

The significance of “āçrama” system in Khmer Empire

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Abstract

In Khmer history, it seems that the empire took on the largest territory in the reign of Jayavarman VII (1181-1220) at the latter half of the Khmer Empire and in its prime. The inscription of the temple shows that the Empire fitted out the Royal Road and constructed so called “Gîte d’étape” which was like a station, and a hospital in each place along that road¹. At that time, the territory of the Khmer Empire expanded to half of Southeast Asia. We need to consider temple construction as part of the social system of reign over the huge Khmer Empire.

The objective of this study was to consider the role of temples that are called “regional bases” in a mutual relationship for the development of the Khmer Empire. Especially, I focus on the development and disappearance of the word “āçrama” in temple inscriptions to designate the temple “annexed building”, and consider the interpretation of these buildings through the latter period of Khmer Empire and the significance of Vat Phu temple. In around 1000 pieces of inscriptions, only 31 variations of words “āçrama” could be confirmed to occur in 59 pieces. Nineteen of them were identified with real temples and regions. On analyzing the tendency of location in each period, it was confirmed that they were located far from the centre, but in a major regional area along the Royal Road. Establishment of “āçrama” grew especially during the reign of Suryavarman I. However, use of the word “āçrama” diminished and decreased to only one inscription in the reign of Jayavarman VII even though it was the time of the largest territory in Khmer history. If temple formation is considered, most temples that have “āçrama” are “vertically-oriented” temples on terraced slope with “annexed building”, that would be the “āçrama”. On the other hand, regional bases of the latter period expanded on flat land into a complicated temple layout and “annexed building” had changed in size and layout. Focusing on temple layout and its location, it can be confirmed that “āçrama” existed as a religious and royal base especially if one examines the Vat Phu temple. This base would have been developed into a “Gîte d’étape” or a hospital under Jayavarman VII. The significance of “āçrama” was that it provided a connection between the centre and the region.

Introduction

In Khmer history, it seems that the empire took on the largest territory in the reign of Jayavarman VII (1181-1220) at the latter half of the Khmer Empire and in its prime. Temple inscriptions show the Empire fitted out the Royal Road and constructed so-called “Gîte d’étape” which is like a station, and a hospital in each place along that road¹. Furthermore, in entrance doors of Bayon Temple, the central temple of Khmer Empire, there is a collection of short inscriptions of name of King’s ancestors and regional temples that show “worship for King’s relatives and each regional base²” are gathered in the center of the Empire. It is suspected that the territory of the Khmer Empire expanded to half of Southeast Asia in this period. We need to consider temple construction with social system that how they reign over the huge Khmer Empire. Existence of “regional bases” is not clear on the relationship between social development of Empire. Previous studies on Chinese books and

inscriptions prove that there used to be a regional administrative unit³. Also, some of the temple inscriptions show boundary and division of temples and sacred precincts that would be a defined governance intention. As one of them, the word of “āçrama” is significance to represent sacred religious area and Khmer regional governance system. The “āçrama” means monasteries or religious places locates inside of temples in previous studies

The objective of this study is to consider existence of temples that are called “regional bases” in a mutual relationship for a development of the Khmer Empire and its governance system. Especially, I focus on the development and deterioration of the existence of words including “āçrama” in temple inscriptions, compare with temple layout to distinguish which building would be “āçrama” and consider the transition of these buildings through the latter period of Khmer Empire.

Methodology

In this thesis, to consider “āçrama” words as a consideration of the central – regional governance system, methods of this study are mainly three in the following way.

1. Distribution of “āçrama” location by distinguishing its words from inscriptions to consider characteristics of temple layout that have “āçrama” building. For the reading of inscription, I especially followed the translation method in “Inscription du Cambodge I-VIII” by G. Coedes to distinguish the Sanskrit/Khmer old languages of “āçrama” including words (ex. Virāçrama) by researching around 1000 pieces of temple inscriptions. To mapping “āçrama”, interpreter inscriptions of “āçrama” to consider the meaning of that word and guess its location from several related inscriptions.
2. Consider the historical tendency of “āçrama” development and deterioration by transition of numbers of words and its features. Using mapped “āçrama”, I consider the characteristics of distribution of “āçrama” in each period. By figuring out buildings of “āçrama”, features of constructive method of “āçrama” would be revealed, especially by comparison of their layout.
3. Compare the development of “āçrama” and the later transition of social system is confirmed by interpreting the appearance of “Gîte d’étape” instead of “āçrama”. By comparison of “āçrama” layout and “Gîte d’étape” location in some temples, there would be similarities and differences.

Distribution and temple arrangement of āçrama

Reconsideration of “Yaçodarāçrama” inscriptions location

In 889, Yaçovarman I constructed his capital in Angkor as a centre of the Empire. Same date inscriptions have been discovered in several places of the territory. From the translation, it is obvious he established about 100 “āçrama” that are called “Yaçodarāçrama”. The meaning of “āçrama” is hermitage or monastery in Sanskrit dictionary⁴. On the other hand, there is no confident of building that is considered as “āçrama” that some researchers considered it would be made by wood⁵. Dr. J. Esteve said in her thesis “Les Yaçodarāçrama de la région de Vat Phu” that “Yaçodarāçrama” inscriptions were discovered in

center and region of territory⁶. There are Yaçodarāçrama inscriptions in Kampot province, around Vat Phu Temple in Laos, and district of northeast Thailand. Also 6 inscriptions are found in the centre, Angkor (including Roluos) that these inscriptions are located on the center and edge of territory rather than the middle of the Empire. However there is no confidence of constructed location of “āçrama” form inscriptions. Also, there are some inscriptions dating 889 other than “Yaçodarāçrama” inscriptions, and some of them include the word “āçrama” in the same period. For example, Preah Vihear Temple has an inscription related to Yaçovarman I. Dr. S. Sahai expected wooden “āçrama” might be constructed in same period⁵.

Consider the temple layout which “Yaçodarāçrama” inscription is discovered, there are same characteristics on geographical location and layout of temple componential buildings. Some of them are constructed on top of the mountain or middle of the mountain slope, and have vertically-oriented layout⁷ to follow the mountain slope, also there is a huge Baray beside the entrance of long approach to the temple. Especially, Preah Vihear Temple is considered that Yaçovarman I conducts whole temple layout planning. By making “āçrama” on mountain with symbolic layout of temple to emphasis the sacredness, Yaçovarman I would spread his territory of religion and politics. However, this is just one of the hypotheses that it is not clear inscription location is equal to “āçrama” location. It is necessary to consider examples of “āçrama” inscriptions location and its temple layout.

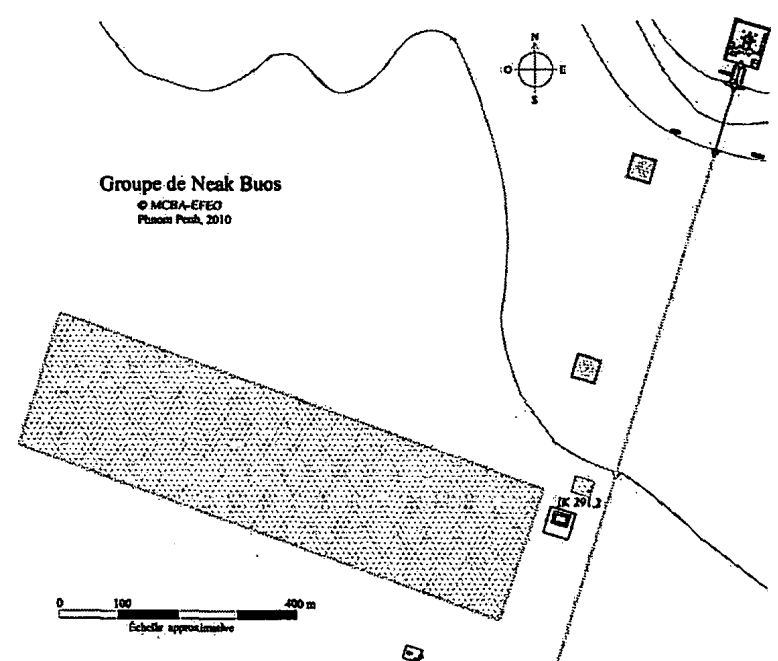


Fig. 1. Neak Buos Site Plan

Other “āçrama” inscriptions and its location

Similar to the word of “Yaçodarāçrama”, there are some examples of “XX āçrama” in Khmer inscriptions. For example, the word “Virāçrama” (Vir + āçrama) is signified in Preah Vihear Temple inscription. These “named āçrama” have the name of King, temple, or place in the previous word of āçrama. These inscriptions are widely figured from several period inscriptions. I focused on the intention of construction of “āçrama” and its tendency of location in Khmer Empire. Refer to “Inscription du Cambodge I-VIII”, I find out “named āçrama” examples. In inscriptions, we can find a word “āçrama” that not named, however it is not selected in this study because of obscurity of its location and intention. Also, like “Yaçodarāçrama” inscriptions, there are some inscriptions of same dating that show same contents and wording if there is no word of “named āçrama”. It is difficult to find same meaning inscription of same dating in the present stage, it would be a prospect for future study.

To see around 1000 pieces of inscriptions, I could confirm 31 varieties of words including “āçrama” in 59 pieces of them. The following Table 1 is a list of “named āçrama” and its inscription number (follow to EFEO IK number). () means supposition of “āçrama” constructive period and location.

Interpreting “āçrama” inscriptions, the existence of “pandita” and “adhayapaka” who take role in religious monks and teachers is confirmed. Furthermore, some of them take the name “Vrah Kamratan An” (higher monks) from King. Vat Phu inscription K.366 shows evidence that King’s relatives stayed in “āçrama” when they visited there from the center, Angkor. Also, Neak Buos inscription K. 349 records “āçrama” building was reconstructed in bricks that “āçrama” is certain to an existent building.

19 words of “āçrama” were identified with real temples and regions. Figure 2 shows supposed location of “named āçrama”. Some temple has 2 or 3 kinds of “āçrama”. Neak Buos Temple and Phnom Bayan Temple have “āçrama” in other period construction. Neak Buos has an inscription of reconstruction. There is a possibility of same building has another name in another period. Vat Phu Temple and Phnom Sandak Temple have few kinds of “named āçrama” in same period, which is considerable to compare temple components layout. Around Battamban area have many inscriptions of “āçrama” in Vat Ek Temple, Basaet

Temple and so on. It is interesting Battamban has an importance to establish “āçrama” in each period in this limited area. In reign of Jayavarman VII, there is a record of civil war in Battamban that prince of Champa came for subjugation⁸.

Location tendency of “āçrama” is significance by layering King’s Road of Khmer Empire that showed as gray line in the map above. Many “āçrama” situated along the King’s Road, also they are almost plotted in the edge of territory.

Temple layout of “āçrama” inscription discovered mainly in vertically-oriented layout temple on terraced slope. Similarity of temple components layout, temple “annexed building⁹” would be considered as “āçrama” building. Preah Vihear inscription K. 382 is graved on “annexed building” wall and says this “annexed building” named “Virāçrama” was a present for “pandita” (a higher monk). Many temples of “āçrama” inscription have “annexed building” beside of temple approach.

There are lots of “āçrama” which could not clarify its location. However, from location and temple layout of “āçrama”, it is considered “āçrama” would be situated on regional bases when King’s relatives or higher priests visiting to rule the Empire. Establishing them on the significance mountain, they become religious and political centers, bases in that regional division. However, regional bases of Khmer Empire shifted to complex large-scale layout temple on the flat plain. I consider this transition from chronological tendency

Historical tendency and transition in the late period

To analyze location of “āçrama” in each period, I confirmed historical tendency of “āçrama” construction and its features. Each tendency of Pre Angkor period and Angkor period is as follows.

Location tendency in Pre Angkor period

Pre Angkorian “āçrama” discovered in Sambor Prei Kuk Temple and Kdei An Temple. Especially, Sambor Prei Kuk Temple inscription says the word “Içanapura” and Kdei An Temple inscription have the word “Adhayapura”. “Pura” means small society like group of nations of Pre Angkor period³. Tendency of location is toward south of Tonle Sap. It is not clear “āçrama” have established by sovereign of each “pura”, there is still a possibility each “pura” has “āçrama”.

Name	Inscription No.	Location	Period	Date
Mangalāçrama	K.148	(Sambor Prea Kuk?)	Pre Angkor III	IV(+78)CE
Rudrāçrama	K.54	Kdei An → Ba Phnom		629
Çresthāçrama	K.44	Preah Kuha Luon		674
Çarvāçrama	K.940	-		VI(+78)CE
Kamvan Isanāçrama	K.726	-		VII(+78)CE
Yaçodharāçrama	K.95	(Battambang)	Yasovarman I	889
Içvarāçrama	K.314	-	(Yasovarman I)	891
Çivāçrama	K.191	(Pr. Thom)	Jayavarman IV	900, 932
Çirindrāçrama	K.187	Phnom Bayan	Jayavarman IV	941
Māheçvarāçrama	K.854	(Kompong Thom?)	?	947
Rudrāçrama	K.180	-	?	947
Yaçodharāçrama	K.958	-	Yasovarman I	954
Saugatāçrama	K.349	-	Yasovarman I	953, 960
Çivapurāçrama	K.266	-	?	966?
Vidyāçrama	K.674	Pr. Enkosei (Siem Reap)	?	968/982
Vidyāçrama	K.262	Pr. Enkosei (Siem Reap)	?	970/984
Devāçrama	K.263	(Neak Buns)	Rajendravarman	985
Içvarāçrama	K.344	-	?	IX(+78)CE
Brāhmanāçrama	K.863	-	?	IX(+78)CE
Rājendrāçrama	K.279	(Banteay Srei)	Rajendravarman	IX(+78)CE
Rudrāçrama	K.556	-	?	IX(+78)CE
Vaisnavāçrama	K.148	-	?	IX(+78)CE
Bhadreçvarāçrama	K.701	Preah Theat Toek Chha	Suryavarman I	1002
Vidyāçrama	K.89	-	Suryavarman I	1004/1096
Rājendrāçrama	K.814	(Battambang)	(Jayavarman)	1003/1006/1007
Çivāçrama	K.216	(Battambang)	Suryavarman I	1005, 1006, 1007
Sugatāçrama	K.216	-	?	1005, IX-X(+78)CE
Saugatāçrama	K.290	-	?	1005, IX-X(+78)CE
Virāçrama	K.290	-	Suryavarman I	1005, IX, -X(+78)CE
Virāçrama	K.290	Neak Buns	Suryavarman I	1008, 1015, X(+78)CE
Virāçrama	K.342	Preah Vihear	Suryavarman I	1018, 1038...
Yogiçvarāçrama	K.381	Battambang	Suryavarman I	1027
Devāçrama	K.212	(Bassat)	Suryavarman I	1036
Purvāçrama	K.205	Battambang	Suryavarman I	1036
Purvāçrama	K.205	Battambang	Suryavarman I	1042
Vidyāçrama	K.206	Bassat	Suryavarman I	1042, X(+78)CE
Vidyāçrama	K.206	Bassat	Suryavarman I	1042, X(+78)CE
Virāçrama	K.207	Neak Buns	Suryavarman I	1046, IX(+78)CE
Rudrāçrama	K.353	-	(Pre Angkor)	1047
Çivāçrama	K.382	-	Suryavarman I	1052
Rājendrāçrama	K.235	(Battambang)	?	1069
Devāçrama	K.449	(Nakhonrachasima)	Suryavarman I	1082
Yogiçvarāçrama	K.391	-	Suryavarman I	1094
Tapasvindrāçrama	K.881	-	(Suryavarman I)	(BS2377)
Mahidharendrāçrama	K.150	Roban Romeus	(Suryavarman I)	IX-X(+78)CE
Mahidharendrāçrama	K.152	Roban Romeus	(Suryavarman I)	IX-X(+78)CE
Rudrāçrama	K.150	-	?	IX-X(+78)CE
Rudrāçrama	K.684	-	?	IX-X(+78)CE
Purvāçrama	K.207	Battambang	(Suryavarman I)	X(+78)CE
Bhadreçvarāçrama	K.258	-	Dharanindravarman	1107
Bhadreçvarāçrama	K.852	Phnom Bayan	Dharanindravarman	1107
Nrpendrāçrama	K.258	Phnom Sandak	Dharanindravarman	1110
Virendrāçrama	K.397	Phimai	Dhara? / Surya II?	1109/1112
Kalyānāçrama	K.32	Phnom Chisor	Suryavarman II	1116
Virāçrama	K.194	Phnom Sandak	?	1119
Lingapurāçrama	K.475	(Vat Phu)	(Suryavarman II)	1136
Bhaveçvarāçrama	K.366	Vat Phu	Suryavarman II	1139
Purvāçrama	K.200	Battambang	Suryavarman II	1145
Vidyāçrama	K.298	-	?	XI(+78)CE
Narendrāçrama	K.485	-	(Jayavarman VII)	XII(+78)CE

Table. 1. List of "named āçrama"

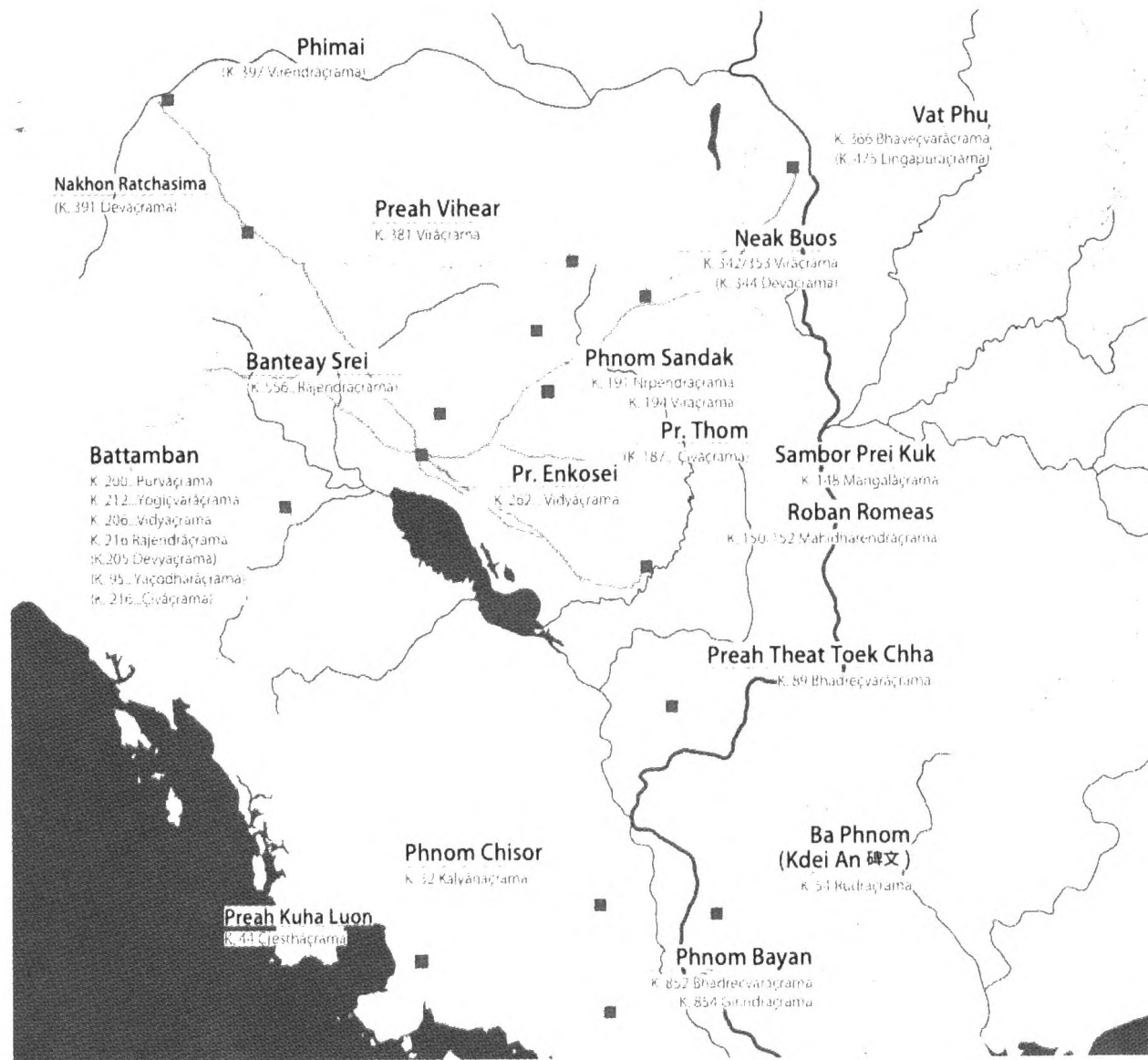


Fig. 2.. Location of “āçrama”

Location tendency in Angkor period

In the reign of Suryavarman I, more than 10 kinds of “āçrama” are found from inscriptions. That was a golden age of “āçrama” construction. Starting from “Yaçodarāçrama” inscription, it expanded in the northeast area of Empire under Rajendrarvarman, but after the reign of Suryavarman I construction of “āçrama” became of lower frequency. In the reign of Suryavarman II, there were still some kinds of “āçrama” but those located in distant areas diminished and decreased to only one inscription in the reign of Jayavarman VII although it was the time of the largest territory in Khmer history. Of course it may be interpreted that “āçrama” is not mentioned in inscriptions because the need and importance of “āçrama” had disappeared by then. It is related to temple layout of the time. In the later period, temples called regional bases were developed with large-scale and complicated components laid out as mentioned before, and only Phimai Temple has an “āçrama” inscription. These are suggestion based on inscription information but we may be able to ascertain more from inspection in the future.

Significance and characteristics of “āçrama”

Does system of “āçrama” as a connection of the center-region religiously and politically disappear after the golden age in Suryavarman I? This system slightly changed, however, continued until under Suryavarman II and then disappeared.

Construction of “Gîte d’étape” is often referred in the Preah Khan inscription as the greatest work of Jayavarman VII. They were constructed along some of the King’s Roads to connect regional bases. It is considered as an innovative idea of Jayavarman VII, although I believe it to be a succession from the “āçrama” system.

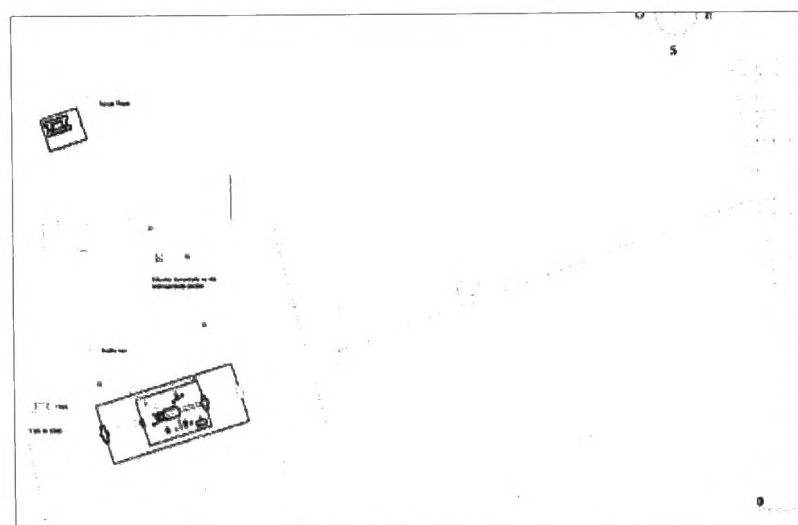


Fig. 3. “Annexed building” in Preah Theat Chha

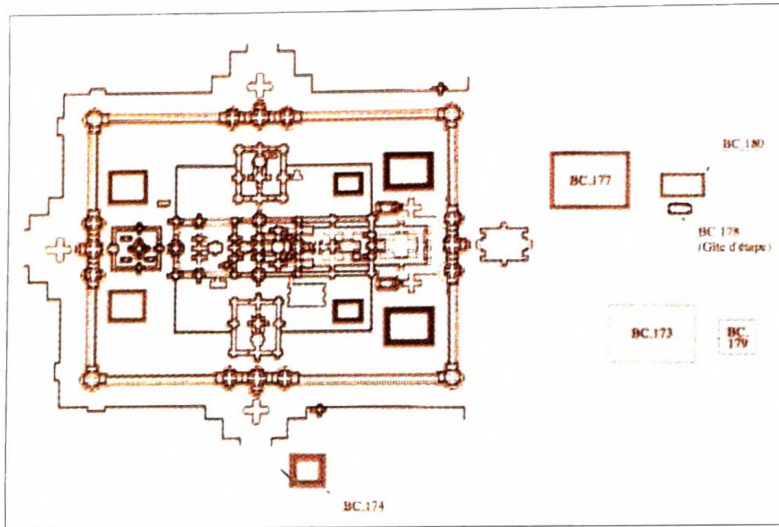


Fig. 4. "Gîte d'étape" of Banteay Chhmar

"Gîte d'étape" is not only situated along the road, but also constructed inside temple complexes. For example, important regional bases of the latter period that are Preah Khan de Kompong Svay Temple, Banteay Chhmar Temple, and Beng Mealea Temple have "Gîte d'étape" in the boundary of the temple complex, besides having them on approach.

This layout is quite similar to the "annexed building" of "āçrama", with a similar floor plan of a rectangular room, predominance of openness to south (and east), and sometimes a small Baray or pond. There are also differences in plans and constructive methods, which are components of rooms, materials. "Gîte d'étape" has a simple plan with one room (sometimes composed of main room and porch), compared with several rooms sometimes encircled by walls in "āçrama".

These similarities and differences meant that the transition of "āçrama" and temple location was needed with the change of society as an innovative system during the reign of Jayavarman VII. We need to consider the background of social change in examining architectural transitions.

Conclusion

Focused on temple layout and its location, it is confirmed that "āçrama" existed and developed as a temple "annexed building" for religious and political purposes in a royal, regional base. This central-regional reign system would have succeeded into a "Gîte d'étape" or a hospital under Jayavarman VII. The significance of "āçrama" was

that it was a connection system between the centre and the regions.

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