

## 2 ANGKOR THOM CITY AND TA PROHM TEMPLE

Our visit to Angkor Thom City and the Ta Prohm Temple was such a visual feast that once again my itchy camera finger went a bit berserk. As we approached the south gate of the city, Myrtle went a bit berserk wanting to ride elephants into the complex. Our guide patiently explained that there were too many of us in our group, that we would enjoy our tour much more on foot. I was secretly relieved. If I were going to ride on an elephant, I would most certainly prefer to be on the elephant itself, like the mahout, and not on that rickety-looking basket. But Myrtle remained disappointed.



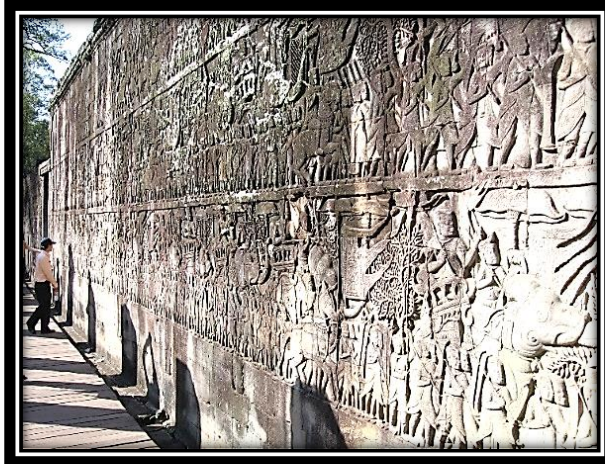
Our guide began his talk, “We are now in Angkor Thom City, the capitol city of the Khmer rulers, built in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, over a hundred years after Banteay Srei. There are lots of temples in this city, and they are built, like Banteay Srei, of sandstone. One of the temples here that is visited the most is the Ta Prohm Temple because of the astounding way the trees have taken over the temple buildings. We will see that later. You see here the demon gods holding a huge, long snake. Over a million people lived in Angkor Thom City. It was surrounded by a mote that had many crocodiles in it. The temples in this city are now Buddhist. At every gateway you will see the four faces of the Buddha-to-be. The Chan people of Chinese origin were enemies then, and they came from the central part of Vietnam. The sandstone used to build this city and these temples was brought from the mountains. It is soft and can be carved more easily.



You see here both demons and gods holding the snake. Many heads have been replaced, as you can see from the coloration. Everything was originally tan. When you see a dark brown color like the elephant, that has been dyed. The three-headed elephant god Indra is riding him. Animism is still strongly believed today in Cambodia.”



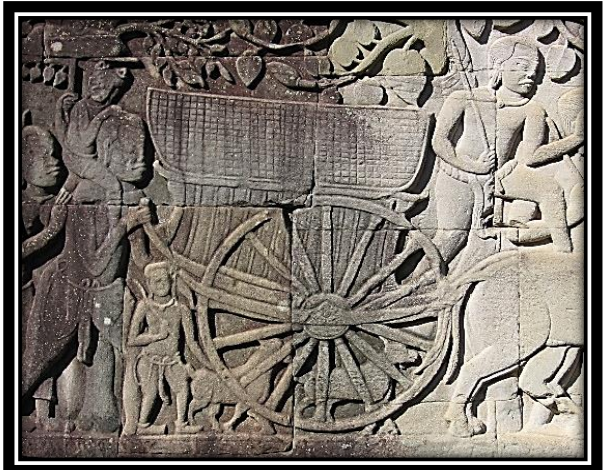
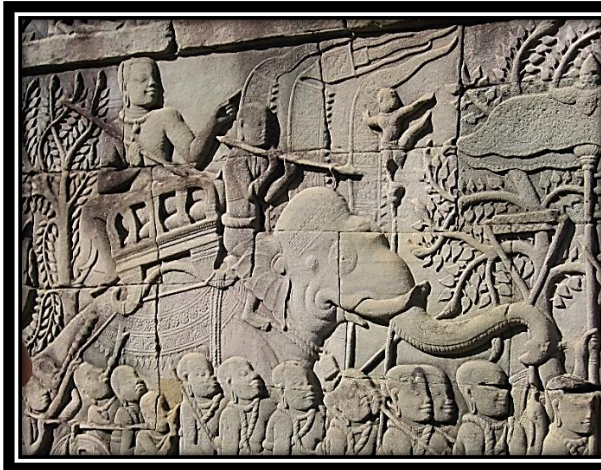
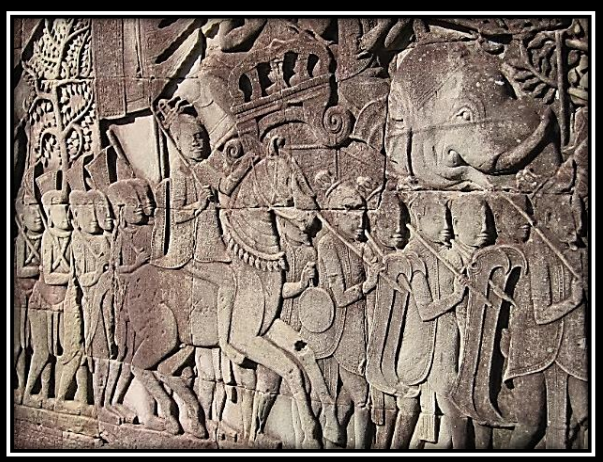
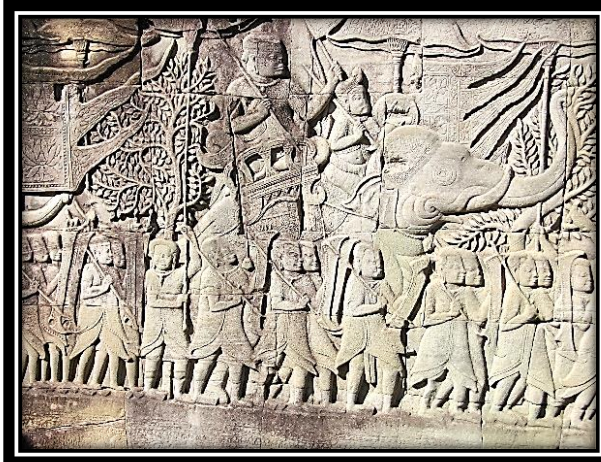




As we entered the temple from the east, we began to see breathtaking bas-relief sculptures on the temple walls. "This is the main Temple in Angkor City," said our guide. "Buddha died under a banyan tree, so the people just call this the Banyan Temple. This is a true Buddhist temple, but it is built on an old Hindu temple. We are told that the original temple was built as Buddhist in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, then became Hindu in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, then reverted back to Buddhism in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The



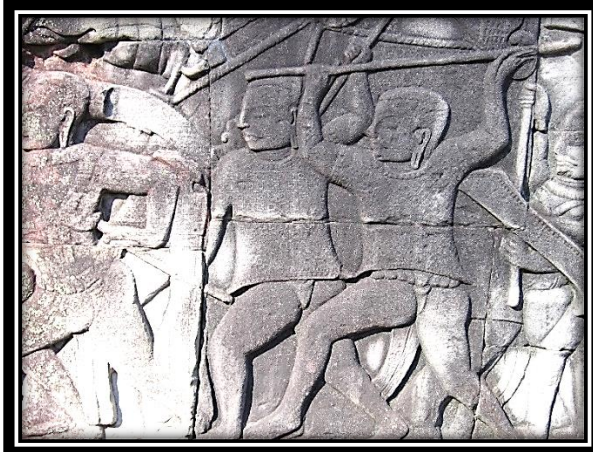
Buddhas here are from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. All Hindu 12<sup>th</sup> century temples became Buddhist by the 16<sup>th</sup> century.



Today there is Buddhism here. People who lived in this city when it was built lived in wooden huts on stilts. Those are gone now. The temple has 54 towers, each with four faces of the Buddha, 216 different faces all with different expressions. It is a pyramid-based temple with outer galleries, and the outer gallery walls are covered with beautiful bas-relief sculptures of the people's history, all



executed in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, nearly 1000 years ago. The French discovered this temple in 1816. In 1930 the first French archaeologists started excavating here and found much of the stonework in the ground. It would be a big puzzle to try to rebuild. A 1902 photograph shows vegetation all over the temple and stones all falling down, so most of what we see today is restored. It was all white stucco when it was new.





The bas-relief sculptures show cooperation between the Chinese and the Khmer even back in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. You can see ox carts, pigs, even turtles biting the butt of the previous walker. In one you see the people getting ready to sacrifice a water buffalo, maybe after a successful campaign. You see them cooking in a large pot. And you see the apsara dancers, their fingers bent back, and their toes. Girls and boys need to be trained from very young to learn to bend their fingers this way.



The next set of bas-reliefs shows the everyday life of the people. Lots of alligators, fish, picking nits from the hair, giving birth, cock fighting and gambling, going to war in boats, preparing food, blowing fire, cutting and polishing stone, using sandpaper, using banana leaves for shade.”

Our guide stopped talking then because we could no longer hear him above the noise and commotion of the Korean tourists who had arrived by several busloads and now swarmed over the complex. We all complained among ourselves how very rude they were, pushing you out of their way, using their elbows to make room for them, talking and laughing so loudly, darting right in front of you when you were trying to get a photograph. It was quite amazing and something new for our group to experience this kind of behavior among tour groups. Our guide said the South Koreans were on annual holiday right now. Earlier there was an Australian photographer doing a story on tourism in Cambodia, who had started to follow our group until our guide told him to stop. Now we were all saying to each other, “Let’s get that Australian photographer back and tell him to do a story on how rude the Koreans are.” But we made the best of it and vowed never ever to be such rude and



obnoxious tourists. Those were, of course, famous last sentiments. I quietly said to Myrtle, “Maybe we need to tone down our behavior too?” She responded with a huff, “What behavior? Are you crazy to try to put us in the same category with these people who push us out of the way and barge right ahead of us when they see we are trying to get a photo?” She had a point. I had been trying to get a photo of her standing in front of an apsara dancer relief when two Koreans rushed up and sort of pushed her away and then beamed at their photographer. I had to agree, that was quite over-the-top rude. I had never experienced anything like that.

Our guide did not know who is represented by this female figure. Myrtle promptly claimed her, picking up a pebble and placing it before the figure, stating she was Lakshmi, goddess of wealth and good fortune. I objected, telling Myrtle that Lakshmi has at least six arms. Myrtle did not waiver; this figure was Lakshmi. So I quickly placed my pebble and gave a lovely salaam, just in case. You never know, right? But privately I muttered, “This figure is not Lakshmi.” A man standing nearby said, “How about Parvati? She has an amazing figure and Shiva would totally dig her.” “No,” I responded seriously, “Parvati has four arms.” He burst out laughing and walked away shaking his head.



Our guide resumed, “On the third level, the highest, people still come here to practice Buddhism. You see the pedestals on which 54 Buddhas sat. Only the king could go to this upper level. The



Buddhas here are replicas of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Buddhas. The Elephant Terrace is very long, 300 meters long by 9 meters wide. When it was built, it had a wooden roof. On top of the Elephant Terrace was the king's stage, which led directly back to the royal palace, to the entry gate of the royal palace. On the three-headed elephant we can see where new sandstone repairs were made on the old original elephant trunks.”





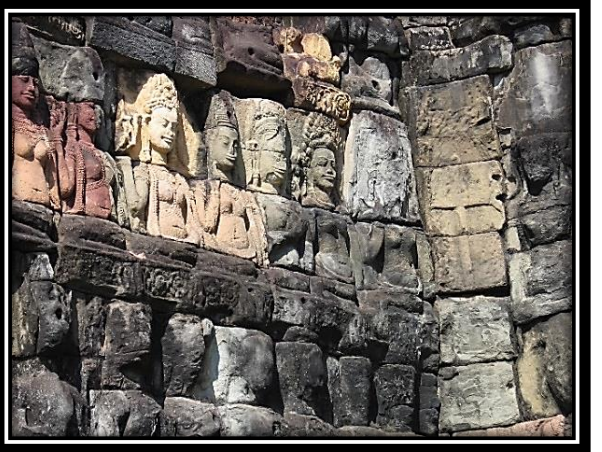
We saw figures of the god Jama on a wall with his concubines. “These are reproductions of Jama,” said our guide. “The originals are in the museum, with restorations. Jama is the god of justice.”



The Terrace of the Leper King elicited some stunned expressions among our group, and more than one sincere “Wow!” The intricacy of the carvings, their sheer number, the fact that no two of them seemed exactly alike, was mind-blowing. I noticed that some of the men in our group took quite a



few pictures of the Naga Princesses with their voluptuous figures. Yes, we finally had our answer to the mysterious goddess figure, who was a Naga Princess, not Lakshmi nor Parvati. A guide for another tour group was talking loudly to his group and identified these lovely stone women. Myrtle and I made a coin offering to the Leper King, on the theory that you can never have too much divine help in your corner, right? “When the first French archaeologists came,” said our guide, “they found the statue of the Leper King without fingers and toes, so they thought he had leprosy.”







Then we came to the Ta Prohm Temple, that had this informative sign posted at the entrance. And yes, dear reader, Ta Prohm totally lived up to its reputation. Our guide gave a brief introduction and then turned us loose, and from there we sort of just walked around stunned.

“Ta Prohm Temple is a Brahmin temple for royalty. 614 royal dancers lived here, and over 1000 priests. It has become a favorite temple for tourists because no restoration has

been done here at all, only a little reinforcement for safety. A lot of the temple buildings have fallen down and keep falling down as the jungle takes over. The trees, as you can see, are huge, and their roots now hold the buildings up. Most of the trees are silk-cotton trees, a few teak trees here and there. Part of the gallery’s structure fell down in this summer’s monsoon, which had a strong wind.”







“Look!” I said to Myrtle. “The Naga Princesses escaped destruction! The trees must love them.” She responded, “Of course the trees love them. Everyone loves the Naga Princesses.” She folded her hands piously over her belly and adopted the princess pose until I started laughing; and then she got offended. Whatever. I was so tempted to tell her something I had overheard: In Sanskrit the word naga means snake.” But I kindly refrained.





I think the reason everyone is so fascinated by the Ta Prohm Temple is that it is a stark reminder to humans of the reality of just how insignificant they really are in the grand scheme of things. Nature is far, far more powerful, and though it works slowly, it works relentlessly. I think that is what Ta Prohm says to people: "Get over yourself. You are only a speck of sand in the sands of time, and all those things that you think are so important mean nothing." It is a sobering thought.





**“Wow!”**

That was my only comment when we left the temple that day. Myrtle’s comment was, “I wish I had been here in 2001 when they made the movie *Tomb Raider*. I might have been able to meet Angelina Jolie.”

To be continued . . .