

CAMBODIA

Temple of Preah Vihear

The Temple of Preah Vihear, consecrated to Shiva and situated on the edge of a plateau dominating the northern plain of Cambodia, dates back to the first half of the 11th century AD. This masterpiece of Khmer architecture, inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2008, combines a series of sanctuaries along an axis of more than 800 m. The temple, parts of which have collapsed in the course of the centuries, whereas other parts have been well preserved, has kept its authenticity in an excellent way. In the past decades, for the various temples at the site of Angkor experts from several countries have chosen a pluralistic approach concerning the use of traditional and modern methods. In contrast, the secluded temple of Preah Vihear has so far been spared major interventions, such as consolidation measures in reinforced concrete or measures that include “dismantling” in combination with completion or partial reconstruction. There is no doubt that certain parts – dangerous deformations, stone blocks threatening to fall down, etc – need to be consolidated for the safety of visitors. This also includes reliefs fallen to the ground which for conservation reasons ought to be reassembled and returned to their original position. However, by and large in this particular case it would be advisable to limit the measures to the most urgent consolidation measures and repairs, – by no means a total dismantling and rebuilding. The undersigned visited the site on 12 December 2006 together with representatives of UNESCO and saw the largely authentic condition of the ruins and an undisturbed setting of the temple complex, including the “nature reserve” of the Cambodian plains (sadly threatened by fire clearing) as spectacular “buffer zone” of the World Heritage. At that time, we participated in the International Coordination Committee for the Safeguarding of the Historic Site of Angkor in Siem Reap.

According to the latest news that reached us during the printing of this report in February 2011 the temple is still seriously threatened by the long-lasting border conflict between Cambodia and Thailand. Based on a decision of 1962 of the International Court of Justice in The Hague the temple of Preah Vihear lies on Cambodian territory. However, it can be reached more easily from Thailand and should be open to visitors from both countries. At the beginning of February 2011, artillery combats occurred and the government on Phnom Penh accused the Thai army of having destroyed parts of the temple. Only a mission announced by Irina Bukova, Director General of UNESCO, could provide clarity about the extent of damage: “I intend to send a mission to the area as soon as possible to assess the state of the temple. World Heritage sites are the heritage of all humanity and the international community has a special responsibility to safeguard them. This requires a collective effort that must be undertaken in a spirit of consultation and dialogue. Heritage should unite people and serve as an instrument of dialogue and mutual understanding and not of conflict” (see article of 8 February 2011 at <http://whc.unesco.org/en/news/708>).

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Views of the temple of Preah Vihear (photos: M. Petzet, 2006)





