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## Prologue: An Introduction to the Angkorian World

Mitch Hendrickson, Miriam Stark, Damian Evans, Roland Fletcher

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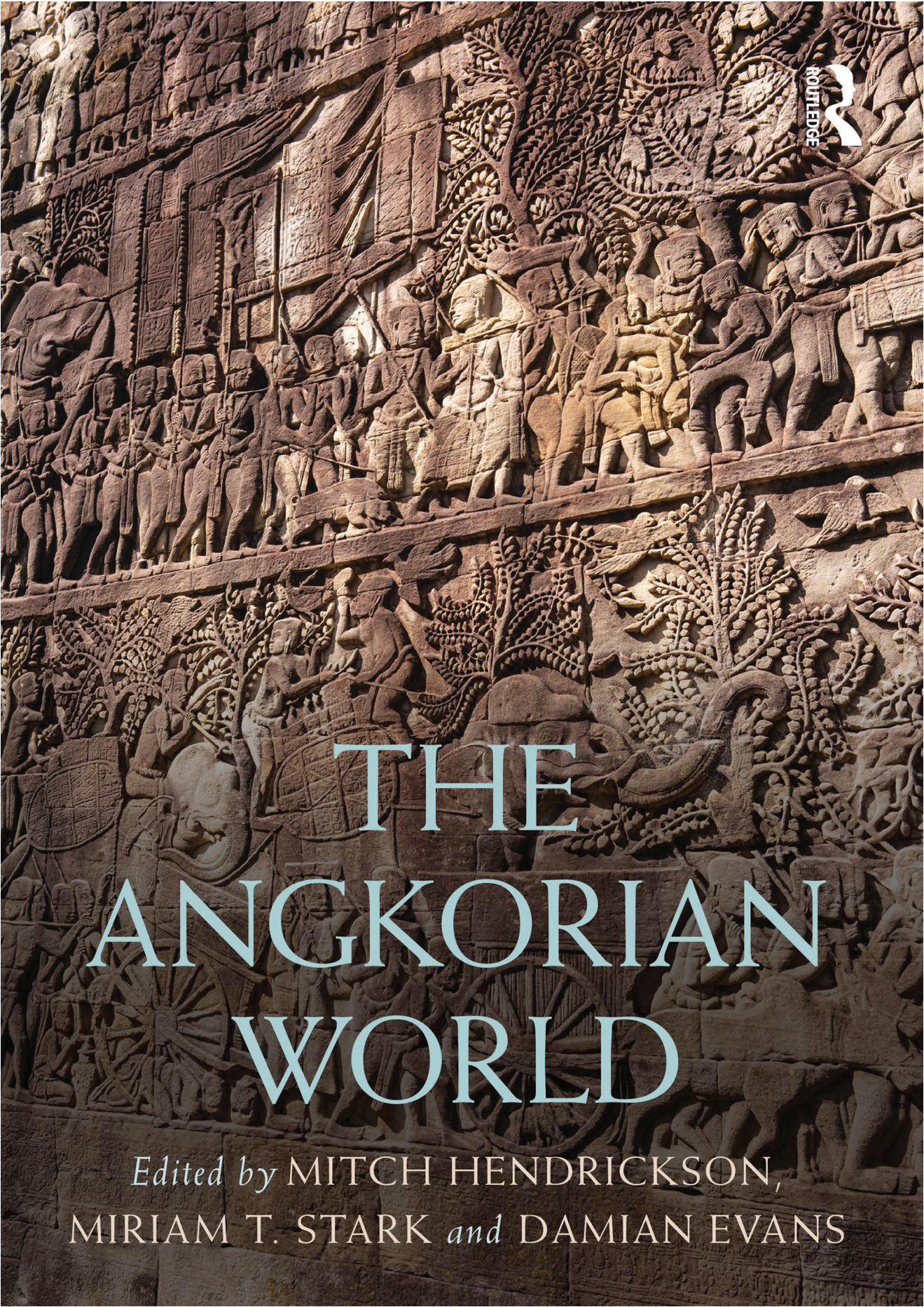
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ROUTLEDGE



# THE ANGKORIAN WORLD

*Edited by* MITCH HENDRICKSON,  
MIRIAM T. STARK *and* DAMIAN EVANS

# THE ANGKORIAN WORLD

*The Angkorian World* explores the history of Southeast Asia's largest ancient state from the first to mid-second millennium CE. Chapters by leading scholars combine evidence from archaeology, texts, and the natural sciences to introduce the Angkorian state, describe its structure, and explain its persistence over more than six centuries.

Comprehensive and accessible, this book will be an indispensable resource for anyone studying premodern Asia. The volume's first of six sections provides historical and environmental contexts and discusses data sources and the nature of knowledge production. The next three sections examine the anthropogenic landscapes of Angkor (agrarian, urban, and hydraulic), the state institutions that shaped the Angkorian state, and the economic foundations on which Angkor operated. Part V explores Angkorian ideologies and realities, from religion and nation to identity. The volume's last part reviews political and aesthetic Angkorian legacies in an effort to explain why the idea of Angkor remains central to its Cambodian descendants. Maps, graphics, and photographs guide readers through the content of each chapter. Chapters in this volume synthesise more than a century of work at Angkor and in the regions it influenced.

*The Angkorian World* will satisfy students, researchers, academics, and the knowledgeable layperson who seeks to understand how this great Angkorian Empire arose and functioned in the premodern world.

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# 0

## PROLOGUE

### An Introduction to the Angkorian World

*Mitch Hendrickson, Miriam T. Stark, Damian Evans  
with Roland Fletcher*

We have designed this volume as a state-of-the-art summary of research on the Angkorian World for a general readership. Drawing from more than a century of research in several discrete (and only rarely overlapping) disciplines has produced new and exciting views of this important but little-known Asian civilisation. So has inviting this generation of authors from different fields to collaborate in multi-authored chapters. Archaeologists have worked with epigraphers, art historians, and historians to develop innovative and holistic perspectives for this volume that push the boundaries of conventional archaeological research. Angkorian scholarship remains distinct from mainstream archaeological research in its stubbornly interdisciplinary approach and its roots in a particularist French intellectual tradition that emphasised epigraphic and art historical approaches. The fact that most research has also taken place within a heritage context, from the early to mid-20th century EFEO conservation efforts to the post-1992 UNESCO World Heritage era, affects the shape of scholarship. So does the lack of dedicated geographic concessions to different teams (as is sometimes the case in the Near East and Mesoamerica), which has meant that multiple research projects have worked in overlapping areas, with varying degrees of cooperation, to produce competing explanations from the same sites. Such frictions are difficult to navigate but can be intellectually productive; our goal is to highlight the particular kinds of insights that emerge from this context.

Our book comprises 35 original chapters written by leading scholars from Cambodia, the United States, France, Australia, Japan, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Thailand. Despite strenuous efforts at authorial parity and even coverage, we are acutely aware of our volume's shortcomings through its long period of development. Our authorship still skews toward Euroamericans, with fewer Khmer voices than we had hoped. Little room exists in this kind of volume for the conventional culture histories that newcomers to Angkorian studies often seek, which often draw heavily on the Francophone canon that was instrumental to the development of Angkorian research. Limited space has been allocated to some topical debates in Angkorian scholarship, like Groslier's (1979) 'hydraulic city' model and discussions of collapse (e.g. Lucero et al. 2015; Penny et al. 2019). We include a basic timeline of Angkorian history (Figure 0.1) and urge readers to consult previously published overviews, some relatively new (Coe and Evans 2018) and some more established (Briggs 1951; Dagens 2003) for key cultural history, the history of research in the field, and key debates through time. Maps included at the end of this chapter provide the reader with a reference of the spatial extent of the Khmer Empire's

influences (Figure 0.2), its reach, and the location of significant sites mentioned in the text (Figure 0.3). Our editorial mission has been to view the Angkorian World as historical scientists: to inspire new ways of looking at things that acknowledge old paradigms and offer new approaches. The following sections provide rationale for our volume's structure.

### ***Part I: Contexts***

This section provides foundational information regarding the study of the Angkorian World, from its heartland (Figure 0.4) to its far reaches. The World's ancient empires all depended on rich local environments, and Angkor is no different. The annual flooding of Cambodia's great lake, the Tonle Sap, fed large populations across the Khmer state, and surrounding regions held myriad forest products that the Chinese sought throughout the polity's lifespan. We have largely limited our focus to the 9th–15th century Angkor Period because of space limitations: our many chapters only graze the surface of scholarship. Some chapters delve into earlier (Pre-Angkorian and prehistoric) developments that were foundational to the Angkorian state. The discussion of early capitals encapsulates the idea of continuity within the larger transformations from small polities to one of the greatest empires in Asian history. Focusing on epigraphic research of minor texts written on objects complements classic research on royal stelae.

We close this section with a discussion of how conventional Angkorian scholarship rendered Cambodian researchers nearly invisible in the study of their own history: despite the fact that French EFEO conservators worked directly with Khmer technical experts (e.g. Falser 2020, 54, 112 for Marchal's conservation work) and despite a florescence in Khmer studies in the mid-20th century (see Dy 2006; Népote 1979; Peycam 2010, 162–64; 2011). This long-standing invisibility was clear even after the Khmer Republic proposed to make Phnom Penh the archaeological centre for a mainland Southeast Asia institute (ARCAFA: Applied Research Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts or ARCAFA). Only 7 of the 42 individuals listed as specialists in Khmer archaeology for that proposal (SEAMEO 1972, 304–6) were actually Khmer, and of those 7, only 2 were trained as archaeologists (Chea Thay Seng and Roland Mourer). Khmer scholars have gradually become more visible in the last few decades, a development that our chapters seek to illustrate. This transformation includes essential voices that will continue to expand our understanding of Angkor as an empire, a cultural icon, and a heritage site of global significance.

### ***Part II: Landscapes***

Here our authors offer broad perspectives on agrarian, hydrological, and demographic contexts of the Angkorian World. Work described in this section's chapters owe much to the extensive archaeological survey programs and remote sensing campaigns that foreign scholars (e.g., those from the EFEO, the Greater Angkor Project, and others) have completed in collaboration with Cambodian institutions, most notably those housed under the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts (including the APSARA National Authority) and the Royal Academy of Cambodia. The 'lidar revolution' resulting from two separate missions that covered over 2000 km<sup>2</sup> of Greater Angkor (Figure 0.5) and beyond has set the stage for new visions of early urban centres and their associated water management systems. Patterns of occupation around Angkor, and along one of the most important corridors in the Angkorian World, the Mekong, show a degree of consistency and coherence, as well as variability and adaptation to local conditions. Archaeobotanical studies, still in their infancy in Angkorian research, offer new insights into agriculture, subsistence, and land use that are canvassed in our chapters.

### ***Part III: State Institutions***

The chapters in this section examine key social traditions that structured ancient Angkorian society by focusing on its capital, which we call Greater Angkor (Figure 0.5). Angkor's success and emergence as Southeast Asia's largest empire were based in large part on the successful operationalisation of a complex and Indic-tinged system of statecraft. Unravelling the intricate genealogies of Khmer kings and locating their religious, art historical, and architectural legacies in time and space have long been mainstays of the literature on the Angkorian World; instead, our volume focuses on selected social processes that force new understandings of Khmer agency and power. How kings became fully legitimate kings rested on systems of bureaucracy and ritual. As the final arbiter and overseer of land ownership, the king sat at the head of Angkorian legal institutions. Physical representations of Brahmanic and Buddhist deities in the state temples of Angkor were central to the reproduction of royal power; we also see that, beyond the capital, local deities became intertwined with Brahmanical practices across the diverse landscapes of the Angkorian World.

### ***Part IV: Economies***

In this section, our contributors focus on the myriad activities and structures that facilitated the rise and functioning of the Angkorian state. Greater Angkor's geographic location was instrumental to its deep occupational history and helps to explain its huge population. Temple transactions and donations recorded in the Khmer-language inscriptions attest to the diverse range of products available in this cashless, barter economy and offer insight into the relative value of certain goods. The primacy of rice is attested to both in these records and in the vast landscape of wet-rice agricultural systems that stretch across the lake's northern margins. Tracing the spatial organisation and orientation of these field systems offers insights into the complexity of farming practices and provides another glimpse at the palimpsest history of occupation in Greater Angkor. The Khmer also produced a range of material culture that would come to define their legacy in mainland Southeast Asia, including distinct green and brown glazed ceramics, metal objects, and their iconic masonry temples. The systematic expansion of archaeological field research beyond Angkor has allowed us to pinpoint the sources for some of these products and identify widespread pyrotechnological activity across the Khmer territories, including the region south of Phnom Penh. The discovery of dozens of stoneware ceramic kilns and hundreds of iron smelting mounds illustrates shifting scales of production and how demand for different types of material was linked to major periods of expansion, particularly during the 12th century and the reign of Jayavarman VII. New approaches to the study of sandstone, the building material of choice for the Khmers from the 11th century onwards, also reveal the complex and dynamic interplay between resource availability, architectural transformations, and the historical trajectory of the Khmer Empire.

### ***Part V: Ideologies and Realities***

The contributions here survey belief systems that underpinned Angkor's merging of religion and state and examine key structuring principles like gender, ideology, and social organisation. As with other premodern states in mainland Southeast Asia, Angkorian people selectively integrated Indic beliefs and practices into their own specific cultural milieux. Conventional Angkorian scholarship emphasises a syncretic fusion of Hindu/Buddhist and local beliefs as

a form of ‘Hindicisation’ (from Georges Cœdès’ classic works [see e.g. Cœdès 1968]). More recent research instead emphasises pluralism, and a kind of ‘indigenization’ in which Khmer elites selected key foreign elements that supported their political goals and Worldview. The beautiful statues that served as foci for religious veneration in the Pre-Angkor and Angkor Periods are now counted among Southeast Asia’s greatest artistic achievements. Our contributors elaborate in detail on their manufacture and elucidate the roles these images played in social and political reproduction across the Angkorian World. One chapter explores roles that key animals like bovines (cattle and water buffalo) played in Angkor’s ritual and political economies. Other chapters use material culture and stylistic traditions to map the geographic boundaries of the Khmer polity. Attention then turns to daily life for Angkorian Khmers within and beyond temple walls, from sartorial expressions to gender roles. Image, performance, and agency all shaped daily life in the Angkorian World, and it is this aggregate that our authors study as long-term history.

### ***Part VI After Angkor***

This final section challenges the conventional ‘collapse’ view of Angkor and threads together the centuries-long denouement of the Angkorian period with subsequent developments in Cambodian and Southeast Asian history. Conventional scholarship has long depended on the European ‘discovery’ of Angkor and on a catastrophic 15th-century ‘collapse’: two concepts that our authors challenge using environmental and archaeological data from micro to landscape scale. Research on urbanism in Greater Angkor chronicles the decline of this capital, its continued occupation, and a demographic shift south to take advantage of growing maritime networks through capitals at Longvek and ultimately Phnom Penh. Other chapters use art, architecture, epigraphy, and religion to explore Angkorian legacies in the 16th–17th century polities that flourished in the territories of the former Empire. Finally, we underscore that the period ‘after Angkor’ continues to the present day in Khmer religious practice. This resilience and continuity is illustrated by the enduring presence of Yama, a minor god during the time of the Empire, who now occupies a central role in Khmer Buddhist practice. More than just an immutable assemblage of massive and durable stone monuments, Angkor has always been a canvas upon which to elaborate particular ways of looking at and thinking about the past, and our final contributions trace some of the ways in which ideas about Angkor are expressed in contemporary Cambodian society and culture.

### **Perspectives**

A recurring theme in accounts of Angkor, from the earliest times until the present day, has been amazement and fascination with the prodigious scope of what was achieved, which by certain measures appears to be without parallel in the pre-industrial world. But the sheer scale of Angkor has given rise to its own set of theoretical and methodological problems. Historically, the precious and finite resources that we have available for investigations on the ground have focused on a handful of great temples in the urban centres of places like Angkor, and the artworks and inscriptions they contain, at the expense of the many thousands of smaller Angkorian shrines that sprawl across the Angkorian World. By focusing on the largest of the monuments, researchers have typically ignored the traces of communities and their everyday life that remain inscribed on the surface of the landscape, which are literally and figuratively overshadowed by the stone temples. Because of the unique scale of Angkor, conceptual and definitional problems abound.

## Prologue

As one example, the urban structure of Angkor itself defies easy categorisation: zoomed out to a certain extent, it resembles a sprawling and integrated ‘city’ of the kind we are now familiar with in the contemporary world: however, it is fully two orders of magnitude more extensive than other ‘cities’ of the pre-modern world. Zooming in for more detail, Angkor Thom (and the Yasodharapura area, Figure 0.6) is a complicated mosaic of urban and rural space, with smaller urban centres that reflect the macro pattern of the settlement complex while also evincing specific local characteristics (Evans et al. 2007). Recent research has underscored the inherent tension in considering Angkor at different scales of time and space: on one level, the layout of Angkor is deliberate and reflects the designs of kings and the religious imperatives of the Angkorian state; on another level, it is the aggregate outcome of countless individual decisions over centuries (Klassen and Evans 2020). The functioning whole has emergent properties—material inertia and systemic vulnerability arising from centuries of reconfiguring the Earth’s surface at regional scale (Penny et al. 2018)—that cannot readily or usefully be reduced to the beliefs and designs of individual kings, nor of farmers.

Recognising such differences in analytical scales is critically important to generating robust new insights about Angkor, particularly in identifying correspondences and non-correspondences between different lines of data (Fletcher and Evans 2012). Details matter, from the specific moment when an inscription was completed, associated with the specific intentions of an individual in the larger socio-political context in which they worked; through the schedules of daily routes and walking distances to collect water; the timing of 5–6-km travel distances to and from markets and workplaces; the fortnightly shifts of thousands of people across Angkor with the waxing and waning of the moon; up to the slow incessant movement of water through the canal networks. Angkor’s space and time were structured and organised at different magnitudes. So were the products of long-term aggregate labour investment: if Angkor Wat temple was really constructed in three to four decades, as one interpretation of the inscriptions might suggest, labourers must have moved around 200 blocks of two to three tons, every single day, all year round—a feat that few quarry masters can match even today. The masonry of the towers on top of Ta Keo temple alone is estimated to weigh 6000 metric tons. Scaling further out, the West Baray held approximately 55 million cubic metres of water, and its banks extending for about 20 km contained over 12 million cubic metres of deposit. Thousands of human workers, working months and even years, moved these enormous quantities of materials (Pottier 2000, 104,114). Charismatic and effective rulers were necessary for Angkorian society to complete these projects, particularly their association of the Khmer ruler with the *devarāja* (god-king) and view of him as their *cakravartin* (universal ruler). On the other hand, it is likely that the everyday life of ordinary citizens over the centuries unfolded in much the same way regardless of which king sat on the throne or the specific gods to whom he professed devotion.

Temporal scales also vary broadly, from the duration of a single temple’s construction to the lifespan of interaction and communication systems. Trade networks that moved textiles from South Asia and China to Angkor lasted for centuries. The Medieval Warm Phase, a period of oscillating higher global temperatures, lasted nearly five centuries. Greater Angkor’s water system had a still longer duration, commencing at least with the establishment of Bhavapura with its proto-baray in the 8th century (Fletcher and Pottier 2022, 728–31) and continuing to the eventual abandonment of its last portion in Angkor Thom in the late 16th century (Groslier 1958). Ceramics were traded into Cambodia from China before the 9th century, and the circulation of this material culture continued beyond the demise of Greater Angkor (Brotherson 2019). Underlying all these developments was a rice-based agrarian foundation that reached Southeast Asia no later

than the early second millennium BCE (Fuller and Castillo 2022) and created a sophisticated local ecology that facilitated surpluses needed to feed the city. This system was embedded in a much older story of the cropping of floating rice and flood recession rice, which has a long ancestry in the seasonally inundated lowlands of the lower Mekong Basin (Fox and Ledgerwood 1999).

Long-standing approaches to art history, inscriptions, and architecture might seem to offer few insights to many of these questions. Inscriptions, for example, while extraordinarily rich in detail on some aspects of Angkorian society, are frustratingly silent on things like the production of material like iron and ceramics, on water management, on the beliefs and perspectives of non-elites, and on the mechanics of society beyond temples and the royal court. On the other hand, several contributions to this volume underscore the value of using innovative approaches, informed by fields such as digital humanities, anthropology, and the applied sciences, to reap new information from sources that have been intensively studied for a century or more. Quantitative analysis of vocabulary and material culture in inscriptions now allow us to track social and economic changes across time and space (Lustig and Lustig 2019), for example, while studies of the geochemistry of ceramics and iron and petrographic analyses of sandstone allow us to connect artefacts to the specific groups people who produced and used them (Leroy et al. 2018; Polkinghorne et al. 2015).

Archaeology continues to play an outsize role in filling in the gaps in our knowledge that remain, but we must be clear-eyed about its limitations, especially given the ephemeral and non-durable nature of most Khmer material culture. We must also reframe the research questions that we ask, since there are a range of compelling and important questions to which we will almost certainly never know the answers. Scholars working elsewhere in the premodern world have demonstrated the importance of studying slavery, health, and mobility in the maintenance of ancient cities and their states. Yet Angkorian mortuary practices—the systematic cremation of the dead—preclude their study. We have no texts that provide insight into whether, and to what extent, belief systems promoted by kings were accepted by the general population or the degree to which the vast investments of labour in temple construction were motivated by devotion or servitude. Urban anatomy, from neighbourhoods to urban sectors, remains a challenge for Angkorian researchers to parse. Deciphering provincial dynamics, from economic organisation to linkages to the capital, requires more work. So does understanding the structure of the agrarian economy that supported the emergence and functioning of the capital. We hope that these chapters inspire the next generation of researchers to begin their research journeys into the Angkorian World.

Every volume in this Routledge series synthesises vast bodies of scholarship on a given ‘World’, and most draw from an array of disciplinary approaches that we also tap in this volume. Much of what makes Angkorian research important and difficult is not commonly found across the scholarly communities who crafted previous volumes. These include the impact of Angkor’s colonial origins and legacies in current research practice, tensions between particularistic and comparative approaches, and geopolitical dynamics translated into scholarly conflicts. As in so many other archaeological research contexts, we currently lack unified or coherent systems for data collection, data access, and collections management. Yet some challenges seem unique to our field of Angkorian studies, from methodological challenges (and accomplishments) born of work in post-conflict land-mined regions, pressures to pursue less invasive research strategies in World Heritage properties, and an archaeological heritage that its descendant community so values that nearly every national flag since the mid-19th century has included Angkor’s silhouette. Archaeology and heritage interdigitate in the Angkorian World to inspire both the kind of pride that encourages Khmers to become archaeologists and nationalism that occasionally also provokes armed conflict.

Prologue

DATE	PERIOD	MAJOR RULERS	SIGNIFICANT DEVELOPMENTS	
1900	Protectorate	Norodom Ang Duong	1863 Treaty with French Phnom Penh the capital	
1800				
1700				
1600	Early Modern/ Middle	Ang Chan	Udong the capital	
1500			Longvek the capital; Rededication of Angkor	
1400	Angkor	Sūryavarman II	Khmer court moves south Thai attacks on Angkor	
1300			Jayavarman VIII	Zhou Daguan account of Angkor
1200			Jayavarman VII	Angkor Thom Civil war/Cham invasion of Angkor
1100			Sūryavarman I	Angkor Wat
1000			Rajendravarman II	Baphuon
900			Jayavarman IV	Yaśodharapura the capital; Pre Rup Koh Ker the capital; Prasat Thom
800	Pre-Angkor	Yaśovarman I	Yaśodharapura the capital; Bakheng	
700		Indravarman I	Harīharālaya the capital; Bakong Mahendraparvata the capital; Rong Chen Founding of the Khmer Empire	
600	'Chenla/Zhenla'	Jayavarman II		
500		Jayadevi		
400		Jayavarman I		
300	'Funan/ Fou-nan'	Isānavarman	Isānapura (Sambor Prei Kuk) a capital	
200		Bhavavarman I		
100	Protohistoric/ Prehistoric	Rudravarman		
0				

Figure 0.1 Timeline of the Angkorian World.

Navigating these challenges takes mindfulness, and we close by offering thoughts about the kind of future research we hope will expand our views of the Angkorian World. At the pragmatic level, more local engagement and less international oversight is needed to decolonise the study of Angkorian heritage field and hear local voices. Standardised researcher protocols, ranging from research ethics to data management systems, would strengthen the field and enhance the research value of more than a century of research collections. As several scholars have argued (see e.g. Heng and Phon 2017; Stark and Piphall 2017), we must eradicate persistent asymmetries between foreign and local researchers in Angkorian studies to move forward. As we commit to doing so, it will not be sufficient to simply dismiss the scholarship that has come before as ‘colonial’, which is obviously and necessarily true: the hard work that confronts us is to systematically and rigorously reappraise the archaeological record and to critically evaluate what is of enduring value and what is not.

We end with a note on chronological terminology. The timeline (Figure 0.1) is broadly divisible into Prehistoric and Early Historic. Culturally we speak of Pre-Angkor (6th to 8th c. CE) and Angkor Periods (9th to mid-15th c. CE), followed by the Early Modern or Middle Period (16th to 19th c. CE). Historians have also identified different phases within the Early Historic Period that correspond to the rise of state-level political entities, including *Funan* (4th to 5th c. CE) and *Chenla* (6th to 8th c. CE). Different meanings of these terms are described in detail elsewhere (Jacques 1979; Vickery 1986). References to late Angkor typically are associated with the late 13th to 15th century and are typically associated with the decline of the Empire.



Figure 0.2 South and Southeast Asia, showing key sites.



Prologue



Figure 0.3 Southeast Asia, showing key sites.



Figure 0.4 Heartland of the Khmer Empire, showing key sites and extent of the Angkorian road system.

Prologue

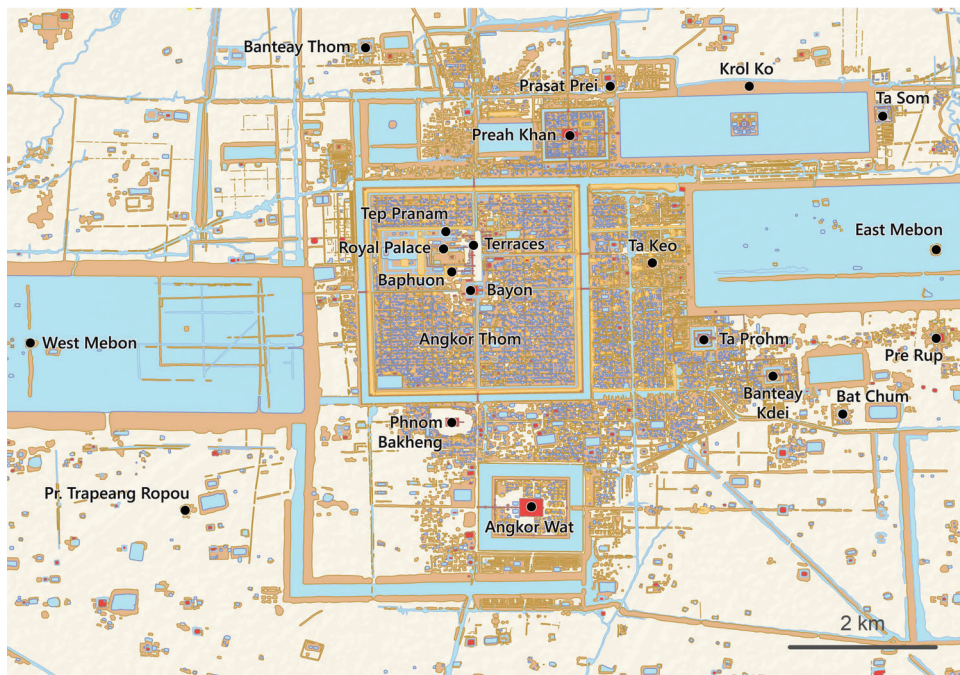
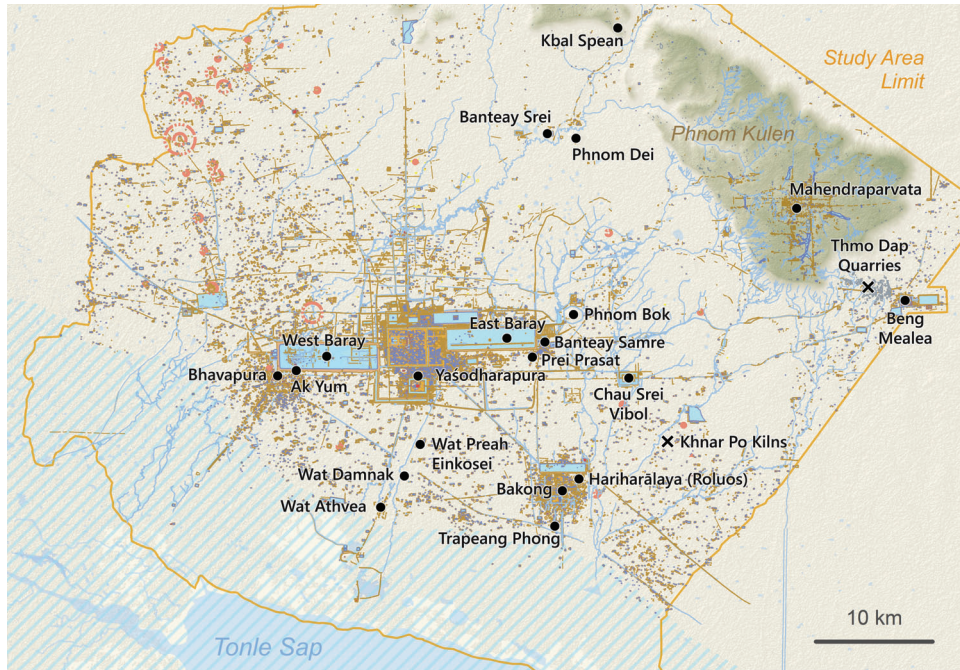


Figure 0.5 Greater Angkor, showing major temple sites and the extent of infrastructure.



Figure 0.6 Capital region of Yaśodharapura, highlighting the urban layout in and around Angkor Thom and Angkor Wat.

## Prologue

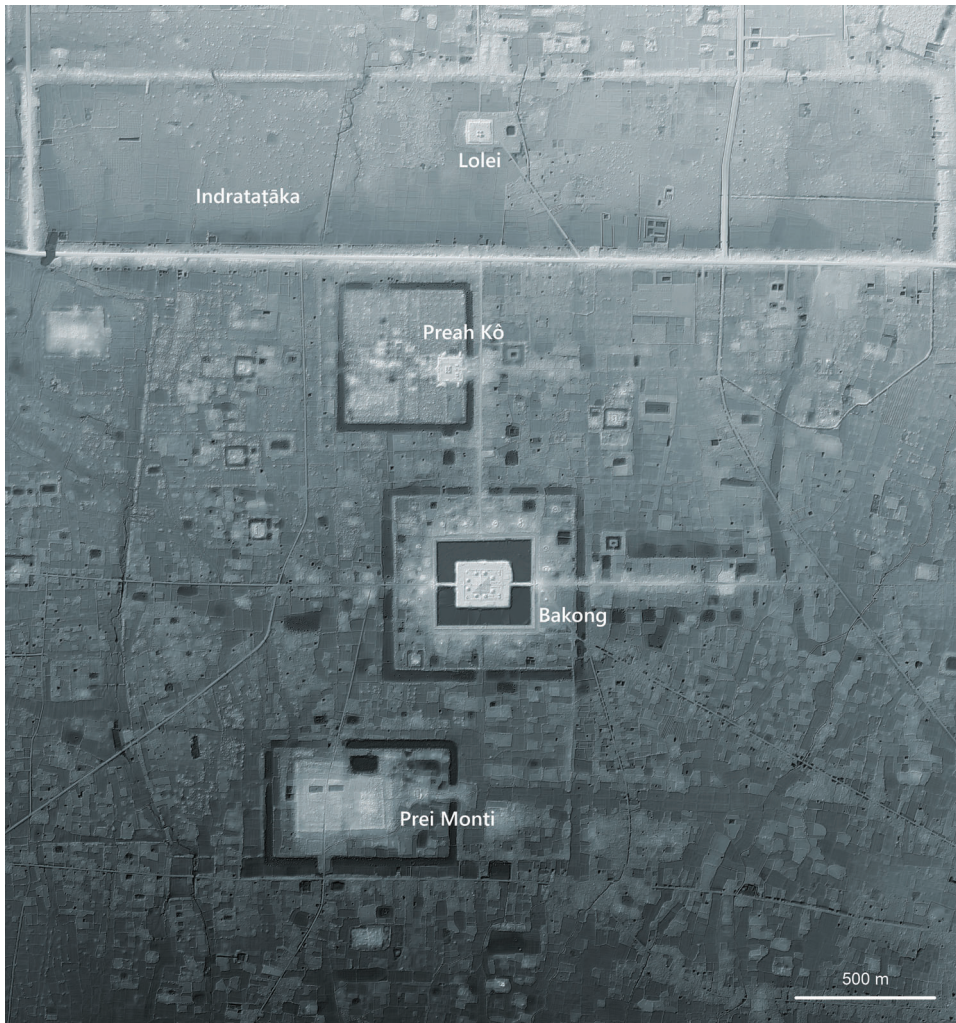


Figure 0.7 Capital region of Hariharālaya (Roluos).

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