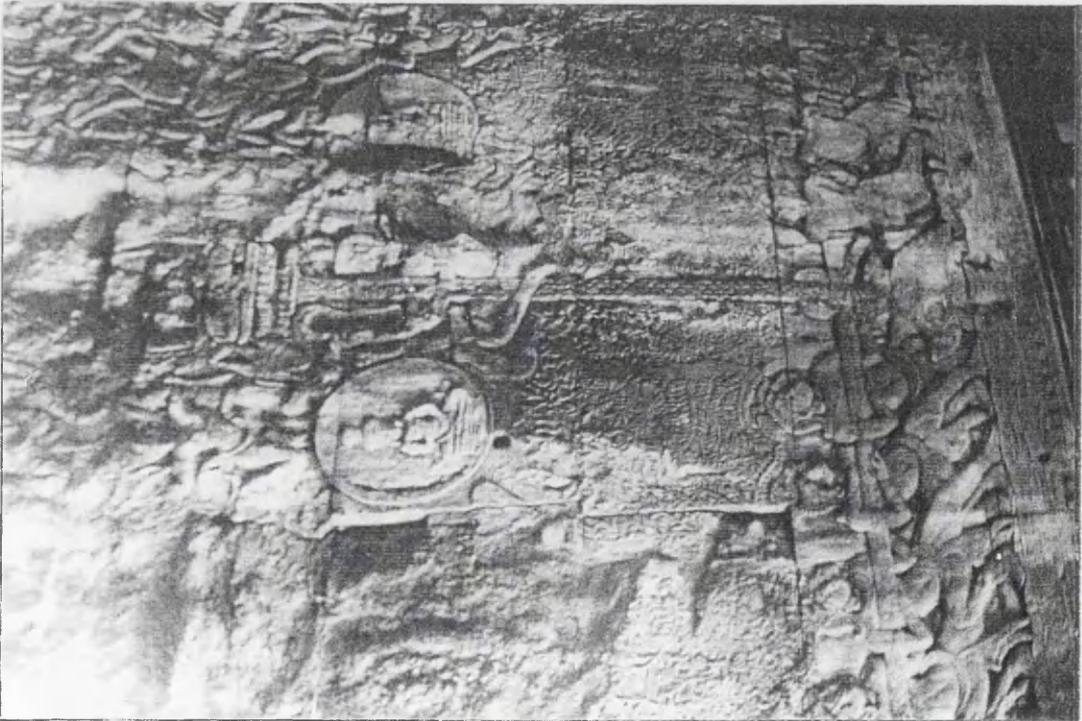


Fig. 15 - Longitudinal profile of Angkor Wat. The distance between the Western gopura and the library of the 4th enclosure is much greater of what indicated in the drawing (from Aymonier E., *Le Cambodge*, 3 vols., Paris, 1901-1904, according to a drawing of M.Oriol).



S.2 - Krishna lifting Mt. Govardhana



S.1 - The Churning of the Ocean of Milk



S.3 - Rama killing Marica



S.4 - Shiva in the Pine Forest



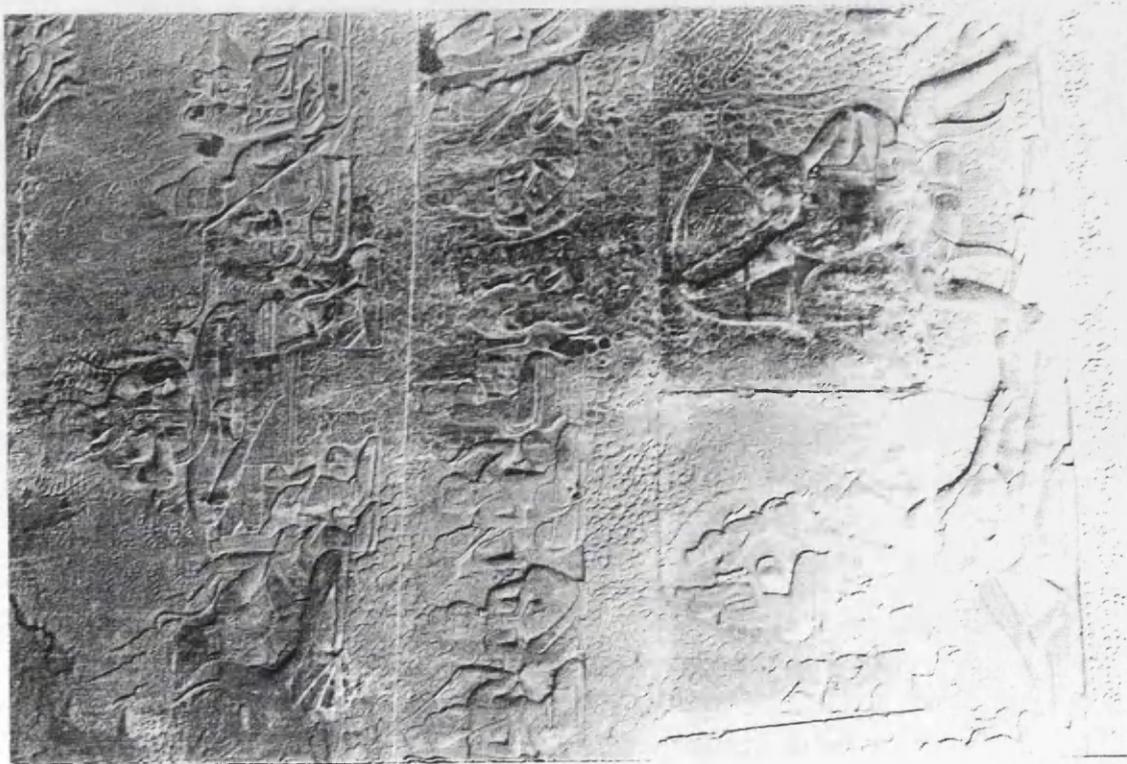
S.5 - Ravana shaking Mt. Kailasa



S.6 - Krishna as a young boy dragging a heavy mortar



S.8 - The death of Valin



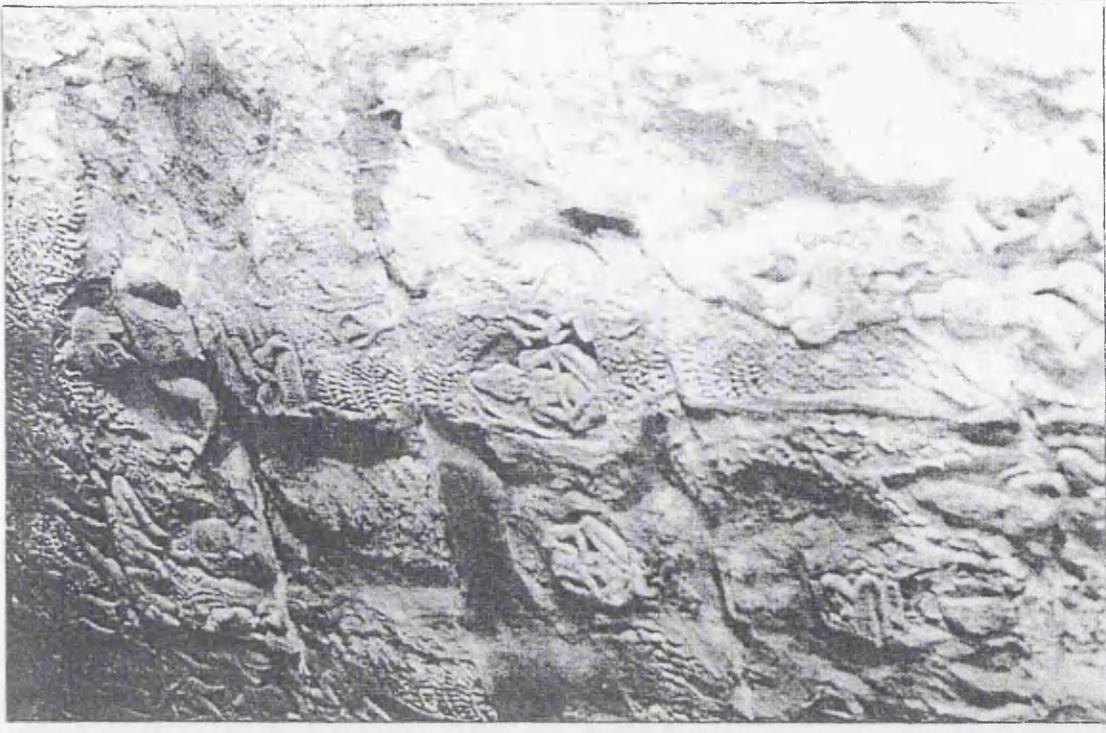
S.7 - Shiva reducing Kama to ashes



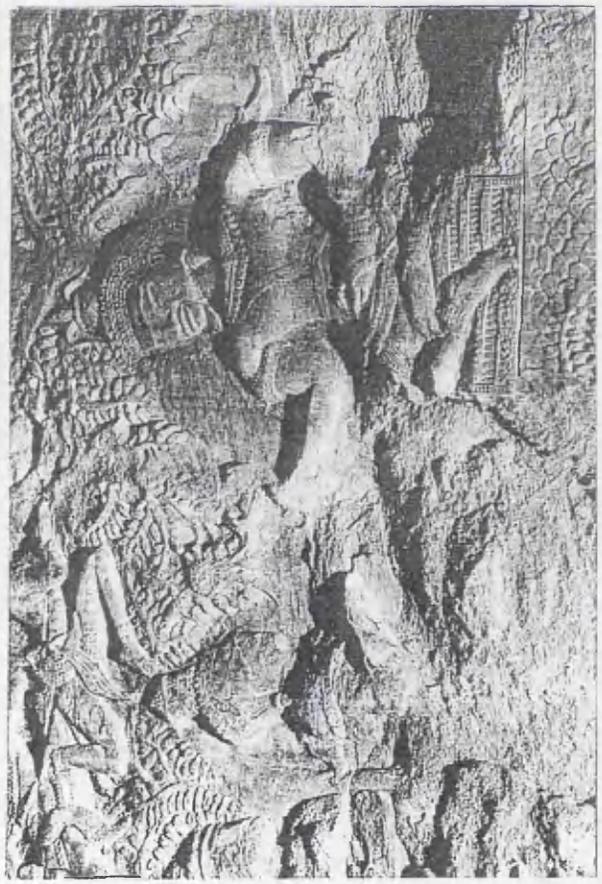
S.9 - *The murder of Pralamba & The dousing of fire*



S.10 - *The water festival*



S.11 - The betrothal of Shiva and Parvati



S.11 - The betrothal of Shiva and Parvati



S.12 - Krishna receiving the offering destined to Indra



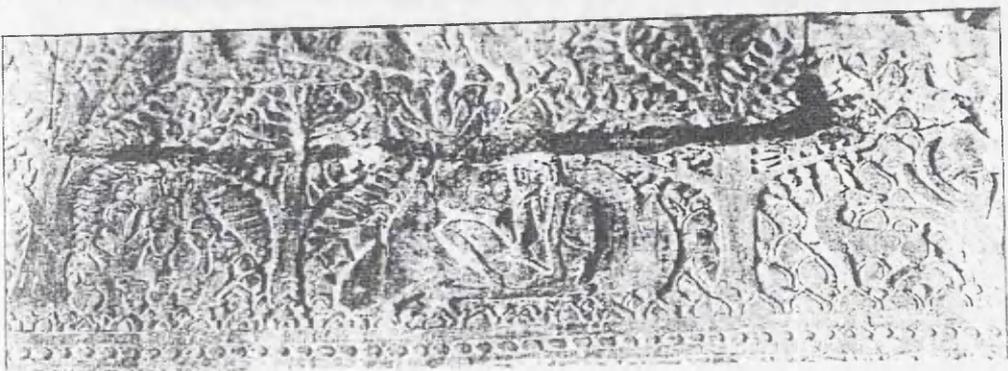
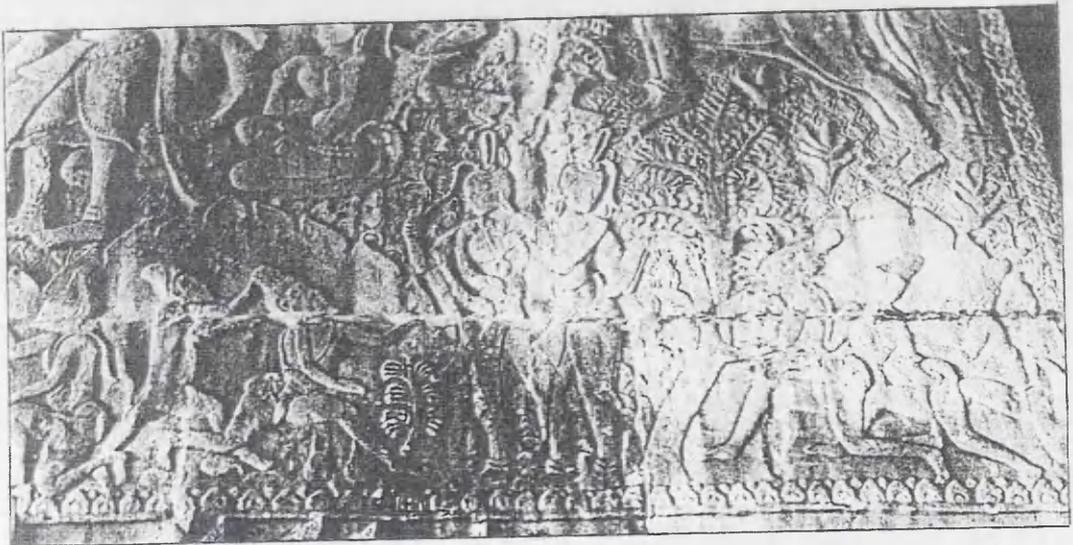
S. 7 - Shiva reducing Kama to ashes, detail of the dead Kama



S. 8 - Rama killing Valin, detail of the dying Valin



S.4 - Shiva in the Pine Forest. Detail of Shiva, and of the *rishis* surrounded by the flames of the *tapas*





N.1 - Introduction to the descent of Vishnu



N.2 - Krishna bringing back Mt. Maniparvata



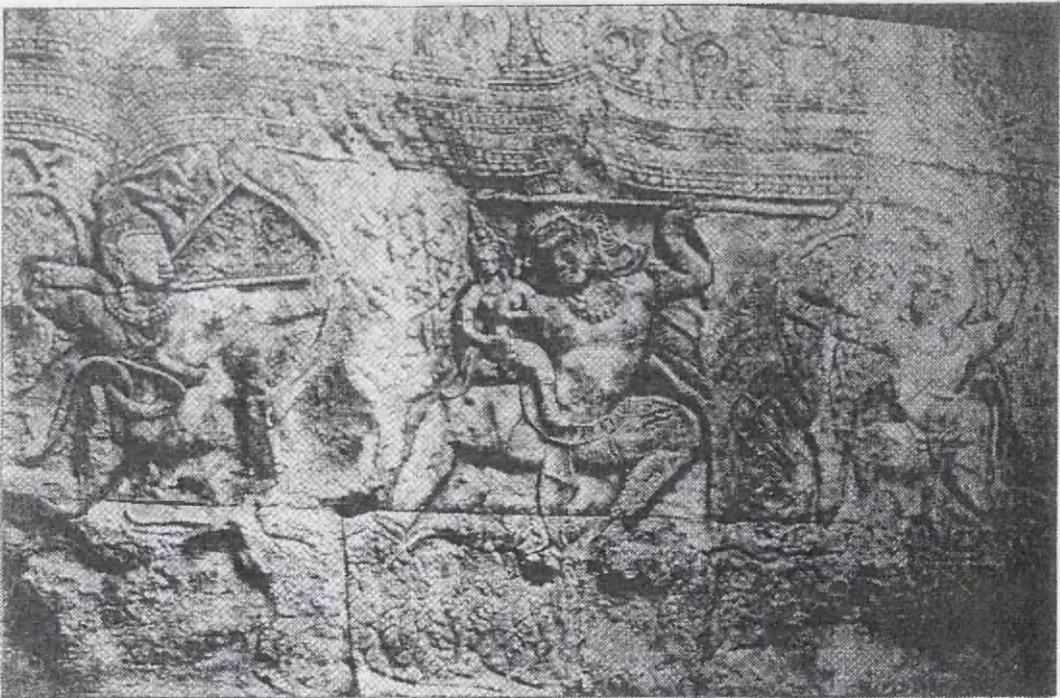
N.3 - Rama alliance with Sugriva



N.4 - Akshaya's vision



N.5 - The ordeal of Sita



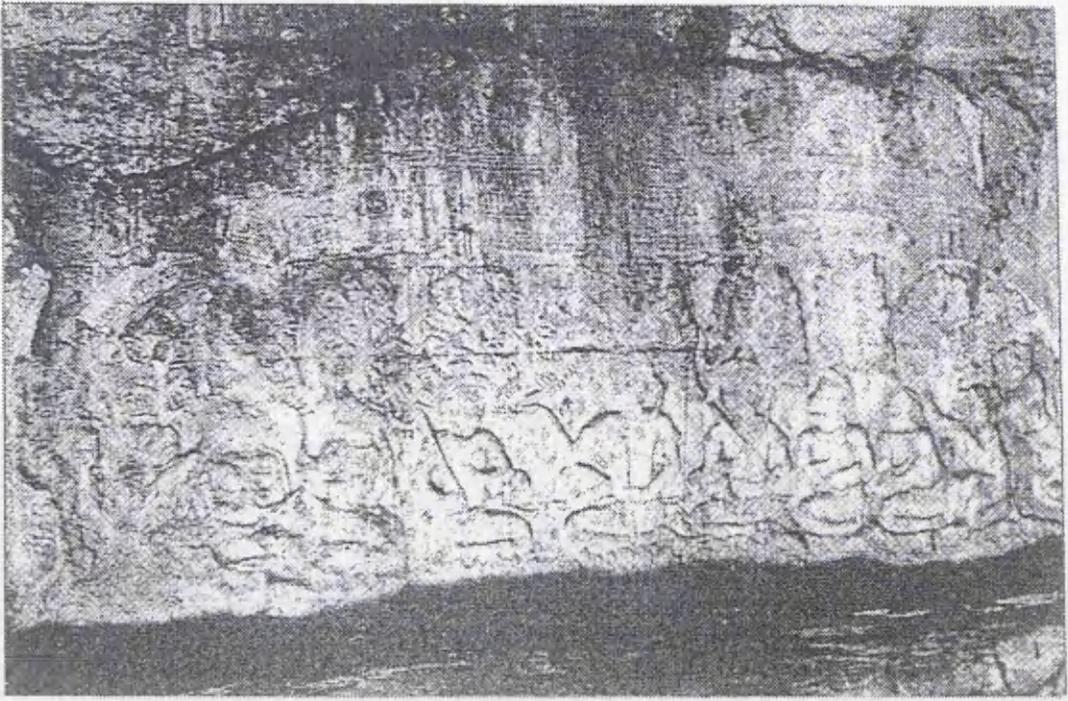
N.6 - *Viradha's attempt to abduct Sita*



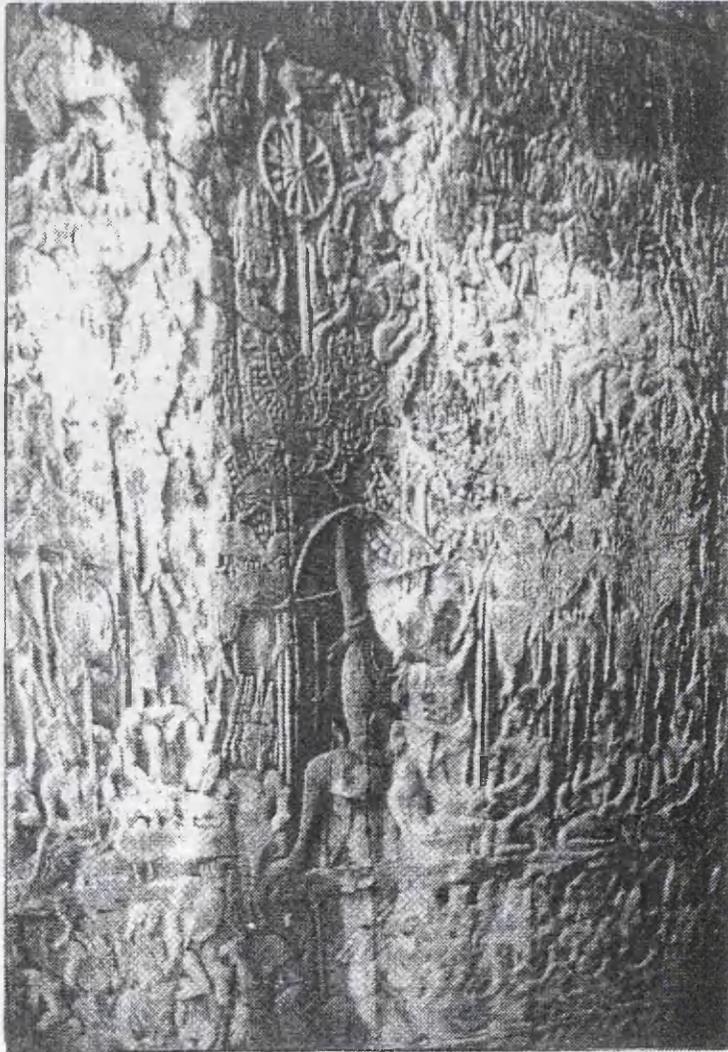
N.7 - Rama on the Pushpaka chariot



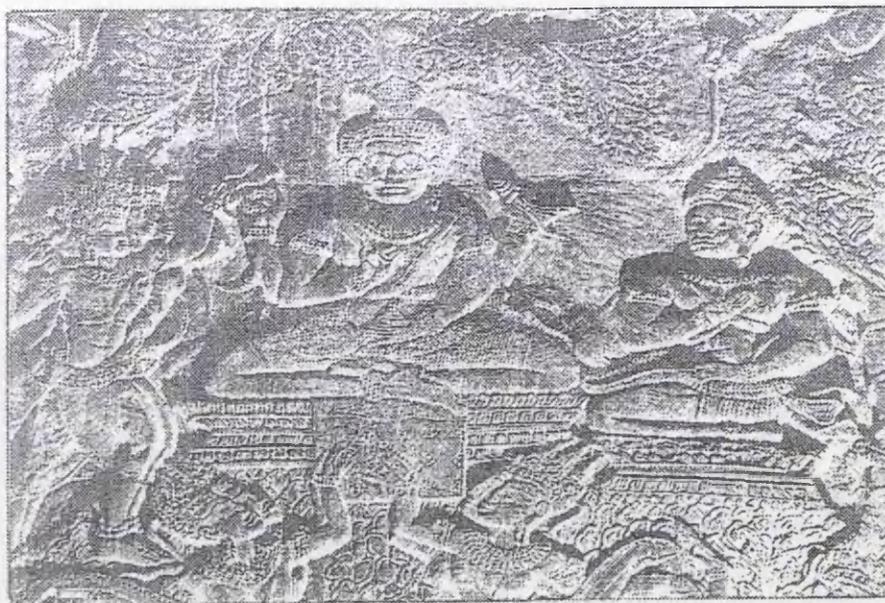
N.8 - Sita meeting Hanuman



N.9 - *Rama's alliance with Vibhishana*



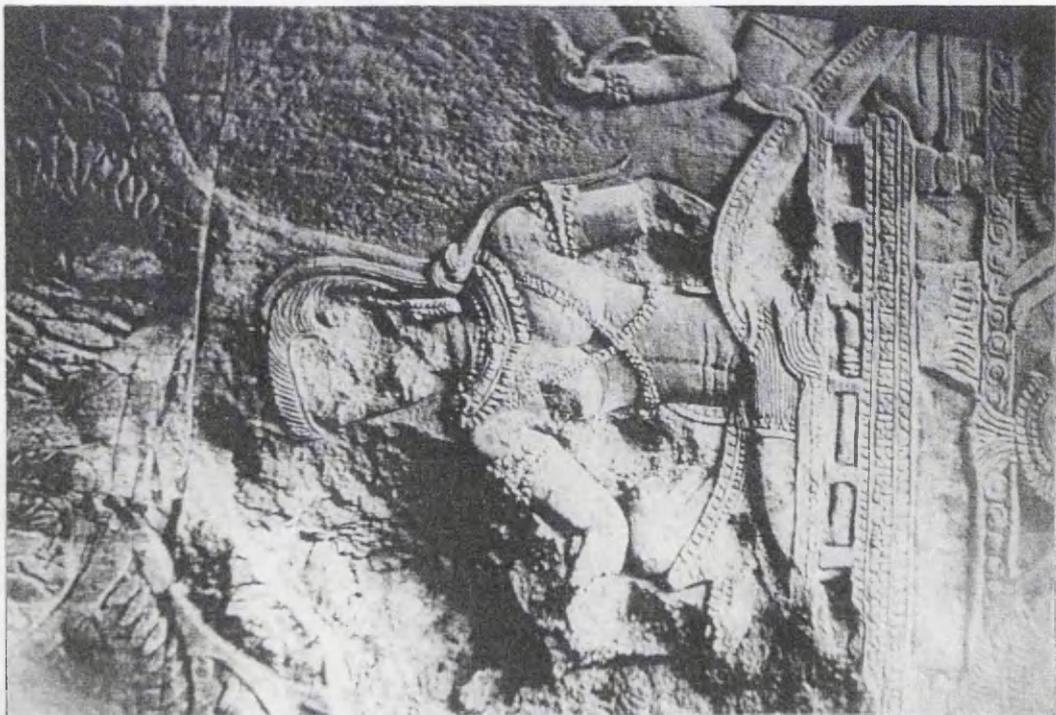
N.10 - *Svayamvara of Sita*



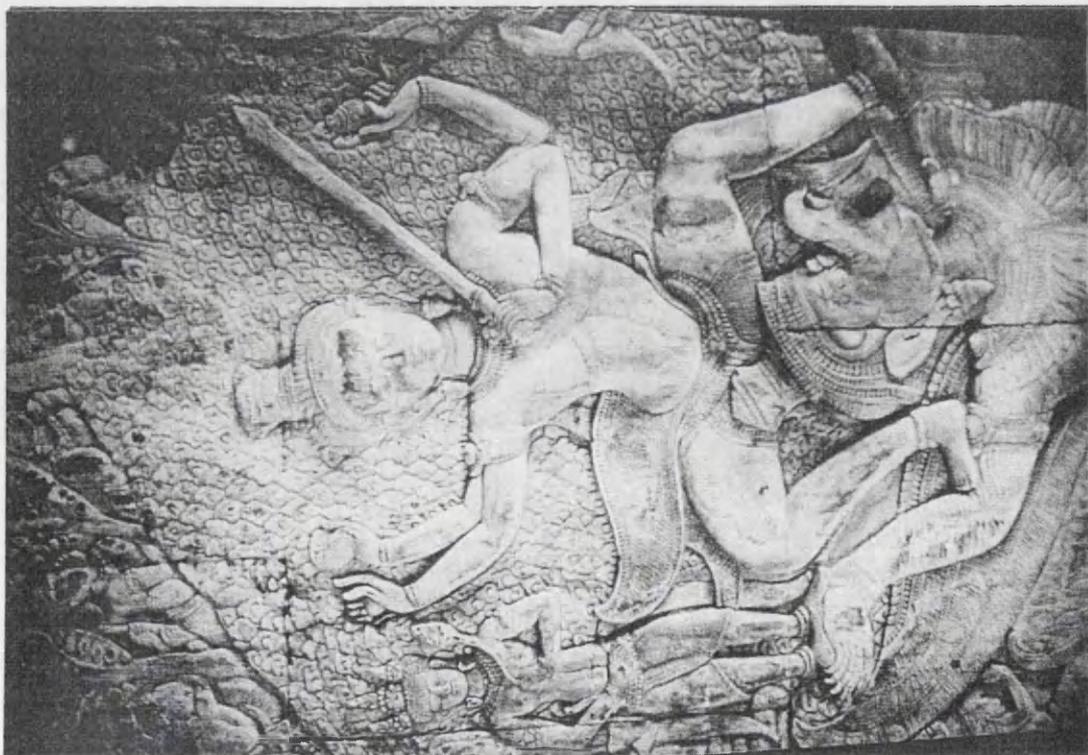
N. 11 - Krishna and the *gopis*, detail.



N.12 - Rama killing Kabandha



N. 8 - Sita meeting Hanuman, detail of Sita.



N. 2 - Krishna bringing back Mt. Maniparvata, detail.

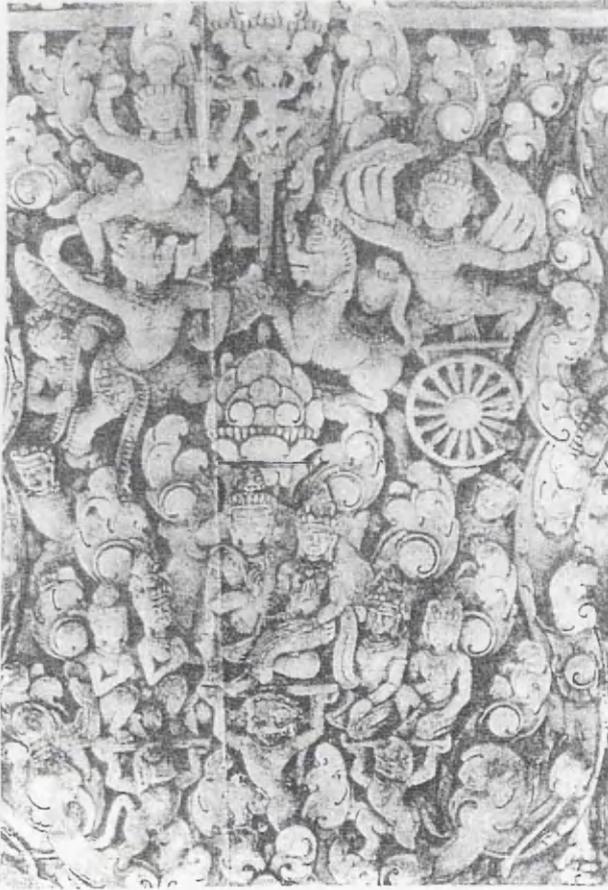
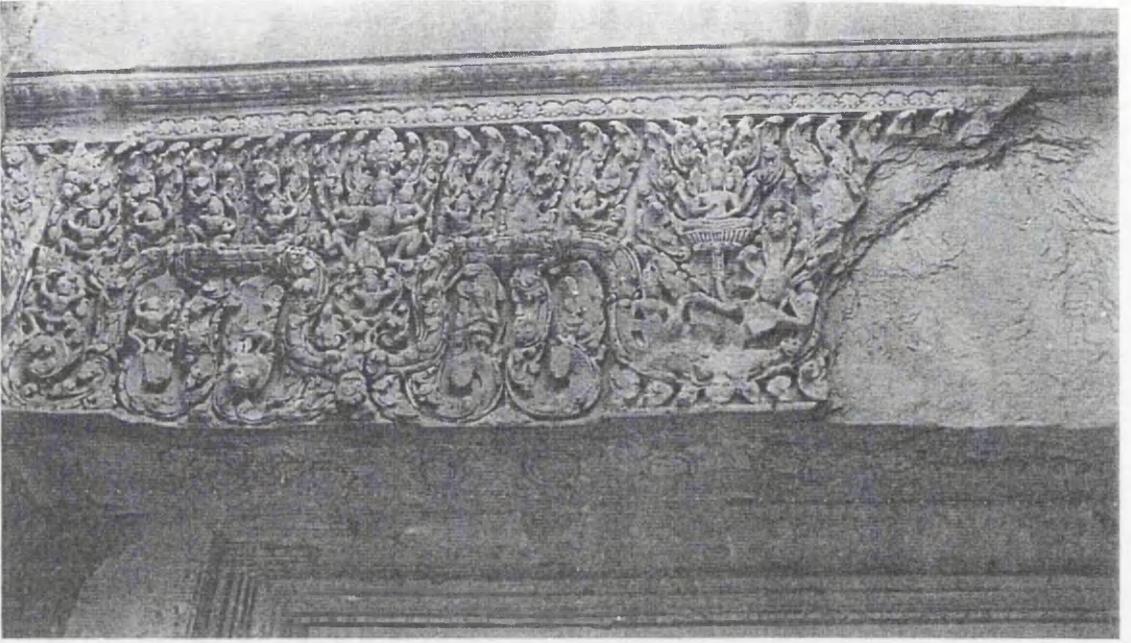
Pl.16, top and bottom right. Western Gopura.

This lintel is of particular importance since it is the first encountered when entering the temple through its main entrance, the Western Gopura. This intricate lintel over the main entrance door to the Western Gopura depicts, at the centre, Vishnu reclining on Ananta, the Endless Naga (eroded); from his navel emanates a lotus stalk ending in a bud on which sits Brahma. Close to Vishnu, Lakshmi (Shri Devi, eroded) extends her arm to touch the husband's hand. The story represents the act of Creation performed by Vishnu at the beginning of each new *yuga*.

Pl.16, bottom left. Western Gopura.

The lintel which decorates the diametrically opposed exit door of the same gopura illustrates a story related to the previous one. It represents Vishnu and Lakshmi seated on a plinth supported by a lion flanked by 2 pairs of subsidiary divinities, similarly sustained by lions. From behind Vishnu raises a pole at the end of which stands a dancing figure (?a war standard). At its right side is a large personage on a chariot pulled by a lion, with a single crowned head but with 10 arms. Probably a *rakshasas'* king, he is brandishing a sword in front of a 4 armed Vishnu standing on Garuda's shoulders.

It is possible that these two lintels encapsulate all the beliefs of the Pancharatra doctrine, the act of creation, the supremacy of Vishnu, and his continuous fight against evil forces.



Pl. 16, top and bottom right - Vishnu Anantasayin
Pl. 16, bottom left - Vishnu and Lakshmi

Pl.17, left. Central tower, eastern side.

This pediment depicts Krishna, brandishing a sword or double bladed axe, in the process of slaying an enemy that he holds by the hair. Since Krishna has the hairstyle of the *gopas*, one assumes that this episode has taken place during his youth. However, during this time, episodes where he uses a cutting weapon to kill an enemy are unknown, since he relies mostly on his sheer physical strength. Because his victim has human form and not that of a *rakshasa*, and because Krishna grabs it by the hair, it is likely to be Kamsa. The fact that Krishna is killing him with a sword rather by brute force, as narrated in the *Harivamsa*, may be an artistic licence. Alternatively, the victim may be Chanura, one of the two wrestlers sent by Kama to kill him.

It is interesting to notice the circular object with a tail to the right of Krishna's torso, representing, in my opinion, a blazing element of his power.

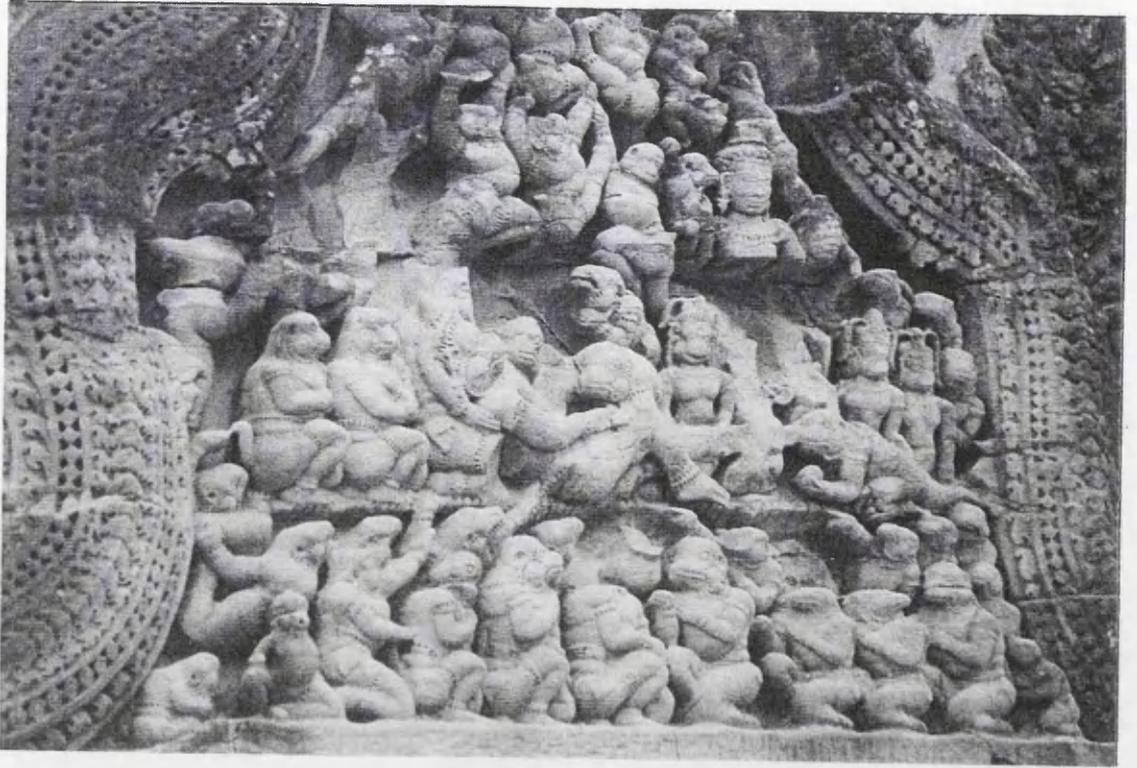
Pl.17, right. Central tower, southern side.

In this pediment, Vishnu (or Krishna) is shown fighting *rakshasas*, one of whom (?Bana) he holds by the hair with one of his left arms.

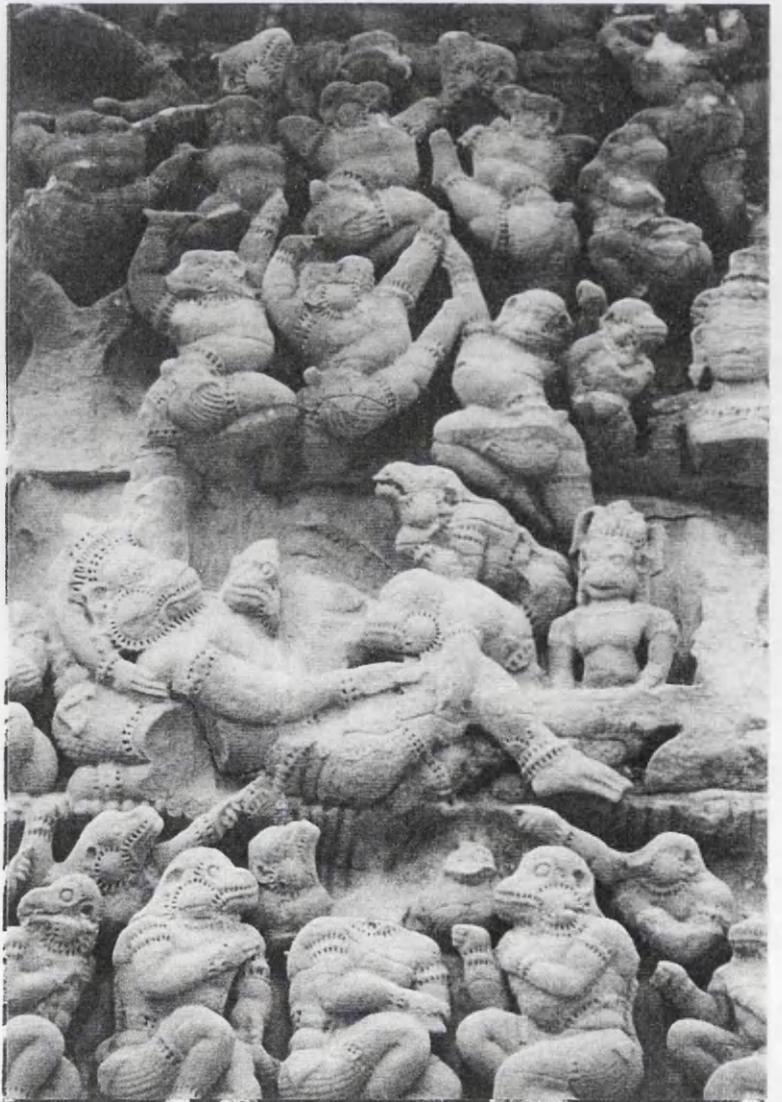
Pl.18, top. Central entrance pavilion of the southern gallery of the 2nd enclosure, pediment over the north facing door.

This pediment depicts an episode of the battle of Lanka narrated in the 6th book of the *Ramayana's* (*Uttara Kanda*, chapters 73-74). When Ravana's son Indrajit enters into combat, he makes himself invisible. Moving like lightning in the battlefield, he shower loads of lethal magic weapons, arrows and javelins charged with *mantras*, overpowering Rama and Lakshmana and most of their allies. Amongst the severely wounded are Sugriva, Angada, Nila, Sushena and Jambavan. When Vibishana and Hanuman are assisting the distressed Jambavan, he reveals than only Hanuman can save the wounded from certain death by going to the Himalayan peaks to collect some powerful healing herbs. At once Hanuman flies to the celestial mountains. Nevertheless, when the magical herbs know that he his coming to gather them, they make themselves invisible. Hanuman does not have any other choice but to uproot the entire peak of the mountain and quickly carry it to Lanka. Rama and Lakshmana, having inhaled the wonderful herbs, are instantly healed, and rise, resplendent of strength, ready to resume the fight against Ravana. The same happens to all his valiant allies, but not to the wounded of Ravana's army, since they had been thrown into the sea to conceal their losses. Later, Hanuman carries back to the Himalayas the peak with the magical herbs.

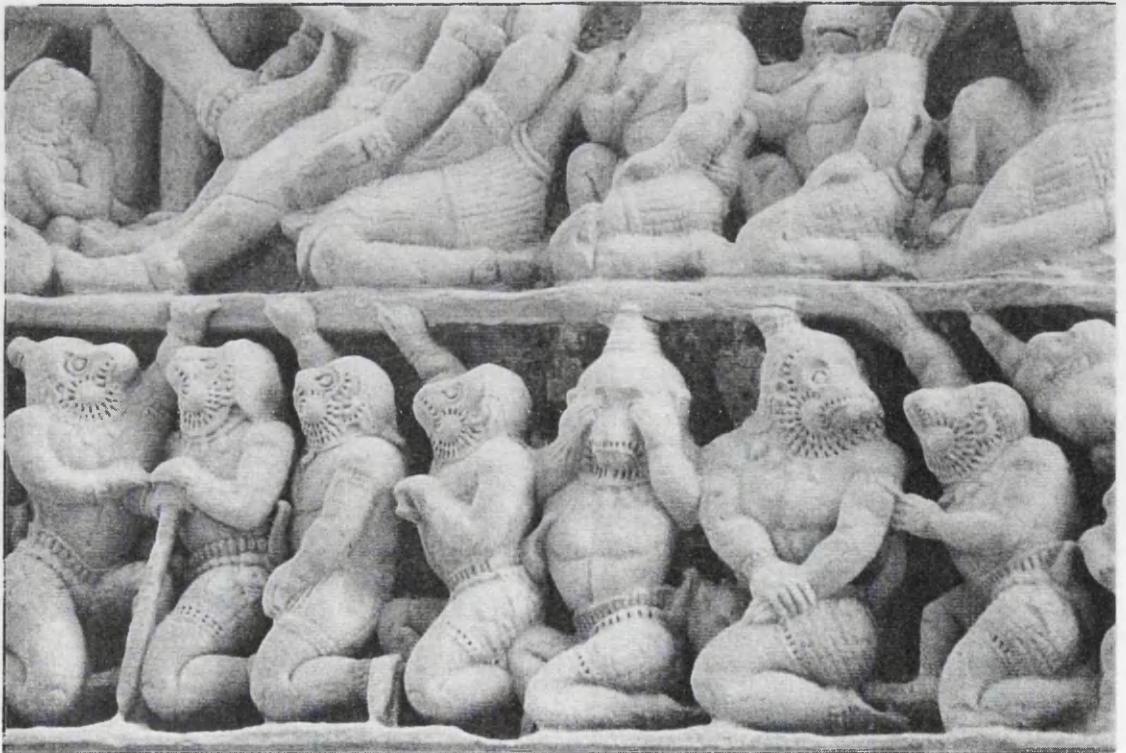
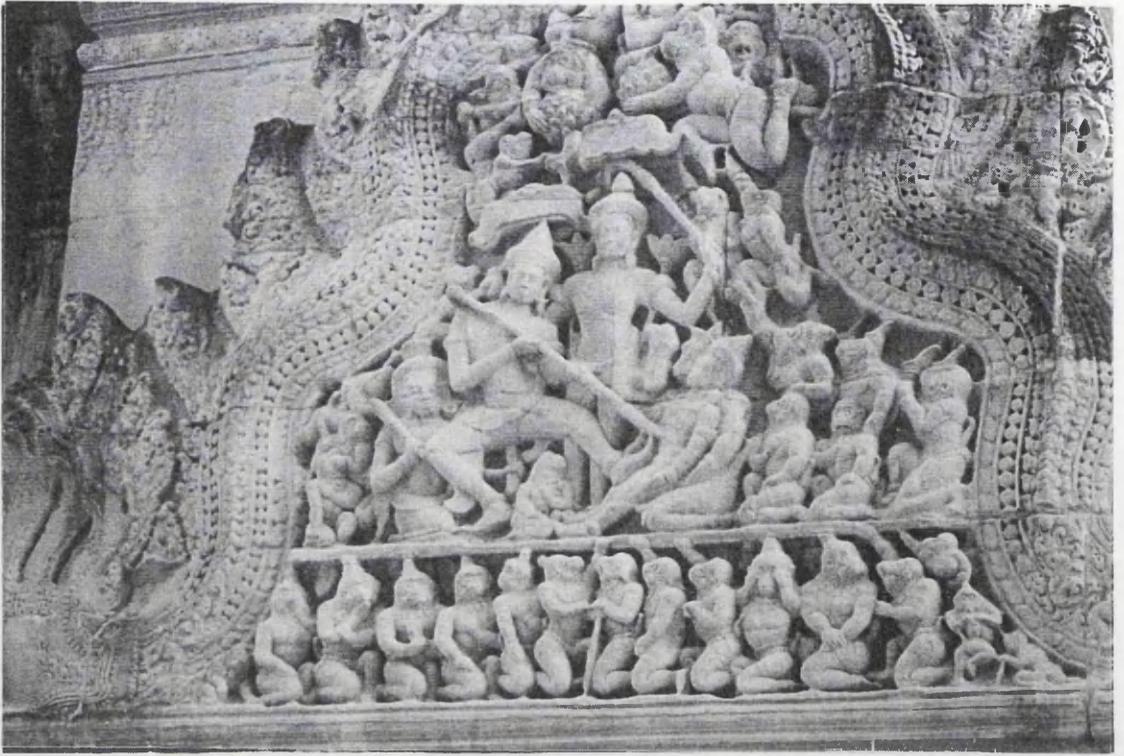
This story is depicted in a complex way in the relief, raising doubts on its interpretation. To the right we can see a kneeling monkey supporting a wounded personage not clearly identifiable. I propose that they are Hanuman and Jambavan (although the identification of the latter is doubtful). The two resplendent personages of heroic size are Rama and Lakshmana. It seems that Lakshmana is pulling out a javelin from the chest of the wounded personage on the floor (an action not narrated in the *Ramayana*). To his right (viewer's left) is a *rakshasa*, most likely Vibishana. The scene at the top of the pediment is easily recognisable: Hanuman and another monkey are carrying large rocky pieces of the Himalaya's mountain with the magic herbs. The lower register (**Pl.18, bottom**) shows monkeys crying and grieving.



Pl. 19 - The death of Valin.



Pl. 19, top. South-eastern subsidiary entrance of the western gallery of the 2nd enclosure, pediment over the north-facing door. The dying Valin is shown in the arms of his wife Tara (eroded; **Pl.19, bottom**). To the right of the viewer, is Rama, of whom only the head is preserved. The fight of Valin and Sugriva is sculpted in the top part of the pediment, but not included in the photograph because it is in a poor state of preservation.



Pl. 18 - Battle of Lanka, Indrajit's casualties

Pl.20, top. Central entrance pavilion of the southern gallery of the 3rd enclosure. Pediment facing east.

As C.M. Bhandari suggested (*Saving Angkor*, 1995), this relief probably depicts an episode of the Kaundinya legend which tells about a prince of this name (see Finot M.L., *Sur quelques traditions indochinoises*, Bull. Comm. Archeol. Indochine, Paris, 1911), an illustrious Brahman, who set out to sea armed with a sacred javelin. At the end of his journey he planted the javelin in the ground to mark the place where to build the capital of his kingdom. He married the local princess Soma, a mermaid or a nagi, and started a royal dynasty. The naga king father of Soma provided a rich dowry by drinking all the waters that covered his kingdom, transforming the muddy soil into fertile land. Nagas and water are two fundamental elements of Khmer autoctonous myths, predating those imported from India.

The Chinese version of a similar story, the legend of Huen T'ien is presented by Solange Thierry (*The Khmers*, Kailash, Paris, 1997, page 39). It tells the story that, through a dream, the Indian prince Huen T'ien decides to embark for the high sea. When he arrives at the flat shores of southern Indochina, the queen of the country, Liu Ye, or Willow Leaf, is waiting for him, not to welcome him, but in order to pillage his merchant ship. She tries to accost him by boat, but an arrow shot by Huen T'ien's magic bow pierces her little boat, causing her defeat. She submits to the Indian prince, and becomes his wife. The legend adds that the prince takes a piece of fabric from his cargo, folds it in half and torts out a hole for the head, and clothes his wife with it because, like all her people, she is naked. Then he governs, organises and transmits his power to his descendants.

The relief under considerations depicts a battle scene in which all the protagonists are female, with the exception of the warrior to the right. It may be the fight that Kaundinya sustained against the local princess and her army, as he landed on Khmer ground.

Pl.20, bottom. Central entrance pavilion of the southern gallery of the 3rd enclosure. Pediment over the south-facing door.

This relief is interesting because it refers to the legend of Aniruddha (*Baghavata Purana*, book 10, chapter 55), son of Pradyumna and grandson of Krishna. A Daitya princess named Usha, daughter of Bana, falls in love with him, and has him brought, by magic power, to her apartment in her father's city of Sonitapura. Bana disapproves, and sends some guards to seize him, with the intention of killing him later. The valiant youth, with an iron club slays his assailants, and can only be captured when Bana uses his magic arrows who transform into snakes and tie him up. On discovering where Aniruddha is kept prisoner, Krishna, together with Balarama and Pradyumna go to rescue him. A great battle follows, where Bana is aided by Shiva and Skanda, the god of war. Bana is overcome by Krishna who cuts off his thousand arms; Skanda is wounded by Garuda and Pradyumna. Finally, Aniruddha is freed and is carried home to Dewaraka, with Usha as his wife.

Bana was the son of Bali, who defeated Indra with the power he had acquired through penance and devotion (*tapas*). He was challenged by Krishna who manifested as the Dwarf, and with 3 steps took over Bali's 3 worlds: the earth, the sky and the lower regions (perhaps symbolising rising, culmination and setting of the sun).



Pl. 20, top - The legend of Huen T'ien or of Kaundinya
Pl. 20, bottom - The legend of Aniruddha



Pl.21, top. Central entrance pavilion of the eastern gallery of the 3rd enclosure. Pediment of the south facing door.

In this relief, the figure of a god, or a king, with the consort on his left thigh, is sitting on a high plinth in a baldachin, or within a small chamber or temple. Below are 3 rows of female worshippers or court members, holding lotus buds and wearing the traditional three-pointed *mukuta*. If he were Vishnu or Krishna adult, he would be represented with 4 arms, as in almost all other reliefs of the temple. Therefore, he is more likely to be Rama with Sita rightfully reigning in Ayodhya, or perhaps, again, to the Kaundinya legend.

Pl.21, bottom. Central entrance pavilion of the western gallery of the 3rd enclosure. Pediment of the west facing door.

In this pediment, the king (or the god Indra), is positioned, alone, on an elephant-chair over an elephant driven by his *muhot*, between umbrellas, fly-whiskers and an insignia of Garuda. Below are rows of marching soldiers holding their swords.

I believe that this pediment is an allegory of king Suryavarman II's prowess, of his heroism in war, or of him returning triumphant from a battle, because it is located centrally over the main door of the gallery of the 3rd enclosure, the first to be encountered after the long walk on the *naga* causeway. The design and the iconography are reminiscent of the king as it appears in the 'Historic procession' relief, at the head of his army. If it were dedicated to a battle scene of Indra (? against Ravana), the elephant would have 3 heads, although this is not always the case in Khmer iconography (compare with the relief N.1 of the NW corner pavilion).

Pl. 22 top. Central entrance pavilion of the western gallery of the 3rd enclosure. Pediment over the south facing door.

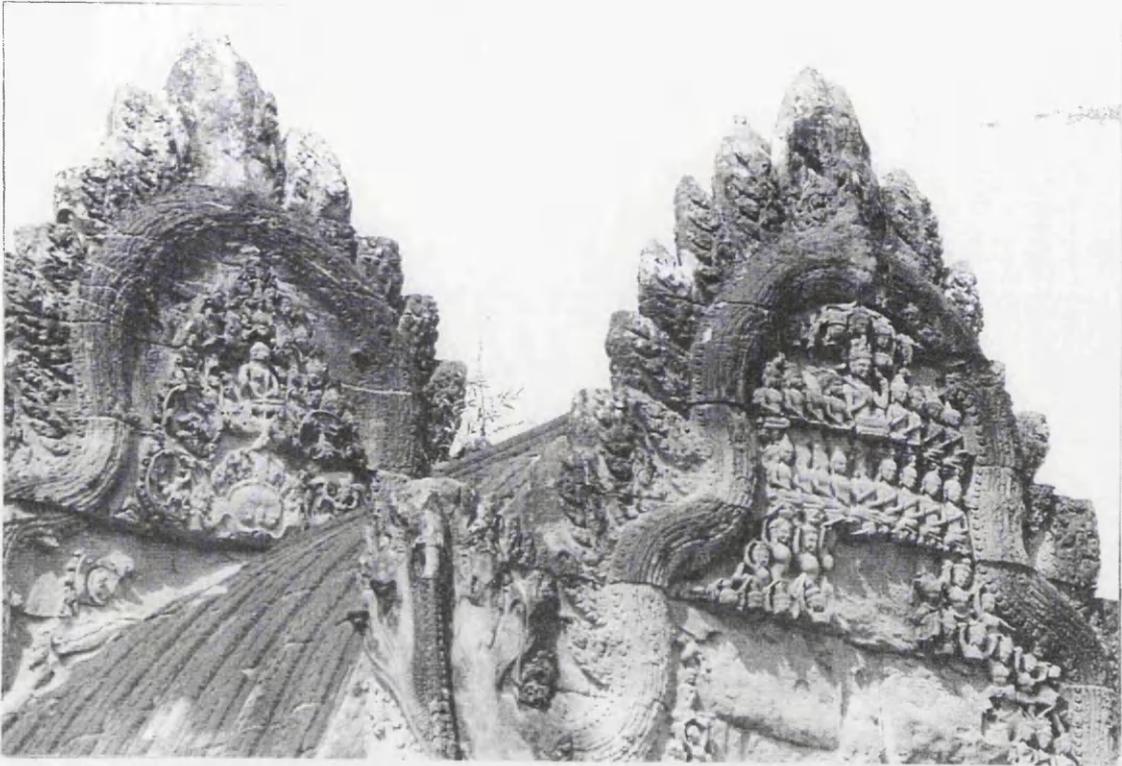
In the nearest pediment a god (?Krishna) holding a sword or a double-edged axe, is seen seated on a small plinth in between and over a row of male acolytes. Judging from their *gopas*' (cowherds) hairstyle, they could be worshippers of Krishna. Below, in the few parts of the reliefs still preserved, are female personages, probably *gopis* (the wife of the cowherd).

In the furthest relief, a god holding a sword is seated above a *kala*, at the centre of a pyramidal decorative composition with 2 large scrolls on each side, containing human figures.

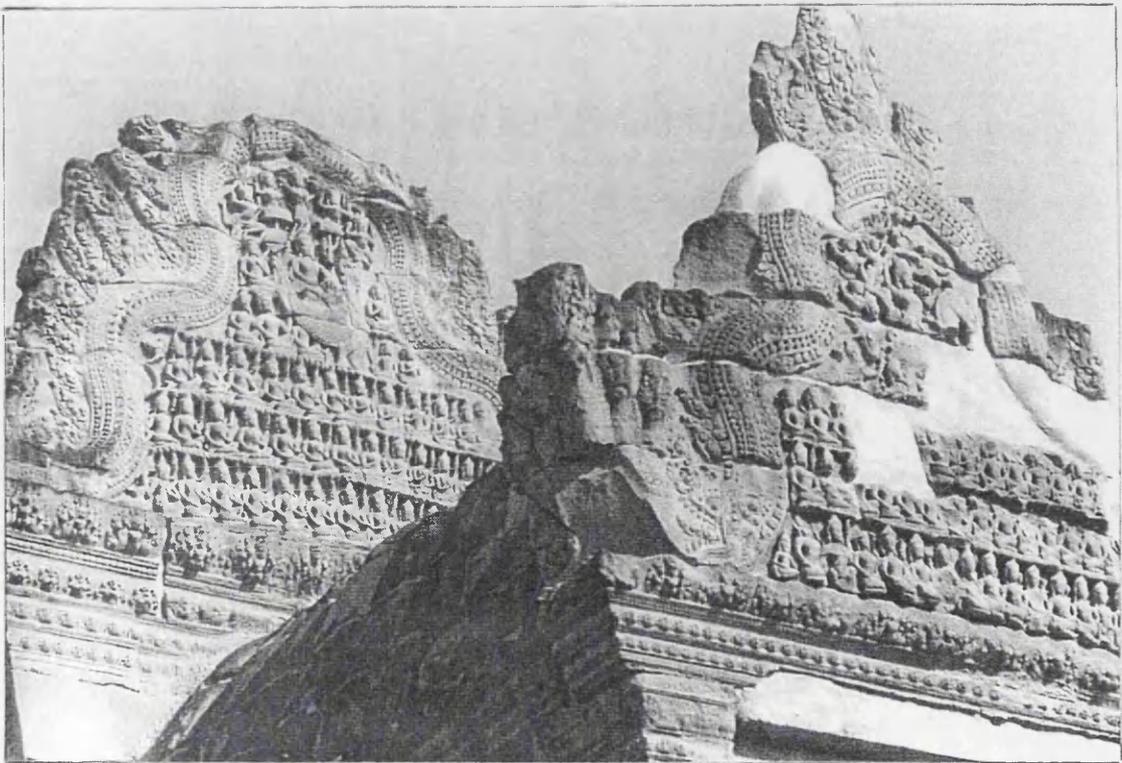
Pl.22, bottom. Southern library of the 2nd courtyard, west-facing side.

In the nearest pediment, are fragments of a male figure riding a horse amongst agitated smaller humans, over 3 rows of seated personages holding their swords.

In the furthest pediment, Varuna is clearly seen riding his *hamsa*, holding a *pasa*, or noose, in his left hand (compare with the relief N.1 of the NW corner pavilion) surrounded by assistants, over 3 rows of exclusively male attendants or worshippers.



Pl. 22, top - A gods amongst acolytes (right) and a god sitting over a *kala* (left)
Pl. 22, bottom - Kubera riding his horse (right) and Varuna his goose (left).

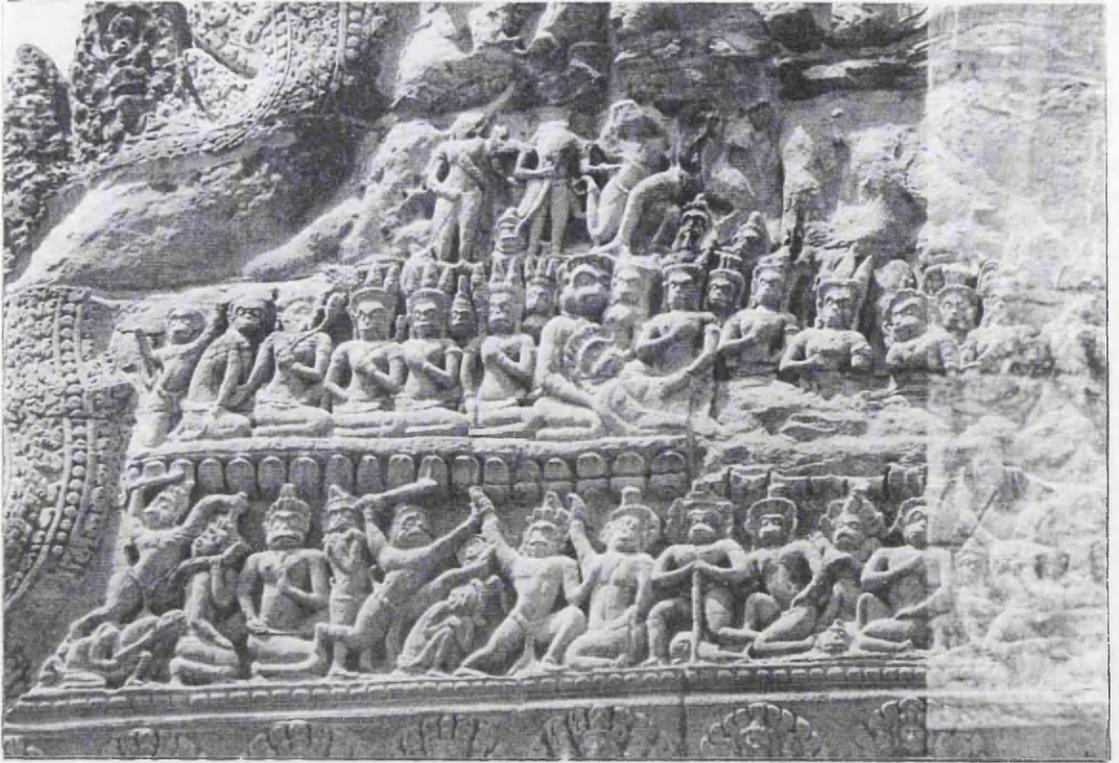


Pl. 23, top. Northern subsidiary entrance of the western gallery of the 2nd enclosure, east facing pediment.

In this relief, the dying Valin is supported by a male monkey of large size, quite unusual in Khmer iconography. According to the *Ramayana*, (*Kiskina Kanda*, ch.16-25) it is his wife Tara who embraces him during all the time of his agony. The only male personages mentioned in the original text, are Angada, the young Valin's son, and general Nala, who - however - performs the task of taking the lethal arrow out of Valin's chest. It cannot be Sugriva, who wanted his death. Therefore, either the personage sustaining Valin is Angada, or another personage borrowed from a local legend and folk tale. Above this scene, only the lower part of the relief depicting Rama and Lakshmana watching the fight between Valin and Sugriva is still preserved.

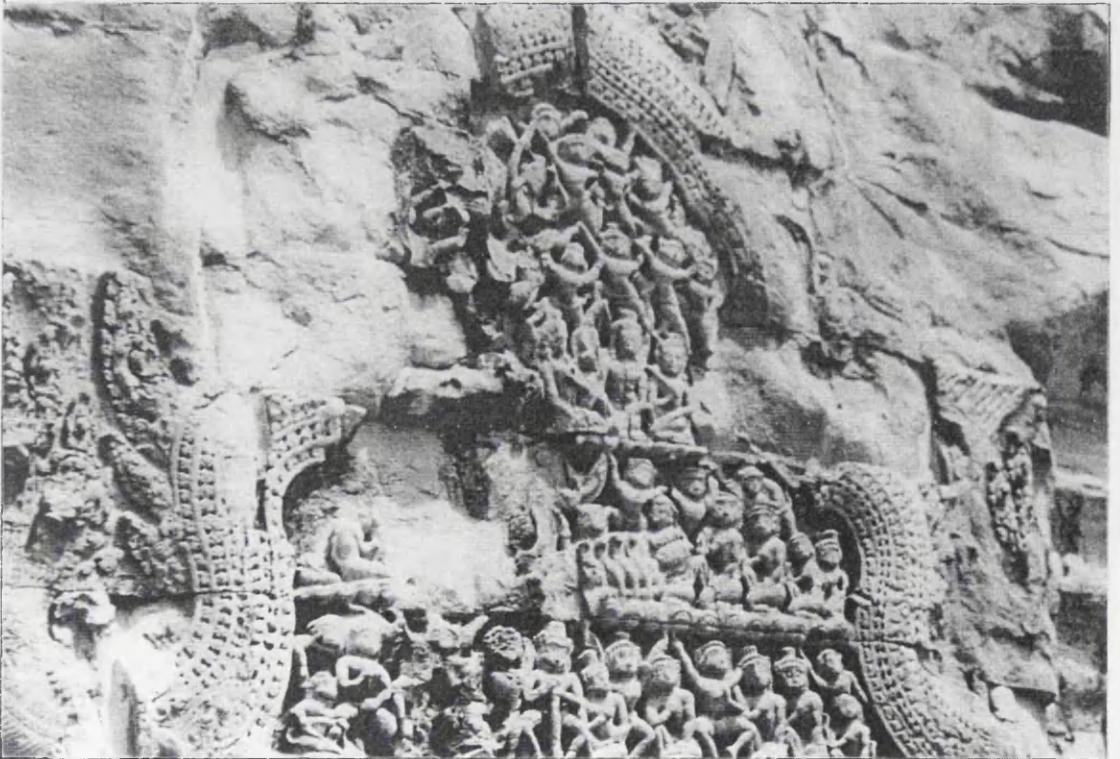
P.23, bottom. Western entrance of the SW corner pavilion of the southern 2nd enclosure, pediment over the south facing door.

Along the middle part of this large pediment, Rama and Lakshmana are represented lying on the floor bound together by snakes with cobra's hoods. These are the product of the magic transformation of Indrajit's arrows, as narrated in an episode of the *Ramayana* (*Yudda Kanda*, ch. 45-50) depicting the battle of Lanka. Garuda eventually frees the two heroes. In the *Ramayana*, this episode takes place before that illustrated in the pediment of Pl.18.



Pl. 23, top - The death of Valin

Pl. 23, bottom - Rama and Lakshmana prisoners of the magic arrows of Indrajit



Pl. 24, top. Northern gopura of the 4th enclosure, west-facing pediment.

In this relief, Krishna is lifting Mt. Govardhana with his left arm. At his right side is Balarama, while a cowherd under a tree is depicted symmetrically on the other side. Below are more cowherds with their animals (compare with the relief S.2 of the SW corner pavilion).

Pl. 24, bottom. Southern exit of the cruciform pavilion, south-facing pediment.

In this pediment Shiva is represented dancing (?the *tandava*) over a *kala*'s head. He is at the centre of a conical decorative composition made by foliage scrolls of which the 4 at the base contain human figures (?*gunas*) and animals.



Pl. 24, top - Krishna lifting
Mt. Govardhana.

Pl. 24, bottom - Shiva dancing



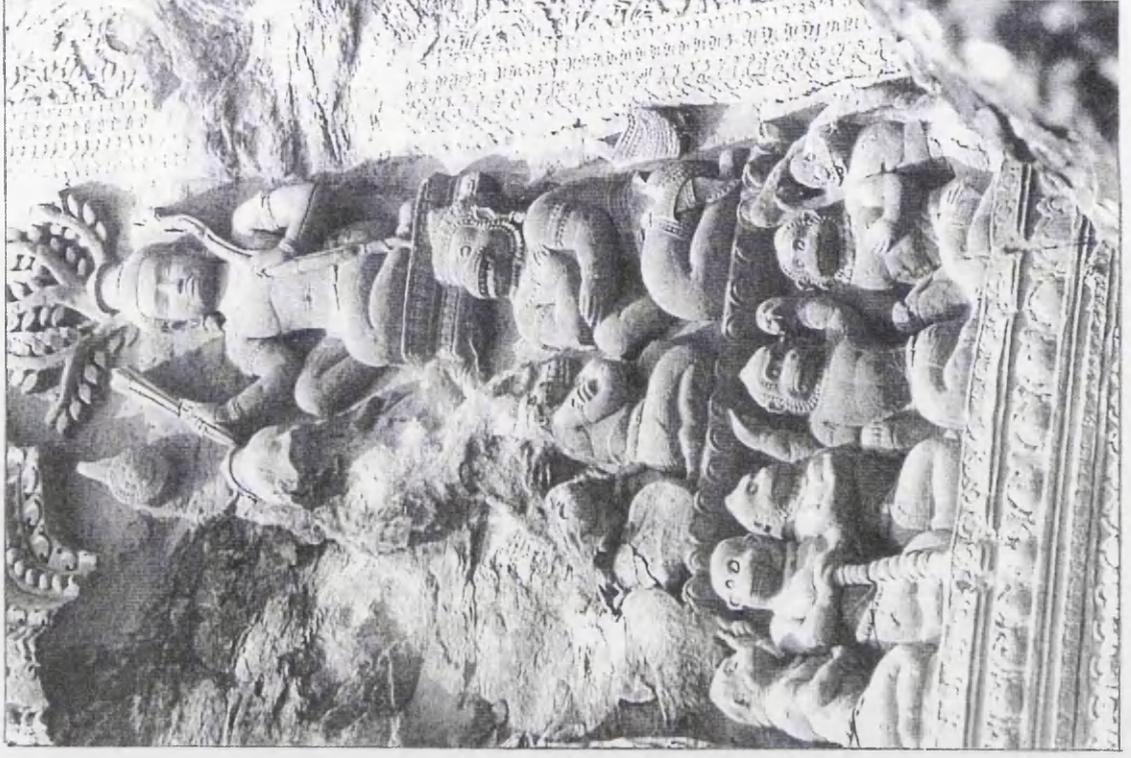
Pl. 25, left. Half pediment of the northern entrance of the central tower.

The death of Valin is again represented here, and despite the limited space, the story is fully illustrated. Rama can be seen at the centre, hiding behind a tree, in the process of releasing the lethal arrow in the direction of Valin who is entangled in a fight with Sugriva (top part of the composition). In the lower register, Valin is seen dying in the arms of his beloved wife Tara, surrounded by grieving monkeys.

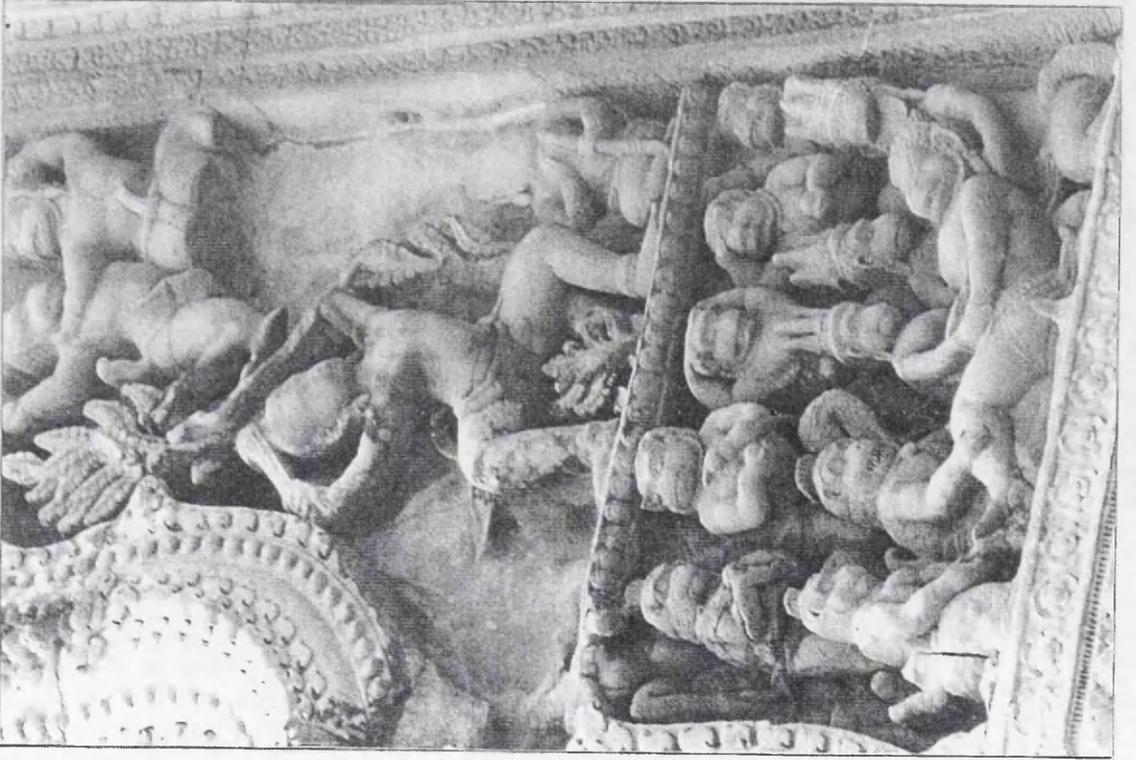
Pl. 25, right. Northern subsidiary entrance of the eastern gallery of the 3rd enclosure, east-facing half pediment.

Rama is seen resting in the forest, close to Lakshmana (eroded), over Hanuman in royal attire. In the lower register are chattering monkeys.

Noticeable is the round object with a tail and a central floral decoration, which - in my opinion - is symbolic of Rama's power.



Pl. 25, right - Rama and Lakshmana in the forest



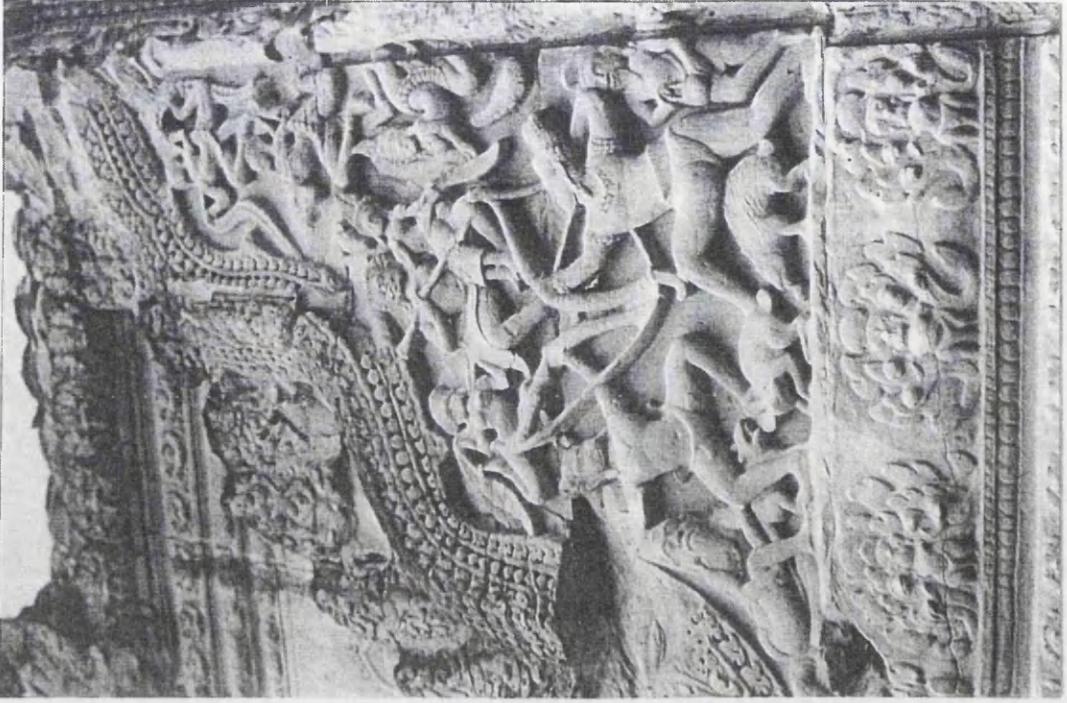
Pl. 25, left - The death of Valin

Plate 26, left. Half pediment of the western door of the SW corner pavilion.

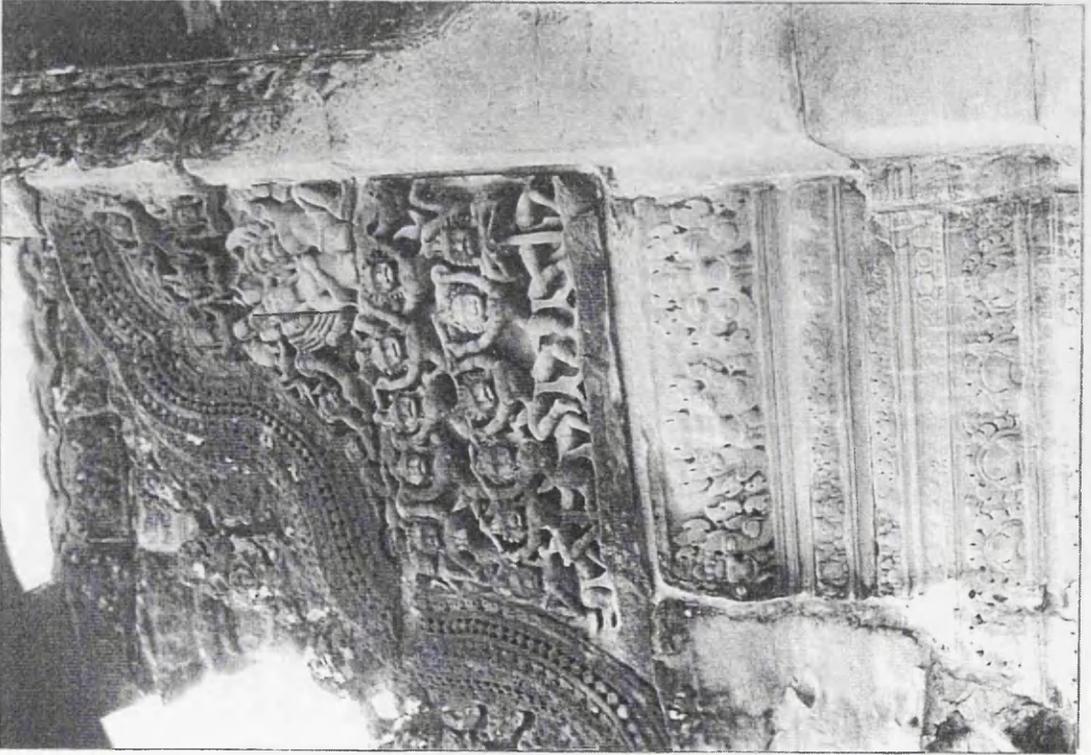
In the upper part of the relief, Viradha - amongst his jubilant *rakshasas* - is holding tightly on to Sita whom he has just kidnapped. However, the lethal arrows of Rama and Lakshmana, seen in the lower part of the relief soon will strike him.

Plate 26, right. Half pediment of the western door of the NE corner pavilion.

Rama and Lakshmana are shown in the act of transfixing with their arrow the *rakshasa* Viradha who is attempting to abduct Sita. Notice the 2 *rishis* (hermits) at the sides of the heroes, who, together with the wild animals, indicate that the scene is happening in the forest.



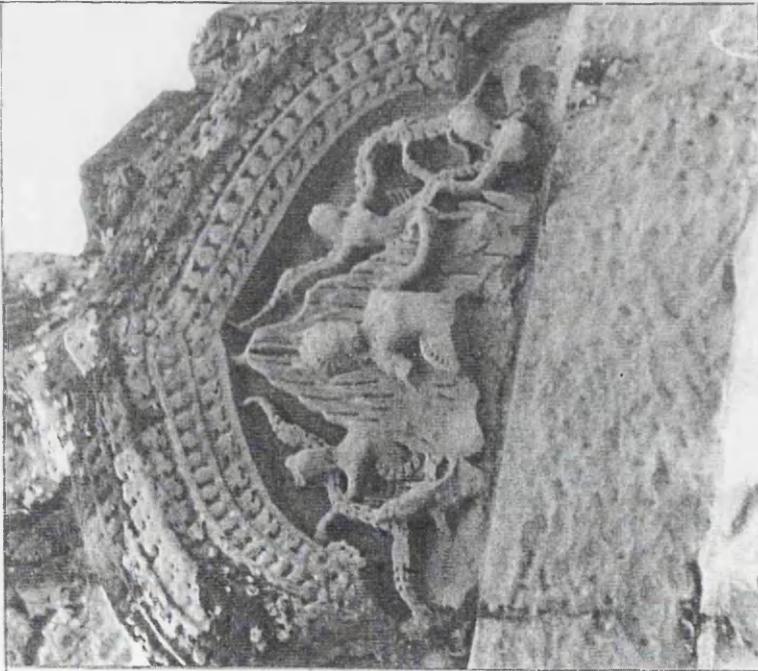
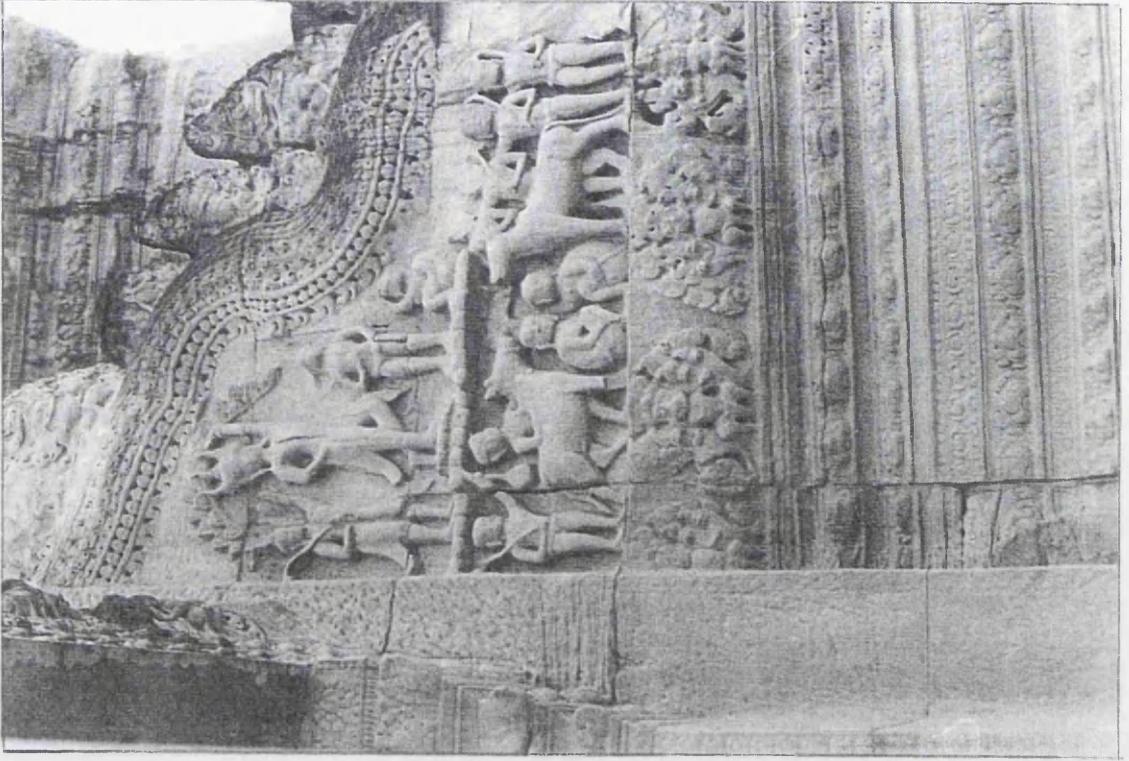
Pl. 26, right - Rama and Lakshmana killing Viradha



Pl. 26, left - Ravana abducting Sita

Pl. 27, left. Northern face of the western gallery of the 1st enclosure connecting the central tower with its western entrance. The top fragment of a small pediment has been installed over the beam of this exit to the little NW courtyard. In it, Sita's ordeal of fire is probably represented. Only the flames enveloping Sita and the upper part of her body can be seen, together with two apsaras graciously holding flower garlands.

Pl. 27, right. Northern entrance of the NE corner pavilion. Krishna lifting Mt. Govardhana is depicted with great simplicity in the upper part of this half pediment flanked by Balarama and cowherds. In the lower register are more cowherds with their animals. Time and weather have eroded the relief, and the details have disappeared.



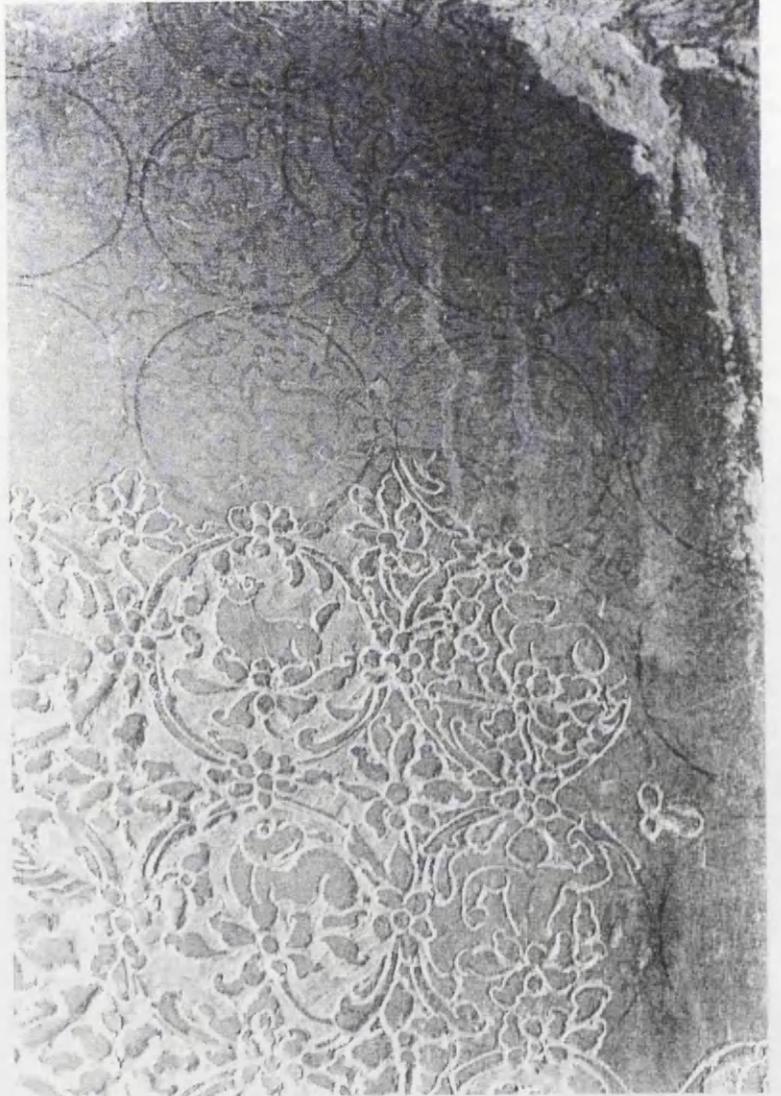
Pl. 27, left - The ordeal of Sita
Pl. 27, right - Krishna lifting Mt. Govardhana

Pl. 28. Top part of the door jamb at the NW corner pavilion of the gallery of the 2nd enclosure.

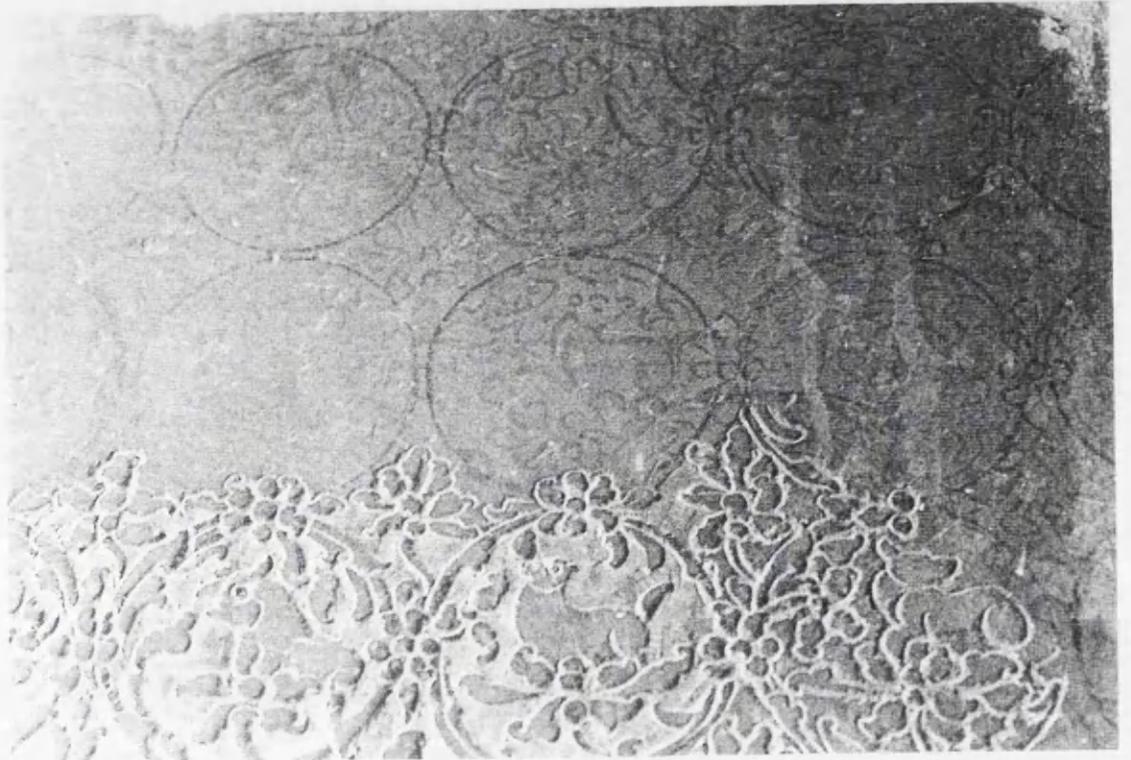
These photographs highlight the finding by the author of remnants of stencilled drawings of the so-called tapestry decoration with medallions traced in black. They were made with a permanent black material (ink or lacquer) still very well preserved, and produced through the use of stencils, as evidenced by the standardisation of patterns on the door jamb of this door and of several other doors and walls of the temple.

The sculptor would have then proceeded to chisel a low relief on the outlines of these drawings, as it can be seen from the photographs. There is no doubt, in my mind, that these drawings are original and contemporaneous to the construction of the temple. They are the only ones that remained unsculpted from the long series of the medallions present below, on the same doorjamb.

The tapestry reliefs mentioned here and in plates 29, 30, 31, as probably all the tapestry reliefs of the temple, were executed during the construction of the temple. Some have been left roughly finished and others unfinished.

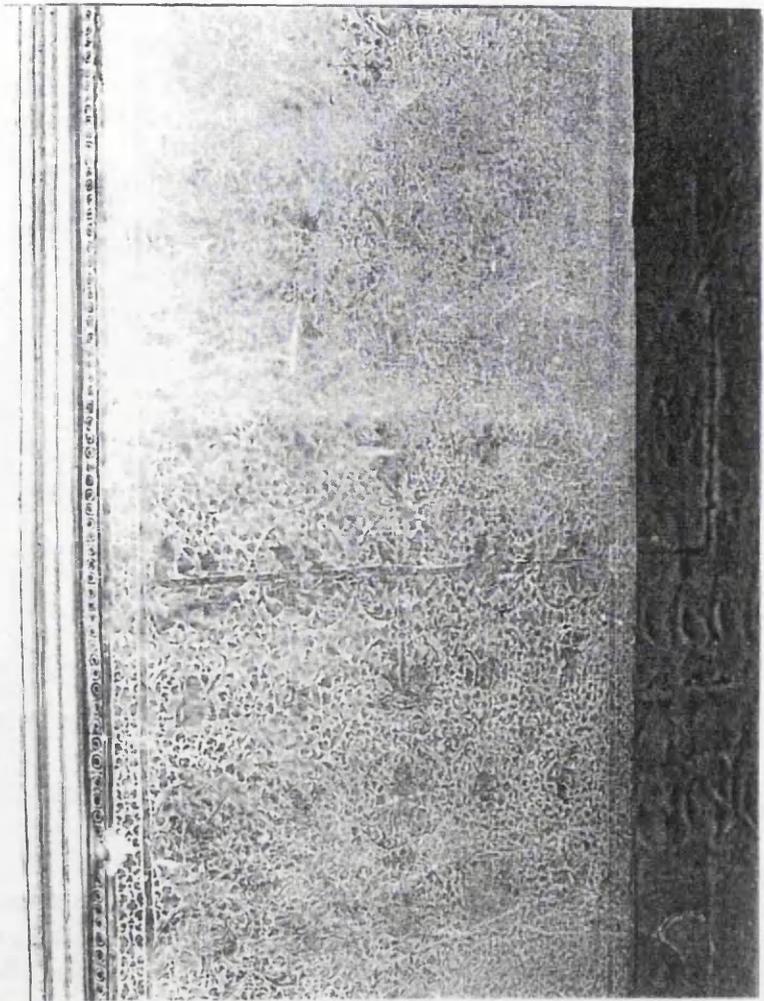


Pl. 28 - Detail
of stencil
drawings
for tapestry
pattern.

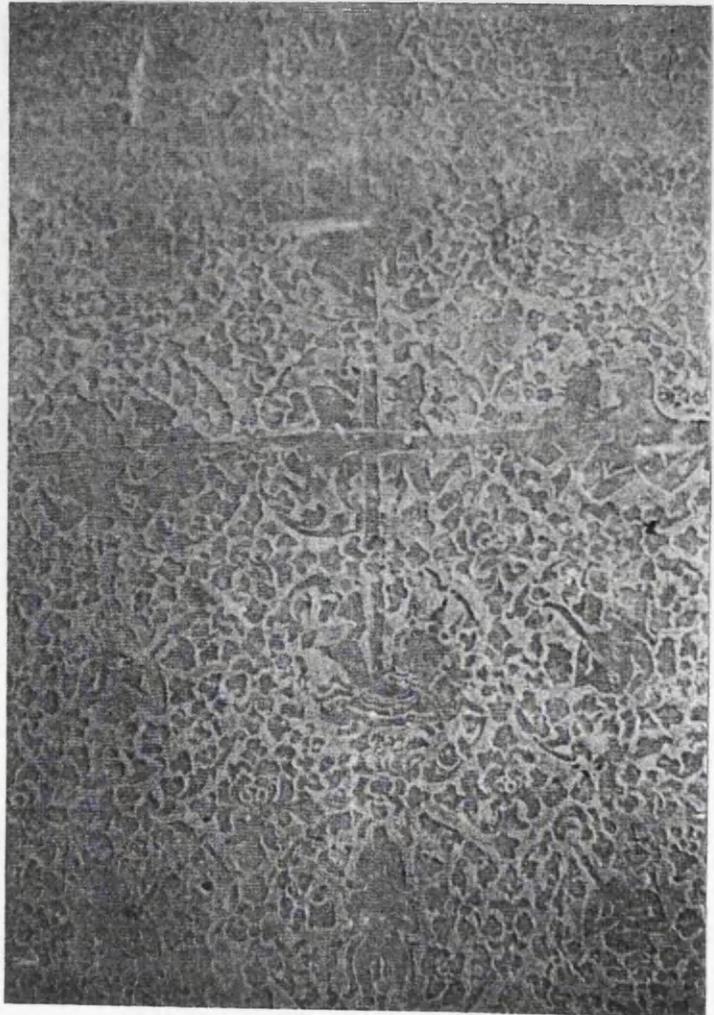


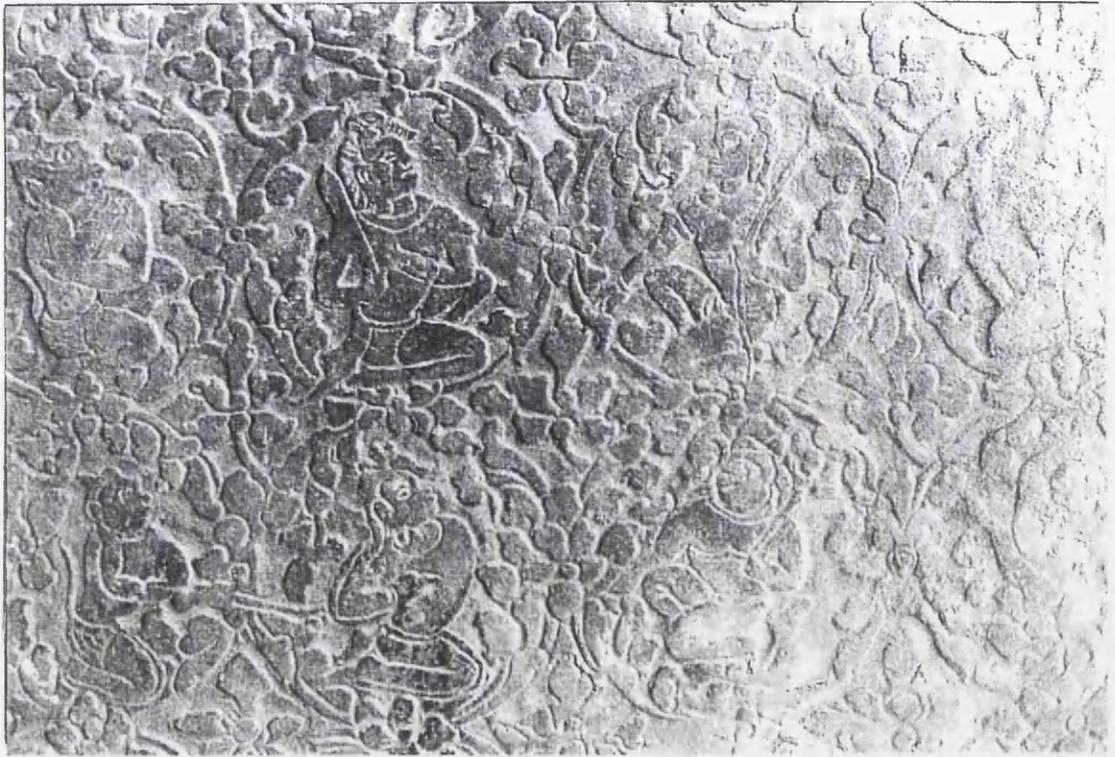
Pl. 29. Door of access to the SW corner pavilion, from the southern wing of the western gallery of the 3rd enclosure.

Even with the naked eye it is difficult to discern the pattern of the Churning of the Ocean of Milk in the tapestry relief decoration of this jamb. In the lower photograph one can see a detail of the horizontal line constituted by the snake Vasuki being pulled by the *devas* and *asuras*. The thin pole rests on the turtle Kurna, while, at his top, Vishnu can be seen helping the churning action.

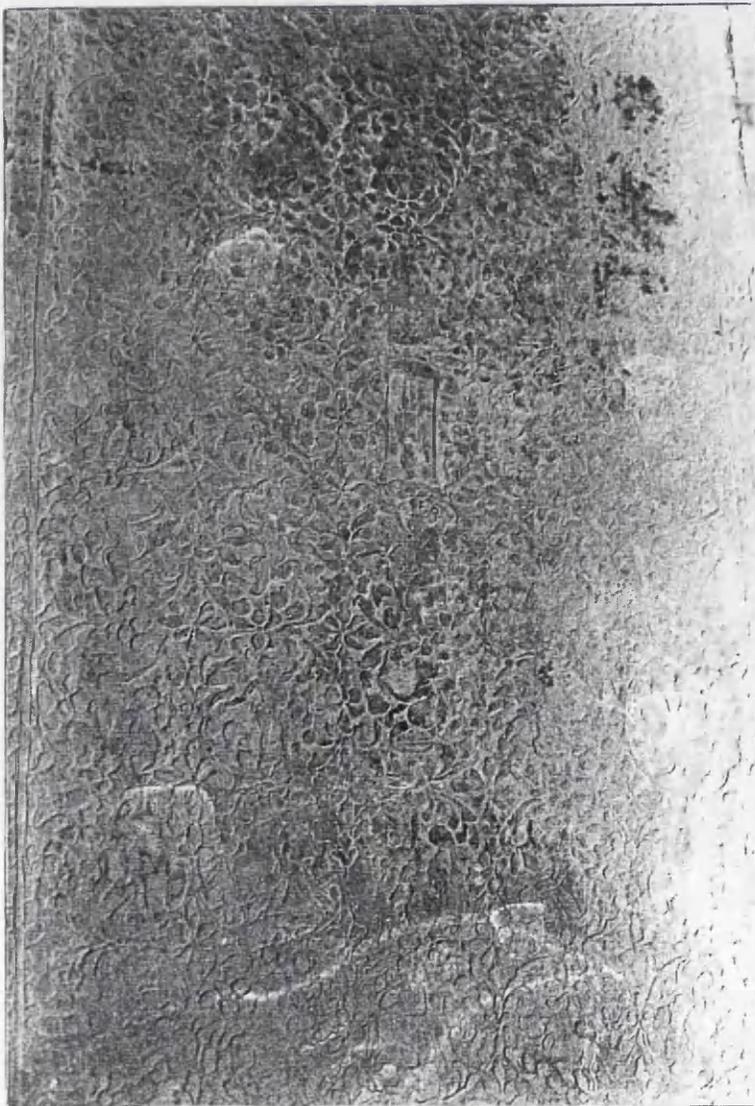


Pl. 29 - Tapestry relief with
the Churning of the Ocean of Milk





Pl. 30, top - Detail of
tapestry reliefs



Pl. 30, bottom - Detail
of tapestry relief with
Shiva in the Pine Forest.

Pl. 31. Southern entrance of the Western gopura.

Two examples of the tapestry relief of the passageway, showing a man fighting a mythological animal (bird or dragon) that trails out into the scroll framing the medallion.



Pl. 31 - Medallions of tapestry reliefs with human figures

Pl. 32. These four examples of narrative sculptural reliefs attest the mastery of Khmer sculptors even when working on the small scale required to fit a scene within the pyramidal composition at the base of pillars. In the relief **32 a**, the figure of Krishna leaning on his cowherd stick, flanked by Balarama, is about 15 cm high (northern door of the western gallery of the 2nd enclosure, facing east). The Vishnu on Garuda of figure **32 b** is less than 20 cm high (eastern door of the northern gallery of the 2nd enclosure). Even smaller (about 12 cm in height) are the dancing Shiva of the photograph **32 c** (central door of the northern gallery of the 3rd enclosure, facing south), and the Krishna subduing the naga Kaliya of figure **32 d** (central door of the southern gallery of the 2nd enclosure, facing north).



Pl. 32 - Four examples of sculptural reliefs at the base of pillars :Krishna and Lakshmana, Vishnu on Garuda, Shiva dancing, and Krishna subduing Kaliya

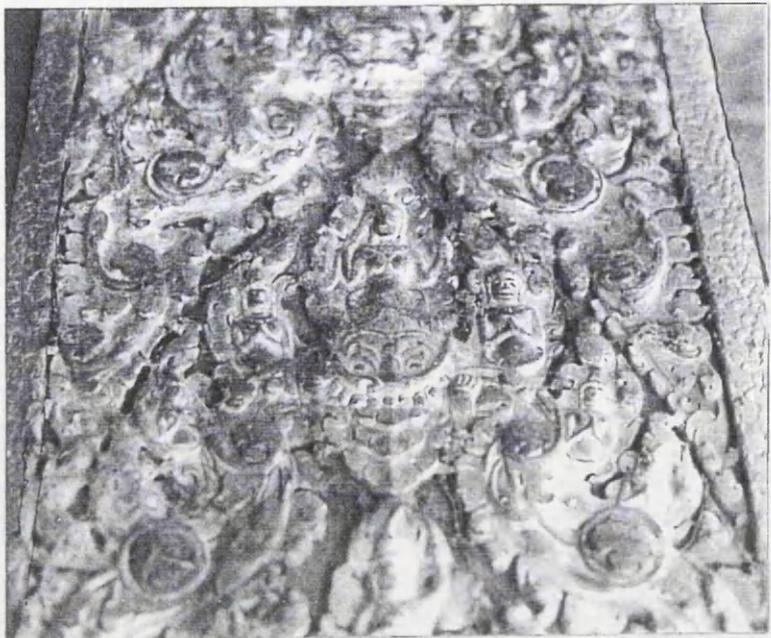
Pl. 33. Four more examples of small-scale sculptural reliefs at the base of pillars. In the photograph **33a** Krishna is depicted lifting Mt. Govardhana to protect his fellow cowherds and their animals; the base of the composition is about 30-35 cm. in width (northern pillars of the cruciform cloister). The same story is sculpted - in a more refined way - in the pillar of figure **33b** (pillar at the eastern end of the gallery of the Historic Procession). The Shiva dancing of the pillar illustrated at **33c**, is flanked by 4 minor personages, including a tiny Ganesha (Eastern door of the NW corner pavilion). The photograph **33d** illustrates an interesting miniaturised (35 cm. wide) scene of the Churning of the Ocean of Milk sculpted below a Kala's head on which stands a tiny figure of Preah Torani (northern pillars of the cruciform cloister).



Pl.33 - Same: two reliefs of Krishna lifting Mt. Govardhana, Shiva dancing, and the Churning of the Ocean of Milk

Pl. 34, top. Detail of the small figure (less than 10 cm high) of Preah Torani, the Earth goddess, over a kala's head, from the same pillar of 33d, but located higher. By wringing her long hair, she produced the streams of water that submerged the demonic army of Mara, saving thus the Buddha from drowning. Preah Torani is a Buddhist icon, and it is not surprising to find it in here due to the religious symcretism, although its size is almost negligible compared to that of Hindu icons in the temple.

Pl. 34, bottom. Detail of an unfinished pillar (western side of the southern subsidiary door of the eastern gallery of the 3rd enclosure). It is evident that Khmer sculptors concentrated on individual elements, starting from foliage scrolls, leaving the central part with small personages to be sculpted later. The photograph shows also the considerable depth of the carving, and how it is started from a simple scratch on the rock's surface, probably following a standard design reproduced by stencils.



Pl. 34, top - Preah Torani

Pl. 34, bottom - Sculptural technique.

