

The Western Top Temple's Stone Blocks

(Preliminary Introduction to the Inscriptions, Graffiti, Marks and Sketched Designs)

By Sok Keo Sovannara
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History and Research

Prasat Top Lec or Western Top temple and known as Monument 486 is located in Angkor Thom area, about 500m in the south-west of Bayon temple. It can be reached through the western gate of the wall of the Angkor Thom complex.

Western Prasat Top is not the original name given to the site. It was coined by later generations, and means "small temple in the west"¹. The current visible structures known as three sandstone towers², sandstone Buddhist terrace and laterite enclosure, have been primarily thought to be dated at least 16th -17th centuries, after the empire of Angkor collapsed around the first half of 15th century. *But after finding some Chinese white porcelain and some Khmer green glaze ceramics, Prof. Sugiyama and his colleagues have considered that the central tower was probably in 14th century, while the two other towers were a bit later*³.

Khmer people had occasionally changed from Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism to Hinayana Buddhism known as Theravada. Some of temples in Cambodia, especially in Angkor Thom area, had been temporarily changed and particularly added for accepting to the concepts of new religion.

Western Top is one of those temples. Historically, the evidences of remain structures indicate that there was approximately a former tower of a temple already constructed on the place where current central tower. The existed structure is a laterite basement that was covered by modulation-decoration sandstone wall of central tower. The former tower is thought to be built probably in 10th century, because evidentially according to the laterite basement structure and other sandstone elements such as pillars and four lintels confirm that it is similar to the style of Banteay Srei temple, which dates to 10th century or in the reign of the King Jayavarman V (968A.D-1001A.D). The groups of sandstone elements are very close to the elements of Banteay Srei temple⁴. But after a clearance done by Henri Marchal in 1924, an inscription was found in the south-east of the sub-basement of the north tower. There are about 23 lines of the text, while about 18 lines are visible⁵. The inscription was written in mainly Sanskrit and a few lines of Khmer, about an erection of a statue of Visnu and the foundation of the temple by a maternal uncle of king Yaçovarman, who named Çrī-Samaravikramam. This inscription should be in the reign of this prince dated between 889A.D-908A.D. This is a problem for dating the former tower or structure. Basing the inscription, there would be a temple constructed and a statue also erected during the reign of this prince (end of 9th to beginning of 10th centuries). But evidentially, comparing to the sandstone elements found using with the later sandstone central tower, it indicates that the former building seems to be built in the late 10th century. Finally, when after the former building collapsed, the 14th or 16th-17th century towers were constructed and added surrounding to the former remain structure known as probably the inner laterite basement.

¹ Nara Institute, *Western Prasat Top Site Survey Report*, 2012, Phnom Penh, p.14

² In his brief description in *Inventaire Descriptif des Monuments du Cambodge*, E. LUNET DE LAJONQUIÈRE wrote that the three towers were built by brick.

³ *Primarily, through the cultural layers of trench FA01, which was excavated in July 2007, nearby the north-west corner of the central tower, some white porcelain fragments were discovered inside the basic soil layers of basement of the laterite and sandstone basements of the central tower. According to these fragments, actually from De Fua kiln, in South-east of China, they consider the central tower is 14th century and two other towers are not so late from the construction of the central tower.*

⁴ Henri Marchal, *Notes Sur Le Monument 486 D'Angkor Thom*, BEFEO, Tome XXV, Hanoi, 1925, pp411-416

⁵ Louise Finot, *Inscription d'Angkor Thom*, BEFEO, Tome XXV, Hanoi, 1925, pp 298-410.

However, this is a big problem that needs more time to discuss about the progress of constructions of the former and newer buildings.

Western Top was primarily described and invented as Monument 486 by a French scholar named Lunet De Lajonquière⁶. Probably, he had a mistake with his description of the three towers of the temple. He wrote that the three towers of Western Top were built of brick. Surely, the three towers were constructed by sandstone and some laterite blocks. At that time, he also mentioned that there was not any inscription found at the temple.

In 1924, Henri Marchal came and cleaned up the soil and stone ruins around the building in order to check the plan of the temple. Fortunately, a 23-line inscription was found in the north-east corner of the central tower. The inscription was later studied and published by another French scholar named Louise Finot.

After Marchal, from 1940s through 1960s there was little scholarly investigation or research on the Western Top temple site.

From the year of 2002, the Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties (Japan) began a new project on conservation and restoration works at this temple, after finishing a research work on ancient Khmer ceramic kiln at Tani village site. In the same year, a draft topographic map had been done for the area around the temple and some collections were also done for some ceramic fragments remaining on the ground surface. Starting in 2003, a primary excavation was conducted in the south of an eastern Buddhist terrace, which measured about 3m from east to west and 11m from north to south⁷, in order to check the relation between that terrace and the outer laterite wall surrounding the temple complex. Step by step, the continuous excavations had been done for different places around the whole temple area in the aims of understanding and checking the stratigraphic layers of the soils and underground structures of the temple and eastern terrace. Till the end of 2011, totally 13 times of archaeological excavations were done around the temple site.

From March 2012, the Nara Institute cooperated with Apsara Authority began the restoration work for this temple. The project will be held during five years. Now we are under the removing work of the stone blocks from the southern tower.

Basing on our observation some blocks of the stones from the southern tower and scattered area contain some graffiti, marks and decorations. Some of the decorated blocks indicate that they are the reused blocks that were probably brought from any fallen temple. It is not yet clear about these graffiti and marks. However, this primary study is a part of our research and restoration works that can bring us to understand the process of the Western Top temple's constructions and its stone material resources.

Restoration Work and Stone Arrangement

The western Top temple consists of three towers and one eastern Buddhist terrace. Our work plan is to conduct the restoration work during 5 to almost 10 years. It was started from March 2011 to firstly 2017 and begun with the southern tower of the temple. All the blocks including the blocks from the complex towers and scattered areas around the temple are systematically recorded and invented separately according to the areas where the blocks originally exist. We recognized the areas for the temple complex as Central tower, Southern tower, Northern tower, Eastern terrace, Southern Scattered Area or Assembly South, Assembly West, Assembly North and Assembly East.

When we started to dismantle the stone blocks from the southern tower, the Alphabet S was used to recognize the blocks from southern tower. And then E, S, W and N were also combined with S to understand about the blocks from which side or part of the tower. For example, we gave the number to the stone from 001, so the first block from the northern part

⁶ Lunet De Lajonquière, *Inventaire Descriptif des Monuments du Cambodge*, Tome Troisième, Paris, 1911, p.74

⁷ APSARA Authority, Department of Culture, *Report of Excavation Work at Western Top Temple*, Siem Reap, 2003, page 1. (written in Khmer)

would be SN001 and so on. The layer of the stone blocks would be called from the upper part down to the lower part by using N to understand the number of layer. For example SN001/N1

The collections of scripts, marks and designs

A-Inscription

The first inscription of western Top temple was found by Henri Marchal in 1924, in north-east corner, during his clearance around the temple. Then it was registered in Khmer Inscription list as number K.576 and studied and translated by Louis Finot in 1925⁸. The inscription contains 23 lines including Sanskrit and Khmer at the last three lines. There are only 18 lines readable. The inscription was written without date, but according to the text talking about the establishment of a statue of Vishnu and the foundation of the temple by the maternal uncle of the king Yasovarman I (889AD-908AD), named as Çrīsamāravikrama.

The second inscription was found in 2012 during our clearance and datum point setting up in the south the eastern Buddhist terrace, inside the laterite enclosure, near the southern twin Sema stones. The inscription consists of a line written on the inner surface of a decorated stone as a tray, but there is not any date. Basing on the character of the scripts and inscription’s meaning indicates that it dates in middle Khmer period or post Angkor period.



Fig.1-dakkhine kassapo buddho

The Kassapo Buddha is in the southern direction.

Hypothetically, this sandstone object was made for storing something offering to the Buddha named Kussapo, who was in the southern direction. In Theravada Buddhism, four Buddhas already existed such as Nagomano, Kuksantho, Kassapo and Samanakottama.

We have found two other broken pieces of sandstone that have same characters to the first tray-shaped inscription. These blocks are recognized as number 3 and 4. The block number 3 contains only *pacca*(?) probably originated from *paccima* (west direction). The block number 4 remains only the last sentence of the inscription, as *kyamuni*(?), means the name of Buddha.

Basing on these three middle period inscriptions, there could be another block of the inscription for another direction.



Fig.2 bacca (?)



Fig.3 kyamuni(?)

⁸ Louise Finot, *Inscription d'Angkor Thom*, BEFEO, Tome XXV, Hanoi, 1925, pp 307-309

B-Graffiti

Graffiti is referred to the script or word that was written by the stone cutter or sculptor as the personal work or block, or sometime the different person who tried to make any mark of the stone block. Mostly, the graffiti have no meaning.

Primary observation indicates that the graffiti scripts are mainly found on the basement blocks of the southern tower from the upper to the lower basements. Separately, the southern tower was built on three steps of the basements; the upper basement consists of three layers (N9, N10 and N11); the middle basement contains six layers (N12, N13, N14, N15, N16 and N17) and the lower basement has six layers (N18, N19, N20, N21, N22 and N23).

Several kinds of the graffiti are found mainly on the wall sides of the stone blocks including *e*, *eka*, *era*, *ka*, and *ba(?)*. Some of these graffiti scripts are not clearly recognized. The word *eka* (Fig.2, 3 and 4) is from Sanskrit means number one⁹. Some other single scripts are the vowels and consonances that have no exact meaning (Fig.5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10), but probably the signs or remarked characters of the person who cut or made the stones. On the other hand, most of these scripts cannot be well understood as to which consonance. But these consonances look like the Angkorian period scripts than the scripts found in the three middle period inscriptions. For example, *ka* (Fig.11, 12 and 13) or *ba(?)* (14, 15 and 16) can be compared to the Khmer consonances in Angkor period¹⁰.



Fig.4



Fig.5



Fig.6



Fig.7



Fig.8

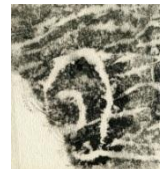


Fig.9



Fig.10



Fig.11



Fig.12



Fig.13



Fig.14



Fig.15



Fig.16



Fig.17



Fig.18



Fig.19-Bayon temple

Some of these graffiti are often found on some stone blocks of Bayon temple (Fig.19).

C-Mark

There are several marks noticed on the stones. These marks are not sure to be sketched originally when the stones taken from the stone quarry or the other period when different people who came to build this temple tried to carve on the blocks they moved from the other places or temples. Some stone blocks' characters, especially the remains of the decorations,

⁹ Gérard Huet, *Dictionnaire Sanskrit-Français*, 2005, p.78

¹⁰ Savaros Pou, *An Old Khmer-French-English Dictionary*, Cedoreck, Paris, 1992, pXIX

show that most of the blocks of Western Top temple are reused stones that probably blocks from the previous fallen down temple on site or from other temples inside Angkor Thom area. This is the problem for us to know where the stones of Western Top temple were from. However, these marks below cannot be described or interpreted about the meanings.



Fig.20 Fig.21 Fig.22 Fig.23 Fig.24 Fig.25 Fig.26 Fig.27



Fig.28 Fig.29 Fig.30 Fig.31 Fig.32 Fig.33 Fig.34



Fig.35 Fig.36 Fig.37 Fig.38 Fig.39 Fig.40 Fig.41 Fig.42

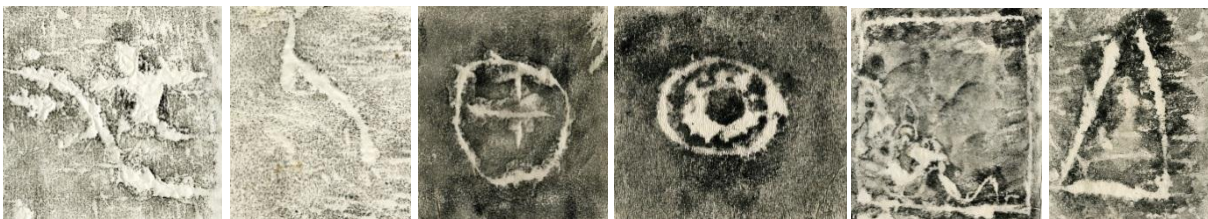


Fig.43 Fig.44 Fig.45 Fig.46 Fig.47 Fig.48



Fig.49 Fig.50 Fig.51 Fig.52 Fig.53 Fig.54



Fig.55 Fig.56 Fig.57 Fig.58 Fig.59

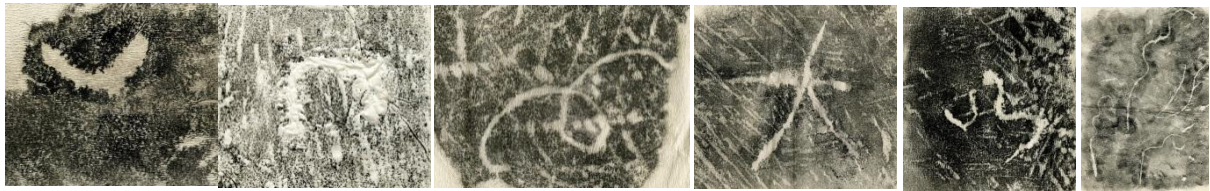


Fig.60

Fig.61

Fig.62

Fig.63

Fig.64

Fig.65

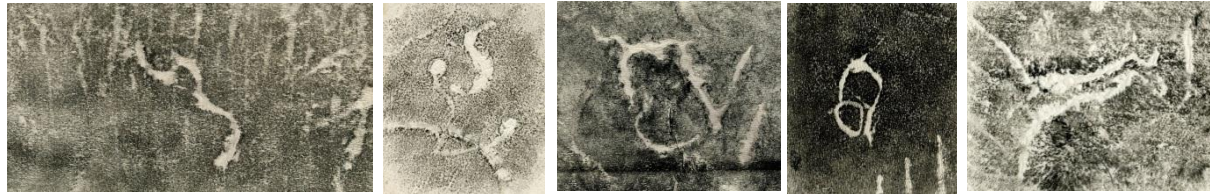


Fig.66

Fig.67

Fig.68

Fig.69

Fig.70



Fig.71

Fig.72

Fig.73

Fig.74

Fig.75

D-Decoration and Sketched Design

We found not only the decorated stone blocks of the southern tower, but also some of the central tower's sandstone blocks are decorated with praying-human image that were mostly put the decorated sides to the inner parts of the walls of the tower. The inner pillar's head of the eastern door, northern side, of the southern tower was arranged by a decorated block of sandstone (Fig.104). It is a line of lotus petals different from the other lotus flower designs of the three towers of the Western Top temple. One block of sandstone from the second basement of the southern tower, (SW086/N17), remains a good decoration of fire-vine with some human images inside the circle shapes of the fire-vine design (Fig.76).



Fig.76- Fire-vine design with human images

These two examples of the decorated sandstone blocks can be used to confirm about the re-utility of the used stone from the previous temple.

Moreover, there are some other sketched designs that look like the images drawn and carved in the middle period or in the other time when other people came and tried to sketch the image of the animals and especially the images of sitting Buddha on the inner wall of the

southern tower and the door frame of the eastern door of the southern tower. The animal images are mainly found on the wall sides of the sandstone block of the basements. We also found such kind of sketched images on the collapsed stones in the southern scattered area (or called South Assembly) and western scattered area (or called West Assembly).

These sketched images can be divided into three categories. One is belonged to the human or Buddha images, while another is referred to animal figures. And the last one includes the images of flowers, fruits and unknown design.

The human or Buddha images are found on the wall sides of the eastern door of the southern tower. A few south assembly stone blocks also have Buddha images. These Buddha images are not good looking figures. They were probably sketched by simple people who came for praying and wanted to show their supports to the Buddhism by making these Buddha images on the wall of the tower. But was that possible some of the Buddha images were sketched before the southern tower construction? Sometime we found the Buddha image on the basement sandstone block, for example a block SE01/N23 from the third basement, contains an image of sitting Buddha. The trace of the image is looked well with the decoration at the head area, but the sitting position is not so neat (fig.77).

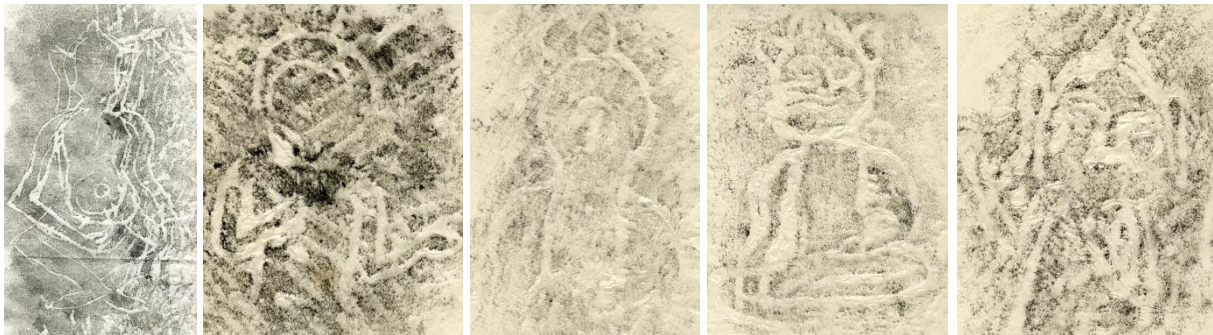


Fig.77

Fig.78

Fig.79

Fig.80

Fig.81

The animal figures are visibly looked like the images of dears. Some others are clearly the elephants. One elephant figure is found on a block of the northern wall, inner side, of the southern tower, with red color that seems to be applied by some red lacquer (Fig.89).

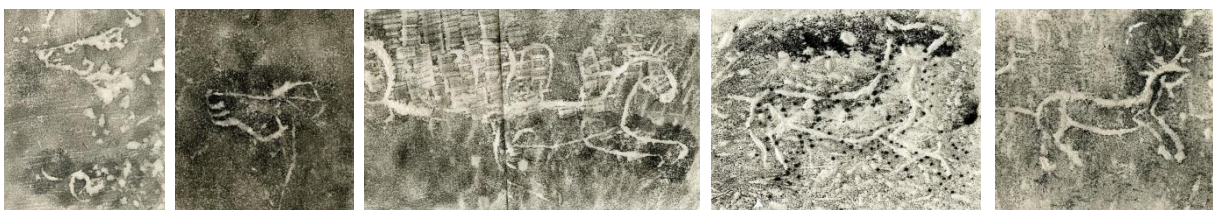


Fig.82

Fig.83

Fig.84

Fig.85

Fig.86



Fig.87

Fig.88

Fig.89

The last sketched images found at Western Top temple are thinkable figures are flower and fruit designs. Some others are geometrical motifs and unrecognizable carving. We do not surely know the meaning of these sketched figures.



Fig.90

Fig.91

Fig.92

Fig.93

Fig.94



Fig.95

Fig.96

Fig.97

Fig.98

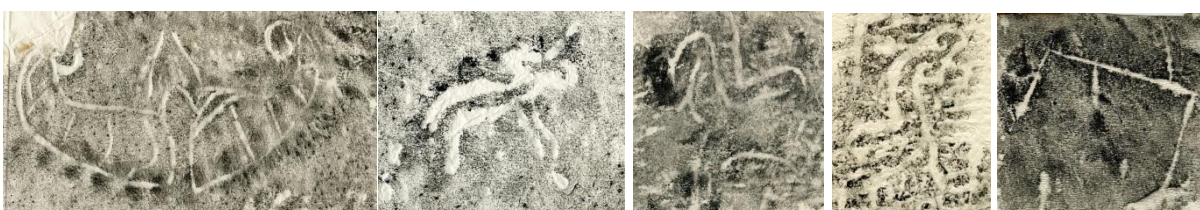


Fig.99

Fig.100

Fig.101

Fig.102

Fig.103

Summery and Discussion

This draft introduction to the inscriptions and the graffiti found at western Top temple is a part of our continuous study and research about the process of the constructions of Western Top temple. Previous researches concluded that at least two stages of this temple's constructions were done. Firstly, the inner part of the laterite basement of the central tower was probably and approximately was built in the late of 9th century by a maternal uncle of the king Yasovarman I, according to the inscription found by Henri Marchal in 1924. Secondly, the outer sandstone tower was added surround the former collapsed tower in early 15th or 16th centuries. At that time, two other towers, in the south and north, were also thought to be constructed. But basing on our recent dismantlement of the southern tower it is make us clear that the southern tower was additionally added continuously to the south by covering the southern stair of the central tower as its lower basement.

The study of the graffiti, marks and decorated sandstone blocks can reveal some information of the sandstone materials that were used to build up this three sandstone tower or including the eastern Buddhist terrace, as well.



Fig.104 Pillar head of eastern door of southern tower of Prasat Top temple



Fig.105-Block of the second basement of Bayon temple

The graffiti and the marks are not so important to understand the originality of the sandstone blocks, because there are not so many evidences of these items can be compared. But some decorated sandstone blocks found inside the southern tower and its basement can be assumed that some of the Western Top temple's stone blocks were probably brought from the Bayon temple, after some parts of the Bayon temple fell down (see the examples of fig.104 and fig.105). This is just my primary assumption. The further research will be done and exactly discussed for the originality of the sandstone blocks of the Western Top temple.

Reference

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