

What Happened to the King?

Recently the ruins around Angkor in Cambodia, long primarily of interest to archeologists and occasional tourists, have been brought to world attention as a result of war extension to the area. This new prominence brings to mind the legend of the so-called "Leper King" of Angkor told by Lee Huizenga¹, and referred to by Perry Burgess in his book *Who Walk Alone*², and gives occasion to raise a question concerning the recent history of this king.

The temple complexes about Angkor were built in dim centuries past (9th-12th centuries A.D.) by a people called the Khmers who have themselves long disappeared. In the city complex called Angkor Thom, near the famous Bayon Temple, there remains a terrace in which was found the statue of a king surrounded by statues of four women (Fig. 1). De Beerski³, one of those who was engaged in the excavations at Angkor described the statue:

The stone monarch is absolutely naked, his hair is plaited and he sits in the Javanese fashion. The legs are too short for the torso, and the forms, much too rounded, lack the strong protuberances of many muscles, but, however glaring are his defects, he has many beauties, and as a study of character he is perhaps the masterpiece of Khmer sculpture. Whilst his body is at rest his soul boils within him . . . He is not the wretched creature stung bitterly by the shafts of agony and mortification, but the wicked noble at the time of his greatness. His features are full of passion, with thick lips, energetic chin, full cheeks, aquiline nose and clear brow. He sneers, and never has ignominy of mind been more clearly expressed—the mouth, slightly open, showing the teeth, and the eyes seeming to gloat over the shame of a fallen and hated foe.

It is uncertain who this "Leper King" was. Recent investigations are conflicting and have attempted to link him with Javavarman VII, the last great king of Angkor. But the statue is said not to be a representation of the latter personage.^{4, 5} A legend which goes with the statue is

¹ HUIZENGA, L. S. "The Leper King of Angkor." *China Med. J.* **43** (1929) 1142-1143.

² BURGESS, P. *Who Walk Alone*. New York, Henry Holt & Co. 1940, pp. 223-225.

³ DE BEERSKI, P. J. *Angkor Ruins in Cambodia*. London, Grant Richards Ltd., 1923, pp. 170-175.

⁴ COEDES, G. *Angkor, An Introduction*. London, Oxford University Press, 1963, pp. 92-94.

⁵ GOLOUBEV, V. *Ecole française d'Extreme Orient, Memoires archeologiques*. Publiés 1926.



FIG. 1. "Leper King" statue. 1956.

perhaps more descriptive of the king and of local beliefs about leprosy. This is best told by de Beerski who worked at the ruins and heard the tale from Cambodian narrators. His account is at some variance from that given by Huizenga. The latter's account is probably second hand since he speaks only of two wives and two female statues beside that of the king. The legend, as given by de Beerski follows:

"It was at the time when the town had just been surrounded by walls when the first monuments embellished the wild forest, and when the king, who had come to the earth as a baby, rocked in a palanquin of gold resting on the wings of swans, saw all his wishes granted him. He was young and handsome, great in warfare and administration, but his heart was cruel. Everyone hated him, everyone except his wives, the only creatures to whom he showed the good qualities of his soul, he gave them many things they desired and was wont to spend hours in their company. Four of them, four sisters, were his favourites, whom he loved more than any others and whose whims were law. Their names were Tieya, Kramoth, Vodey and Roum-Say-Sock.

"One day they came to the monarch and told him that court life and etiquette weighed heavily on their shoulders, and that, if only he were to accompany them they would like to seek adventures . . . At first he mocked them,

yet, when he found out that they were in earnest, he himself felt ready enough to leave his pomp behind for some time and to wander away: a knight errant with his four ladies. So they secretly made their preparations and started out before dawn, leaving nothing that could betray their secret.

"The morrow found the land wavering between joy and sadness, some thought that now their ambitions could be gratified, others that the riots and revolutions sure to arise would bring ruin and bloodshed. Two famous generals claimed the crown, Vey-Vongsa and Thornit, they immediately hurried to the provinces friendly to their cause and called up their armies.

"Meanwhile the king and the four fugitive girls were enjoying the novelty of their escape. They passed through numberless plains and woods and, some two months after leaving Angkor, tarried in a town where they heard of a hermit, renowned for his powers of foretelling future events, and who lived in a grotto at a distance that would mean two days of hard riding. They set out. The holy man was dirty, but learned and as soon as the king came in his presence he guessed his rank and asked him to sit down on a jackal's skin while he would ask of the gods the enlightenment of prophecy. At last he spoke, after an ecstasy that lasted a day and a night: 'Thou wert a king, O lordly visitor, but never wilt thou be called king, thou didst many a bad action, O lordly visitor, but

never again wilt thou do another. Two great armies are going to battle, and thou alone wilt defeat them both, yet, in the midst of thy glory, thou wilt find the mud of life, also four pearls that are hidden therein.' The monarch was puzzled, especially by the last words, and continued his travels with Tieya and Kramoth, with Vodey and Roum-Say-Sock.

"At this development of the romance the Cambodian narrator, never excelling in concision, finds full scope for his love of anecdotes and recites to his marvelling hearers all the extraordinary things that happened to his hero and heroines, there is no end to the predicaments in which they fall and to the unexpected way in which they escape from all dangers. But having begun to give only the outlines of the tale, and being unable to record it word for word as it was translated to me, I shall relate directly the culminating events of the story.

"The king entered the camp of Vey-Vongsa and offered him his services. The general did not perceive his suzerain under the garb of an adventurer and gave him the command of a wing. In a memorable combat the so-called mercenary killed Thornit, after which he went over to the routed army. There, revealing his identity, he reorganised the ranks he had been the main factor in undoing, and then crushed Vey-Vongsa's battalions, the latter finding death at the hands of his late, disguised ally.

"Unlimited triumph was the king's, and, at the head of the dead pretenders' forces, he

marched in the direction of Angkor, to put once again the Imperial sword in his sheath.

"The hermit had said, be it remembered, that in the midst of his glory the prince was to find the mud of life, and it was at this time that the mud of life splashed and soiled his mobile figure. Hardly had he tasted the fruits of his glory than the nadir of his career was at hand.

"It came in the shape of an old hag. As the monarch was riding, object of the flattery of obsequious vassals, the woman in tattered rags limped along, seized the bridle of his charger, and before anyone had had time to frustrate her plan, the horse was rearing with a dagger thrust into its breast. The palfrey fell, and as the king lay prostrate in the dust the crone threw herself upon him. It was a queer struggle, that of the pauper and of the all-conquering sovereign, both rolling on the ground, the rags and the silk mingling in unprecedented fusion. The knotty arms of the woman were wound round the neck of the prince and her cheek was laid close against his. She was torn away and stabbed, an avenged victim who had seen her daughter defiled by the pleasure-seeking king years before. He rose to his feet, apparently unharmed, but the seeds of leprosy were penetrating his flesh for the woman was a leper.

"The malady alarmingly gained strength and soon the king's escort was reduced to his four favourites, Tieya and Kramoth, Vodey and Roum-Say-Sock. Instead of a state entry into

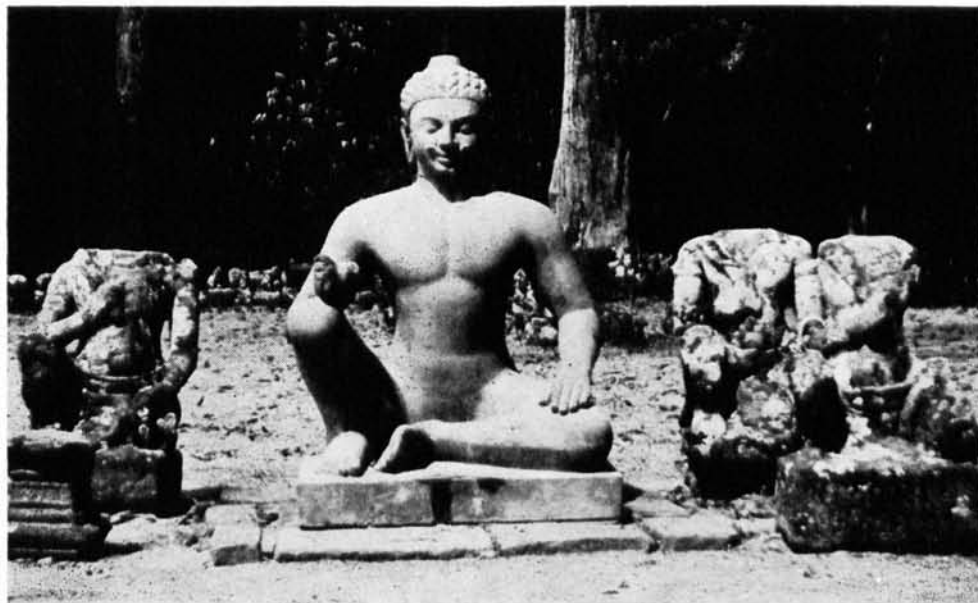


FIG. 2. "Leper King" statue, 1968.

his capital the miserable monarch passed the gate on foot and the inhabitants shunned his presence. Instead of a ceremonious return to his throne he was ordered to remain outside his palace, on the terrace that now bears his name, and there he was left to die of hunger and despair. The loathsome days he spent and the black desolation of his soul were unbearable, yet he would not bow to misfortune and waited for the end bravely, royally. The four sisters had been taken away from him and wept for their lost master, but their spirit was equal to his own. Laboriously they began to pierce a secret passage into the masonry of his prison. Finally, after many anxieties and efforts, they reached him, brought food and love, soothed his sorrow, and remained with him till he died, and then they themselves died, the four pearls he was to find hidden in the mud of life, the four faithful sisters, Tieya and Kramoth, Vodey and Roum-Say-Sock."

To this day the image of the "Leper King" has remained on his terrace. The secret passage is revealed to all eyes. Gold leaves have been pasted on the statue's

forehead and occasionally it sees a village girl who has come to pray.

Figure 1 is a photograph taken in 1956 and shows the statue of the king and his wives. Remarkably the ravages of time had created weathering effects on extremities in a pattern like the common distribution of lesions in leprosy. In 1968 one of us (F.M.S.) had the opportunity to visit the terrace of the king and made Figure 2. Clearly the wives are the same as in the 1956 photograph. But the king has changed. His "lesions" have disappeared and a rejuvenated figure stands in the place of the one from antiquity. Did someone conclude that with the advent of effective therapy for leprosy, a new, lesion-less figure was indicated? Did someone decide that the original should be in a museum? Did some private owner obtain possession?

What happened to the king?

—OLAF K. SKINSNES, M.D.

FREDRIKKE M. SKINSNES, B.A.