

## SIEM REAP: THEN AND NOW

Darryl Leon Collins  
*Independent scholar, Siem Reap*

The provincial centre of Siem Reap (which translates as ‘the subdued Siamese’ or ‘the subduing Siamese’) was formed by gradual amalgamation of villages clustered around Buddhist wats that are still to be found within close proximity to the Siem Reap river that flows in a north-south direction through the centre of the town. Although recent research postulates this river is in fact a canal, the riverine pattern of development is common to many Cambodian villages to the present day.

As far as we are aware today, extensive historical documentation on the town appears in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with European accounts. *Khmer Chronicles*, written retrospectively, largely in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with historical aims but with strong legendary bents, situate the town’s veritable founding as a provincial centre in the post-Angkorian period, after the relocation of the Khmer capital from neighboring Angkor to more southerly regions. 1525 is the founding date most frequently cited in these texts, but only in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century do we encounter contemporary descriptions of the town.

Missionary Father Charles-Emile Bouillevaux travelled to Angkor in 1850 – “Travelling upriver from the Great Lake, he passed through the small modern town of Siem Reap, and cut through the jungle to emerge at Angkor Wat’s western causeway.”<sup>1</sup>

Scottish photographer John Thomson mentions the village of Siem Reap following a visit to photograph the ruins of Angkor in March 1866:

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Bruno Dagens, *Angkor: Heart of an Asian Empire*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1995, p.34.

“... The old town of Siamrap<sup>2</sup> is in a very ruinous state – the result, as was explained to us, of the last invasion of Cambodia – but the high stone walls which encircle it are still in excellent condition. Outside these fortifications a clear stream flows downwards into the great lake some fifteen miles away, and this stream during the rainy season, contains a navigable channel.”

Old Siem Reap town was annexed by the Siamese, along with the three provinces of Siem Reap, Sisophon and Battambang from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century until their retrocession under the Franco-Siamese Treaty of 1907. The administrative centre of Siem Reap had been fortified by a crenulated wall constructed by a Siamese officer named Praya Bodin.<sup>3</sup> These brick and stone walls as noted by Thomson, surrounded a *kamphaeng* or fort built in 1834, vestiges of which remained until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup>

In the very same year as Thomson’s visit, French members of the Mekong Exploration Commission set out from Saigon and reached Angkor on 23 June 1866. A map ‘Carte des Environs d’Angkor,’ drawn by Messrs Doudart de Lagrée and Francis Garnier published in *Voyage en Indo-Chine* in 1873, reveals directly south of ‘Angkor Wat’ the ‘Citadelle de Siemreap’ (Résidence du gouverneur de la province) and the village dwellings, surrounded by rice fields, strung along the Siem Reap river.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Now spelt ‘Siem Reap’.

<sup>3</sup> *Five years in Siam from 1891-1896*, vols. 1 & 2, H. Warrington Smyth with an introduction by Tamara Loos, White Lotus, Bangkok, 1994, vol. 2, p.230; originally published in 1898. A similar fort wall was also constructed in Battambang by the same Siamese official.

<sup>4</sup> Refer photograph, ‘Former citadel (indigenous guard)’, no. 76 (H108), National Museum of Cambodia, dated 1902.

<sup>5</sup> Francis Garnier revised and edited by Léon Garnier, *Voyage d’exploration en Indo-Chine effectuée pendant les années 1866-1867, et 1868 par une commission française présidée par Doudart de Lagrée*, 2 vols, Hachette, Paris, 1873.

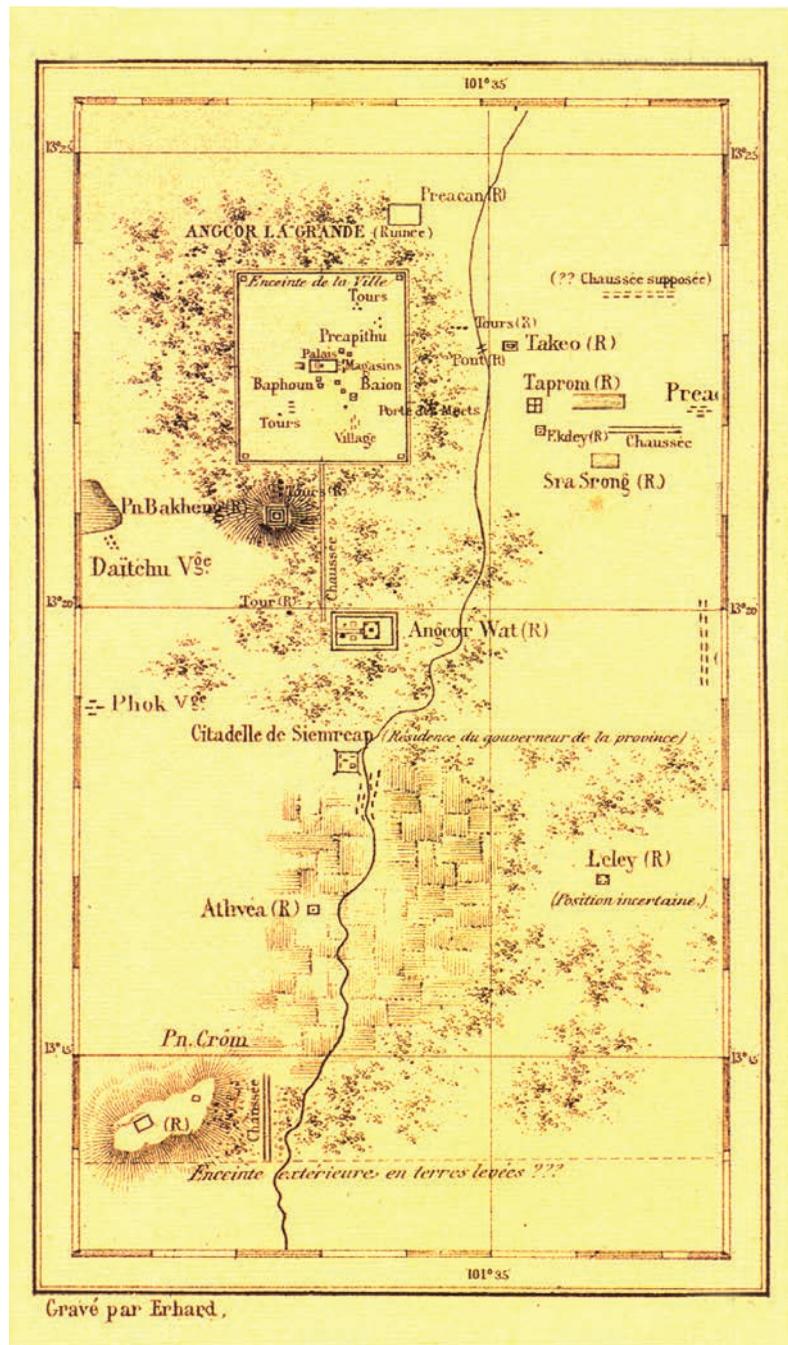


Figure 1: Detail of map 'Carte des Environs d'Angkor', 1866 showing the 'Citadelle de Siemreap' & village of Siem Reap (Photo: Published in 'Voyage en Indo-Chine', 1873)

Louis de Carné travelled to Angkor as a member of the Mekong Commission, and his book, written mostly by Francis Garnier, was published before the main report. After travelling across the Tonle Sap lake, reaching Phnom Krom, and travelling into the province he recounts an 1866 visit with the governor of Angkor:<sup>6</sup>

“... and the governor of Angkor gave us a hearty welcome, putting horses, elephants, and buffalo-wagons at our disposal; and our caravan thus made up, advanced towards his residence. An enormous enceinte, built of iron-stone regularly cut, and probably taken from some of the ruins, recalls the castles of the middle ages. A huge iron cannon, in which birds nestle, is mounted in front of the principal gate, and human heads fresh cut off, and set on long spikes fixed in the ground, show that the lord of the palace has the right to inflict death-penalties. Some Cambodian thatches are all you see inside the enceinte of this vast citadel. An air of cleanliness, which one does not commonly see even in the houses of great people, distinguishes the dwelling of the governor, who took no end of trouble with us, and wrote our names and rank on a slate; a form of politeness, but, perhaps an act of policy as well, for this brave Cambodian was an agent of the court of Bangkok. Some bad European engravings adorned the pillars and the walls, and a portrait of the Pope was hung at the entrance to the women’s apartments.”<sup>7</sup>

In the 1920s, Helen Churchill Candee gives details of the construction of the Siem Reap citadel that involved the removal of the east staircase of the Bakheng temple to provide plundered stones for the fortified walls, but neglects to mention that the actions of the ‘inhabitants of Cambodia’ were at the behest of the Thai authorities.<sup>8</sup>

“..., so the inhabitants of Cambodia removed the blocks of limonite<sup>9</sup> and sandstone [from the Bakheng] of which the long, wide stair was built and carried them away to use in building the citadel at Siem Reap. All that is left of the stair is a few slabs to mark the steps and two guardian lions now fallen to earth, which rest on the first platform.”

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<sup>6</sup> Louis de Carné, *Voyage en Indo-Chine et dans l'Empire Chinois* translated from the French as *Travels in Indo-China and the Chinese Empire*, Dentu Ed., and Chapman and Hall, Paris & London, 1872 (reprinted with Preface by Walter E.J. Taps as *Travels on the Mekong: Cambodia, Laos and Yunnan*, White Lotus, Bangkok, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, pp.39-40.

<sup>8</sup> Helen Churchill Candee, *Angkor the magnificent: The wonder city of ancient Cambodia*, Frederick A. Stokes Company, New York, 1924, pp.215-216.

<sup>9</sup> Now usually referred to as ‘laterite.’

*Siem Reap: Then and Now*

To reach Angkor in 1872, Frank Vincent, an American, visited Cambodia and the ruins of Angkor. He describes the overland journey from Bangkok to the village of Siem Reap:

“The total distance we traveled from Bangkok was 275 miles; of this 30 miles was by canal in boats, 30 miles on the Bangpa Kong river in boats, and the remainder – 215 miles – was performed upon horses and elephants, in bullock-carts, and on foot; the greater part of the journey, however, was accomplished on horseback. The time consumed in making this trip was seventeen days.”<sup>10</sup>

Auguste-Jean-Marie Pavie visited Siem Reap on his first exploratory mission in 1881 and commented in hindsight<sup>11</sup>:

“Siem Reap, the center that succeeded Angkor in the administration of its district, better known by the European tourists than Battambang thanks to the admirable ruins which encircle it, is far from having any importance, especially from the commercial point of view.”<sup>12</sup>

Pavie’s mission was “the study and construction of a telegraphic line across Cambodia and Siam, from Phnom Penh to Bangkok”<sup>13</sup> and it is from Brien, one of his colleagues, that we have an undated photograph of the then ‘Governor of Angkor’ (Siem Reap).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Frank Vincent Jr, *The Land of the White Elephant: Sights and Scenes in Southeast Asia 1871-1872*, Harper & Brothers, New York, 1873 (rep. Oxford University Press, Singapore, 1988).

<sup>11</sup> The reader may conclude from this that Pavie seriously underestimated the enormous commercial tourist potential associated with the Angkor ruins.

<sup>12</sup> Auguste Pavie, *Mission Pavie Indo-Chine 1879-1895. Géographie et Voyages. I. Exposé des Travaux de la Mission (Introduction, Première et Deuxième Périodes - 1879 à 1889)*, Ernest Leroux, Paris 1901, and *II. Exposé des Travaux de la Mission, (Troisième et Quatrième Périodes - 1889 à 1895)*, Ernest Leroux, Paris 1906 and Auguste Pavie translated by Walter E.J. Tips, *The Pavie Mission Indochina Papers 1879-1895 - vol. 1: Pavie Mission Exploration Work: Laos, Cambodia, Siam, Yunnan, and Vietnam*, White Lotus Press, Bangkok, 1999, p.131.

<sup>13</sup> The line (669km) was built in two sections - from Phnom Penh to Battambang (306km) in 1882 and from Battambang to Bangkok (363km) in 1883.

<sup>14</sup> The image is reproduced in the Tips edition (1999) as Plate 87, p.112.



Figure 2: 'The Governor of Angkor'  
(Photo: By Brien, inspector of telegraphs, published in 'The Pavie Mission Indochina Papers', 1901-06)



Figure 3: Postcard: 'The Governor of Angkor and his children, Siem Reap, 1906 (Photo: Private collection)



Figure 4: Postcard: 'Cambodian riflemen in front of the fort', Siem Reap, c.1905 (Photo: Private collection)

Figure 5: Former citadel (indigenous guard), Siem Reap, 1902 (Photo: National Museum of Cambodia)



H. Warrington Smyth recounts a visit to Siem Reap in the later years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in volume 2 of his writings, *Five years in Siam*:

“Siemrap, like Battambang and Chantabun, was one of the places selected as an outpost against the Cambodians after the capture of the two lake provinces by the Siamese in 1795.<sup>15</sup> Each town was fortified by a rectangular Kampaeng built of laterite and brick, and with their tall gateways<sup>16</sup> and picturesque touches of red in the midst of eternal green, they still form imposing memorials to the energy of Praya Bodin,<sup>17</sup> the Siamese officer who erected them.”<sup>18</sup>

In 1901, Aymonier clearly identifies the architect, date and precise placement of the citadel at Siem Reap by providing coordinates.<sup>19</sup> He further mentions the relationship of the citadel to Wat Preah Enkosei placing its location on land approximately one kilometre south of Wat Enkosei and on the west bank of the river:

“The majority of the edifices reserved for the government and for public services are built inside a huge citadel with well-designed ramparts interrupted by bastions. The limonite blocks of this enclosure come from ruins all over the province.<sup>20</sup> Erected, they say, in 1834 by the Siamese general whom they called Chao Khun

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<sup>15</sup> This date is sometimes given as 1794.

<sup>16</sup> An illustration of ‘La porte de la citadelle de Siem Reap’ (photograph Pestel), fig. 72, is found on p.355, *Le Cambodge*, vol. II, Etienne Aymonier, Ernest Leroux, Paris, 1901 (also reproduced in Aymonier, 1999, p.157).

<sup>17</sup> Bodin is noted as a famous Thai general involved in suppressing an insurrection and liberating Vientiane in 1828. According to Aymonier and Chhuong, he arrived in Cambodia in 1831 and conquered the royal army constructing citadels in Siem Reap (1834) and Battambang (1837). In 1842, the Thai king ordered Chav Ponhea Bodin and his troops to escort Preah Ang Duong to Udong to be crowned. He died in 1848, advanced in years, after returning to Siam with his retinue in 1847. His name is alternatively given as ‘Chao Khun Bodin’ in vol. II; *Le Cambodge*, vol. III, Etienne Aymonier, Ernest Leroux, Paris, 1901, pp.795-798 and as ‘Chav Ponhea Bodin’ in *Battambang in the time of the Lord Governor*, Tauch Chhoung, translated by Hin Sithan, Carol Mortland and Judy Ledgerwood, CEDORECK, Phnom Penh, 1994, pp.9-10 (there is an image of Chav Ponhea Bodin - plate 11).

<sup>18</sup> Warrington Smyth, 1898, vol. 2, p.230.

<sup>19</sup> In December 2003, Christophe Pottier of the EFEO Office Siem Reap, in verbal communication with the author explained that in all probability these 1901 French coordinates are inaccurate. He further suggested the location for the citadel was in all likelihood the area of the old French administrative quarter to the south of the Royal Residence bordered by National Route no. 6 and the western road along the Siem Reap river.

<sup>20</sup> Aymonier records that stones for constructing the citadel were also removed from the exterior enclosure of Wat Athvea to the south of Siem Reap town. Taken with Candee’s version, it appears both the Bakheng and Athvea temples in particular were raided for building materials. Aymonier, 1999, p.207.

Bodin, it is situated on the right bank at 13° 38' 09" N and 101° 32' 30" E. Moura says that in this citadel, 'a little distance away from the residence of the governor' there is a splendid sandstone idol of Ganesa, rather big, a little pot-bellied but executed by a master's hand. This is the Neak Ta of the place."<sup>21</sup>

"... Preah Inkosi, Einkosèi or Eynkosèi, which is situated on the left bank [of the Siem Reap river], a kilometre upriver of the citadel and near the last houses of the city."<sup>22</sup>

Pierre Loti also writing in 1901 provides a physical description of the village:

"After an hour we stop at Siem Reap, almost a town, but quite Siamese in character, with its little houses always perched on piles, and its temple bristling with golden finials. It has a post office, rather a rustic one, where one may frank letters with stamps bearing the likeness of King Chulalongkorn, and a little telegraph office also, for a telegram is brought to me ..."<sup>23</sup>

Loti continues after a visit to the Angkor ruins in 1901 in a somewhat more romantic tone:

"At about seven or eight o'clock we reach the Siamese village of Siem Reap, on the bank of the river, in the region of tall palms. It is quite dark, and the half-naked people who move about under the vault of trees get the light they need by waving burning brands, as is the custom also in India on the Malabar coast."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Aymonier, 1999, p.212.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p.212.

<sup>23</sup> *A pilgrimage to Angkor*, Pierre Loti (Julien Viaud), edited and introduced by Michael Smithies, Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai, 1996, p.28 (originally published 1912). The colonial French administration inherited the postal and telegraph services from the Siamese following retrocession in 1907.

<sup>24</sup> Loti, 1996, p.72.

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*Figure 6: 'Residence of the governor', Siem Reap  
(Photo: Published in 'Les ruines d'Angkor', 1890)*



*Figure 7: Residence of the former governor, Siem Reap, 1911  
(Photo: National Museum of Cambodia)*

The following map of the 'Centre and East of Siem Réap' by Aymonier (1901) clearly indicates the citadel as a square to the immediate left of the words "SIEM RÉAP", and south of the temple Preah Eynkosèi.<sup>25</sup> The site of the citadel is still noted on a map 'Ruins of Angkor' accompanying a March 1912 article in the renowned *National Geographic* magazine.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Aymonier, 1901 translated by Walter E.J. Tips, Map 5, between pp.196 and 197.

<sup>26</sup> 'Forgotten Ruins of Indo-China: The Most Profusely and Richly Carved Group of Buildings in the World', pp.209-272.



Figure 8: Map of Siem Reap & environs by Aymonier  
(Photo: Published in 'Le Cambodge', 1901)

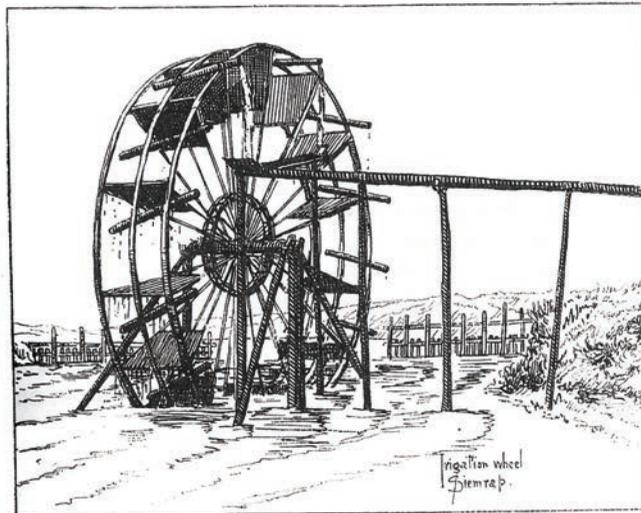


Figure 9: 'The gate of the Siem Reap Citadel' (Photo: By Pestel, published in Aymonier, 'Le Cambodge', 1901)

## *Siem Reap: Then and Now*

The ‘re-discovery’ of the Angkor complex by French explorers, including Henri Mouhot, whose book, *Travels in the Central Parts of Indo-China (Siam), Cambodia, and Laos, During the Years 1858, 1859, and 1860*, was published posthumously in 1863 and 1864 stimulated worldwide interest in the ruins a little to the north of Siem Reap town. In the later years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Warrington Smyth writes:

“The town is very pretty, standing along the banks of the winding sandy water-course, and shaded in dense groves of areca palms. In the country round, dotted like green islets about the parched plain, the farm places are hidden in enormous bamboo clumps, and groups of gigantic palmyras, which flourish in the sandy soil; the more feathery palms cannot live in such arid spots, and in the town, where they are wanted for their nuts and the shade they give, a constant stream of water is supplied to them by numerous irrigation wheels placed in the stream. These wheels are ingenious contrivances, and are worked on the undershot principle, their huge fanlike floats of split bamboo being carried constantly downward by the current; as each one emerges a little hollow bamboo tube fixed to the circumference of the wheel is raised full of water.”<sup>27</sup>



*Figure 10: 'Irrigation wheel, Siem Reap' (Photo: Published in H. Warrington Smyth, 'Five years in Siam', 1898)*

<sup>27</sup> Warrington Smyth, 1898, vol. 2, p.228.

Aymonier suggests that the limits of the town were formed by two ancient monuments – Wat Athvea to the south and Wat Preah Enkosei to the north, enclosing a distance along the Siem Reap river of some 5.4 kilometres. Even today these limits still correspond to the principal north-south axis, whereas the town has extended in an east-west direction along National Route no. 6.



*Figure 11: Waterwheels in the Siem Reap river south of the town along the road to Phnom Krom, 2003 (Photos: the author)*



*Figure 12: River view, Siem Reap, 1902  
(Photo: National Museum of Cambodia)*

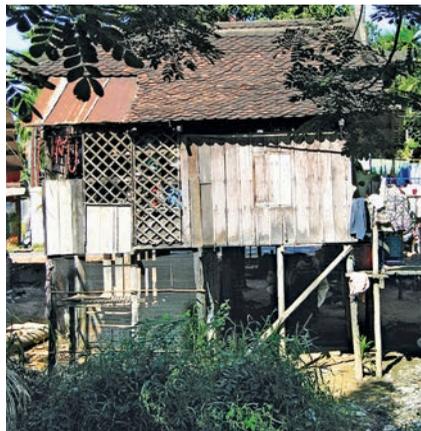
*Siem Reap: Then and Now*



*Figure 13: Siem Reap village and river, 1912 (Photo: National Museum of Cambodia - enhanced)*



*Figure 14: Siem Reap village and wooden bridge, 1912 (Photos: National Museum of Cambodia - enhanced)*



*Figure 15: Khmer house on the Siem Reap River, 2003 (Photo: the author)*

Aymonier also mentions the peculiarity of a wooden bridge spanning the Siem Reap river possibly seen in the 1912 photographs, “The two banks are linked by a wooden bridge, of which the roadway opens to let the barges pass during the high waters.”<sup>28</sup>

## Water Resources

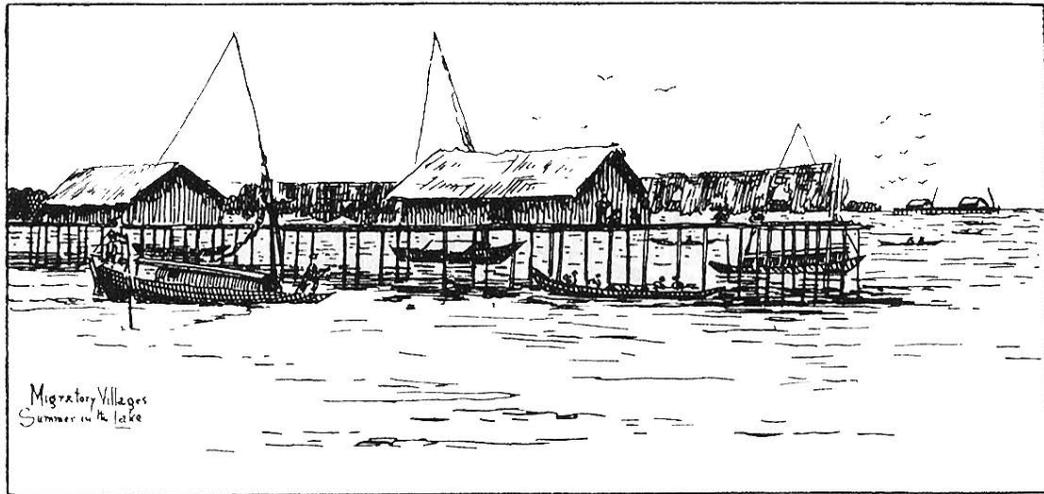


Figure 16: 'Migratory villages, summer in the lake' (Photo: Published in H. Warrington Smyth, *Five years in Siam*, 1898)

The tourist potential of Siem Reap was soon realised with arrival by water one of the favoured methods of reaching the monuments. Published in 1898, Warrington Smyth's account of arrival by boat rather surprisingly does not differ greatly to that of today.

“A solitary bare hill<sup>29</sup> marks the entrance to Siemrap, at the northern end of the lake; but its actual mouth, screened by the tree trunks, is only made visible by a beacon on a tree. The klong is a muddy winding ditch scarcely 30 feet in width, which suffices to take a boat through the belt of swampy forest to terra firma. ... we rode over the eleven miles of plain to the little town of Siemrap upon trotting bullock-carts called K'ta, which are peculiar to the neighbourhood.”<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Aymonier, Paris, 1901 translated by Walter E.J. Tips, p.211.

<sup>29</sup> The author is almost certainly referring to Phnom Krom.

<sup>30</sup> Warrington Smyth, 1898, vol. 2, p.227.



*Figure 17: Tourist Boats near Phnom Krom, Siem Reap, 1912 (Photo: National Museum of Cambodia)*

An ancient inscription from Bat Chum ascribes a certain sanctity to the waters of the Siem Reap river by stating that “with the exception of the sacrificial priest, no-one may bathe in the waters ... born at the summit of the holy mountain of Mahendra’, while an 11<sup>th</sup>-century inscription at Kbal Spean describes it as the ‘torrent of Rudra, river of Siva, this Ganga.” In another reference, the legendary ruler Preah Thong is cured of leprosy by the holy waters of the Siem Reap river identifying him with the equally legendary Khmer Leper King (*Sdach Kanlong*).<sup>31</sup>

More recently, the ecological habitats associated with the Tonle Sap Lake – an enormous body of water south of the town, have drawn naturalists and scientists to study its wildlife. This lake regulates a flow of water that reverses the Tonle Sap river and ultimately feeds into the Mekong river at Phnom Penh. The lake itself is an important breeding ground for fish, a major source of protein in the Cambodian diet. Flooded forest wetlands have become a focus for eco-tourism aficionados. The world-renowned ‘Water’ or ‘Boat Festival’ usually held in the later months of the year celebrates the almost magical reversal of water flow in the Tonle Sap river.

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<sup>31</sup> Quoted from notes in *Cambodian Buddhism*, Ian Harris, Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai, 2006.

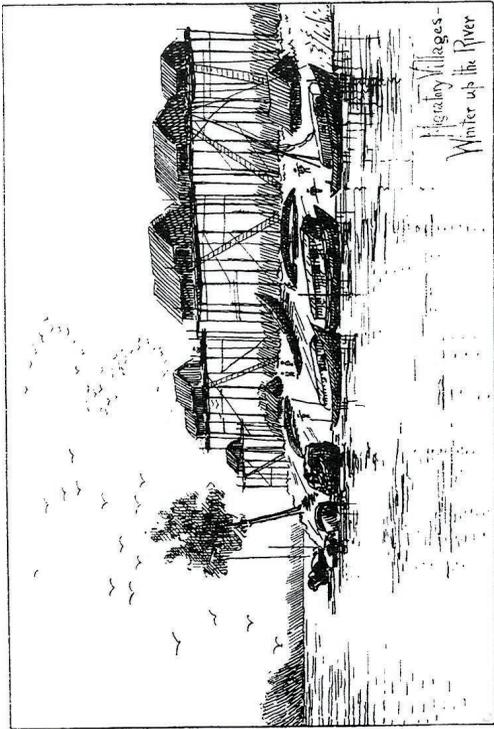


Figure 18: 'Migratory villages, winter up the river' (Photo: Published in H. Warrington Smyth, *Five years in Siam*, 1898)

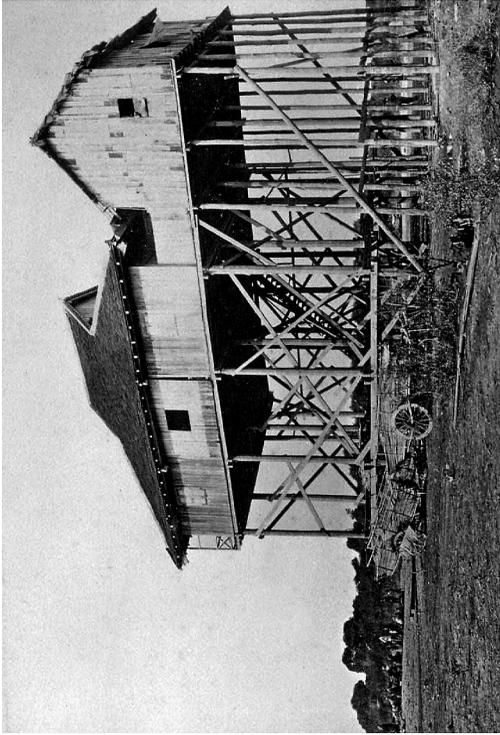


Figure 19: Cambodian house on high stilts near the Tonle Sap, (n.d.) (Photo: National Museum of Cambodia)

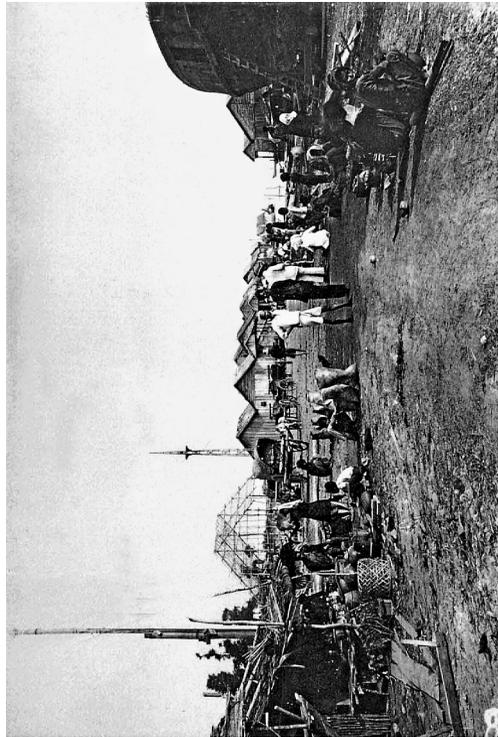


Figure 20: Cambodian fishing village (Tonle Sap?), (n.d.) (Photo: National Museum of Cambodia)

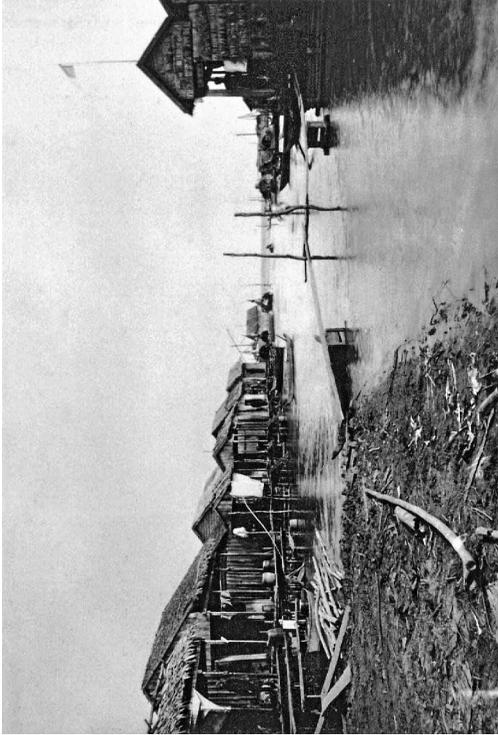


Figure 21: Cambodian fishing village (Tonle Sap?), (n.d.) (Photo: National Museum of Cambodia)

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Warrington Smyth discusses the lake at length through the cycle of seasons on a voyage from Battambang to Siem Reap:

“But the queerest of things about the district are the fishing villages, which migrate as the waters recede to the middle of the lake, returning when the floods begin to rise again to the more secure banks of the rivers. Needless to say they are of very light construction - chiefly grasses and bamboos, and they stand on high piles above the surrounding mosquito-breeding scrub. The lake itself cannot be said to have a shore line; its place is taken by a dense growth of low amphibious aquatic forest growing in the thick mud. In the flood season, when the lake has a depth of over three fathoms,<sup>32</sup> the greater part of this forest is practically submerged for many miles inland. In the low-water season the greater part of the lake is only three feet deep, and then the far line of the forest shows up on the horizon like a range of low dark cliffs. At this time the villages inland take suddenly to pieces, and travel in unshipshape craft down the rivers to the lake, where in a few days they rise again on their stilts, a mile or two, or more, from the forest marge, and in course of time become the scene of much industry, net-drying and fish-curing, and the centre of hosts of wheeling birds and crowding boats. In a few months the water is thick and foul, emitting unpleasant odours, and laden with the refuse of the fishing industry. The heavy squalls which precede the rains warn the inhabitants of the swaying villages to retire; a few boats get swamped, and the crews get out and walk to the nearest group of piles. Then as the waters rise, the villages are packed up, the boats seek the river mouths, the birds fly inland, and the dirty oily expanse of water does its duty once more as the safety-valve of the Me Kawng<sup>33</sup>. The lake appears to be silting up at the rate of several inches a year; the result in the future will probably be wider inundation and deeper channels as the bottom rises and the escaping waters have to erode their way to the Me Kawng...”<sup>34</sup>



*Figure 22: Man holding fish (Tonle Sap?), (n.d.) (Photo: National Museum of Cambodia)*

<sup>32</sup> A fathom is a measurement of the depth of water equal to six feet or 1.8 metres.

<sup>33</sup> Mekong.

<sup>34</sup> Warrington Smyth, 1898, vol. 2, pp.225-226.



*Figure 23: Siem Reap and river, 1902 (Photo: National Museum of Cambodia)*

## **Developments: From the Colonial Period to the Sixties**

It was not until 1907, when the province of Siem Reap (together with those of Battambang and Sisophon) was formally returned to Cambodia following annexation by the Siamese, that the French colonial administration began to be actively involved in the affairs of the town. Writers of the early years note a distinct Thai presence (from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century) and the Chinese market area (Psah Chas) that developed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century:<sup>35</sup>

“There are half a dozen small stores, containing a few piece goods and coloured yarns, and a little ironware imported by way of Bangkok; Saigon goods are voted too expensive by the peasantry of Siemrap. The Talat, or market, is fairly stocked with native fruits, but there is no lively exchange even in these commodities.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> One of a series of Chinese shophouse rows bears the date of ‘1920’ on a roof finial.

<sup>36</sup> Warrington Smyth, 1898, vol. 2, p.228.

Traces of wall paintings in the main hall of Wat Bo attest to the influences of Chinese, Thai and French culture<sup>37</sup> while a few faded signs and typical shop-house architecture in the vicinity of the ‘Old Market’ mark the commercial presence of the Chinese. The third force that exerted itself on the later development of the town was, of course, that of the French colonial presence. Exemplified by a system of consuls and residents, and the scholarly staff of the Ecole Française d’Extrême-Orient, this infrastructure provided much of the expertise to oversee the conservation and restoration of the Angkor complex in addition to managing and planning the emerging town itself.

By the 1930s Siem Reap had its complement of colonial administrative buildings and those dedicated to tourism - the Grand Hotel d’Angkor was already catering to guests in the 1932-1933 season. The extensive gardens in front of the Grand Hotel (now altered from their original layout) were first planned and planted between 1936 and 1937. Subsequent transformations occurred in the 1960s and the 1990s with its present form completed to celebrate the reopening of ‘the Grand’ by Raffles International in 1997.

In 1928, a small art deco-style concrete bridge that is still in use today, had been constructed to carry vehicular traffic on the main road. The ‘Bridge of the Sahachivins’, across from the Old Market at the opposite end of the city was constructed in 1965 during the Sangkum Reastr Niyum period.

A modern courthouse built in 1958 was designed by Cambodian architect Seng Suntheng and after recent renovations was still in use until relatively recently, but land deals have since seen the site privatised.

Earlier, the need to provide accommodation for visitors was met by the Bungalow, or *Auberge des Temples* that was situated almost immediately opposite Angkor Wat.<sup>38</sup> Other hotels in the town included *The New Siem Reap Hotel*, and the *Hotel de la Paix*.<sup>39</sup> By 1963, the *Villa Princièrè* was completed to provide accommodation for then Head of State, Prince Norodom Sihanouk.<sup>40</sup> In the 1970s a spectacularly modern, yet wonderfully understated Angkor Hotel

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<sup>37</sup> The Wat Bo wall-paintings show a Chinese merchant in a row of shophouses smoking opium and several other Chinese in isolated scenes. Semi-divine personages in palaces and their counterparts in more earthly abodes are depicted with a combination of Cambodian and Thai features and dress. Foreign European nationals and French military officers and men are shown in several scenes. Aymonier in 1901 mentions “The population is Khmer, but one also meets Siamese, Chinese and Annamites.”

<sup>38</sup> The Bungalow functioned from c.1908 until it was damaged by shells and fighting in the 1970s.

<sup>39</sup> Both these buildings were recently demolished (late 1990s-2003). In 2005 a new Hotel de la Paix opened on the same site and a completely new version of the former Stung Siem Reap Hotel also opened on its former site.

<sup>40</sup> In the mid-60s, shortly following completion the *Villa Princièrè* was operated by SOKHAR (*Société Khmère des Auberges Royales*). Presently this elegant complex has been fully restored by the Aman Resort Group and is now managed as ‘Amansara’.

designed by French architect Claude Bach, was constructed directly west of Angkor Wat and slightly to the north of the road to the airport. This hotel, never opened, was also damaged in the mid 70s then pillaged for materials.<sup>41</sup>

The Siem Reap Airport was launched in 1963 by the opening of Airport no. 1 (the V.I.P. Pavilion) by renowned Cambodian architect, Vann Molyvann. Although badly mutilated with none of its original Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired jutting glass panels, it is still recognisable in outline from the landing strip and now utilised as a terminal by military aircraft. The second stage of the airport was a large terminal completed in 1968 with Chinese Funds. This building was demolished recently to make way for a new terminal building.

Sixties periodicals record that, “Approximately 320 km from Phnom Penh, and accessible



*Figure 24: Airport no. 1 (the V.I.P. Pavilion) by architect, Vann Molyvann, 1963 (Photo: Vann Molyvann)*

by road via Kompong Thom, Siem Reap remains a picturesque, unassuming haven surrounded by large productive areas devoted primarily to rice cultivation, the provincial capital in a province of 15,950 square kilometres.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> The site now is just discernable. Local villagers demolished the foundations by hand to extract the cement fill.

<sup>42</sup> Source: *Cahiers du Sangkum*, (figure from December issues) 1958-1961. The current area of this province has altered from the 1960s and now stands at 10,549 sq. km.

## Siem Reap into the 21<sup>st</sup> century

Today, the town can be reached effortlessly by air (a short 45-minute flight from Phnom Penh) and express bus or boat, a journey of approximately 5 hours from the capital. The major roads that link Phnom Penh with Siem Reap are now repaired, following years of social upheaval and neglect. Recent World Bank funding enabled work to commence in 1999 and completion in 2006, with the last ancient bridges undergoing conservation work. The fame of Siem Reap primarily stems from its proximity to the ruins of Angkor and associated ancient centres. The temples, water systems and infrastructure of ancient cities have, since their ‘rediscovery’ by French explorers, fascinated visitors and archaeologists alike. The present old sector of the town presents a contrast in workforce, architecture and a happy jumble of tourist facilities. Newer accommodation sometimes disturbs by its disregard for historic surroundings.



*Figure 25: Original shophouses (c.1920s) in present-day Siem Reap serving tourist needs as guesthouses, cafes & souvenir stores (Photo: the author)*

Life is measured by a softer, unhurried gait unlike the ambient jostle of noisy Phnom Penh. Flocks of bicycles carry morning workers into the town, with many ridden by dazzling, white-shirted students who silently glide past like so many egrets. The white and faded pastel-coloured endlessly colonnaded shop-houses under shared, soft terracotta tiled roofs line quiet roads that converge on the old market area. New versions of these timeless designs are, in places, being integrated into the streetscapes. Flower tubs overloaded with treasured plants balance precariously on 1920s cement balustrades nestling above balconies that almost brush the streets below.



*Figure 26: Many of the early renovated shophouse lots house local residents on the upper floors – with local stores, restaurants and souvenir shops below, 2007 (Photos: the author)*



*Figure 27: An example of newly constructed 'copy' shophouses in the vicinity of Psah Chas (the 'Old Market') housing a cafe & optician, 2003 (Photo: the author)*

In 1901 Aymonier categorically states: “Although trade is active, there is no public market in Siem Reap.”<sup>43</sup> However, by around 1920 the stately French colonial rows of Chinese-run shophouses were constructed bordering the market square at what is now known as Psah Chas (the ‘Old Market’).

<sup>43</sup> Aymonier, Paris, 1901 translated by Walter E.J. Tips, p.211.



*Figure 28: Faded and over-painted Chinese names on shophouses at the Old Market, Siem Reap, 2003  
(Photos: the author)*



*Figure 29: Roof finial with date '1920' Old Market, Siem Reap, 2003 (Photo: the author)*

In her monograph of 1924, Candee describes the market, the shophouses and products sold to foreign tourists in the town. Not surprisingly, the choice resonates with today's markets – silverware, silks and cottons.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Candee, New York, 1924, pp.200-204.



Figure 30: Silk skirt lengths, detail of silverware bowl on stand and cotton 'krama' at Psah Chas (Old Market) Siem Reap, 2003 (Photos: the author)

The old town of Siem Reap is rapidly disappearing and a city will be born in a fervour of construction that threatens to erase all memory of its past. Most glaring examples are the large, new hotels lining the route to the airport that pay little attention to traditional Khmer architecture, instead opting for a pastiche of bland international styles that maximise accommodation space. At times, traffic seems to overcome the small streets of the old quarter when larger buses and swarms of the newer 'tuk tuk' passenger vehicles arrive simultaneously. Urban problems based on antiquated infrastructure are now beginning to appear. Most telling is the general lack of resources for a city the size of Siem Reap. Roads, garbage disposal, drainage, water & electricity supply are struggling to keep pace with development.<sup>45</sup> The population is increasing dramatically to cater for the service sector, but there is little acknowledgment of their future needs. Where are the national resources? Despite the obvious importance to Khmer culture, there is no national museum (a private Thai-owned cultural centre is currently under construction), no national higher education available and a distinct, disturbing and widening economic gap is growing between countryside and city. A contemporary count places the populations of Siem Reap district and the province at 119,505 and

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<sup>45</sup> In December 2006, the Cambodian press carried a story concerning the removal of some 600 riverside dwellings from the banks of the Siem Reap river citing unsightly water pollution and offending the sensibilities of tourists.

732,111 respectively.<sup>46</sup> The modern town and province bear the same name. By comparison, at the end of the 19th century, Warrington Smyth records the town had a population of some 2,000 inhabitants, and the province with 10,000.<sup>47</sup>

Tourism on the announced scale of ‘a million plus a year’ is a delicate balance. The temples are already bracing for the onslaught. Short-term solutions to alleviate transport difficulties, possible damage and solve eco-tourist problems are suggested by the Council of Ministers at a rapid-fire rate - all with an eye on the tourist dollar. Sometimes it appears the APSARA Authority, responsible for the overall management of the region, is under siege. Long-term solutions with commitment are rarely sought. What does the future hold for Siem Reap?

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<sup>46</sup> Official population figures in 2002 provided to the Ministry of Interior by the Governor of Siem Reap: these consist of Siem Reap district (1 *srok*) with 76 villages and the province (*khet*) with 12 sub-districts (*srok*) containing 875 villages (*phum*).

<sup>47</sup> Warrington Smyth, 1898, vol. 2, p.228.

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