

Lost in Translation? The Mekong Mission of 1866 and the Plaster Casts from Angkor at the Parisian Universal Exhibition of 1867

1. Mouhot's civilising vision from Angkor Wat's central passageway

The pagoda of Angkor Wat and the ruins of Angkor Thom were not rediscovered by Mouhot, as one says. And there is a simple reason for this: they had never been forgotten nor lost. (Bouillevaux 1874, 131)

There were, of course, many accounts of the glorious temples of Angkor before direct French-colonial impact on Indochina. These included the famous report of the Chinese delegate Zhou Daguan from around 1300 (rediscovered in Abel-Rémusat 1819; compare Philpotts 1996, Smithies 2001), accounts from the post-Angkorian period (see especially Vickery 1977), Portuguese reports from 1600 onwards (Groslier 1958), a first plan of Angkor Wat made by a Japanese visitor in the 1630s (Peri 1923; compare Pl. IX.1), accounts from Cambodia as a tributary kingdom under Siamese domination until the mid-1860s (see especially Chandler 1973, 1976a, 1983; compare the epilogue to this volume), and reports from random, short European visits up to 1850, such as that of the French missionary Charles-Émile Bouillevaux (Bouillevaux 1858, 1874, 1879; see the introductory quote above).

However, it was the report based on the 1860 visit of the French amateur naturalist and anthropologically inclined explorer Henri Mouhot that was propagated by French historiography as proof that a French citizen was the first to 'discover Angkor'. Mouhot's report became a far-reaching, strategically exploited document telling Europe about Angkor and "using Angkor to popularise the French presence within Indochina in the Metropolitan opinion" (Dagens 2005a, 279). Ironically, especially as regards the extreme pride France later took in Angkor, Mouhot had spent many years of his early life in Russia, and his travels to the Upper Cambodian temples of Angkor (which from 1794 to 1907 was part of British-influenced Siam) and to the Laotian border zone were, after many fruitless petitions to uninterested French ministries, originally commissioned (but not financed) by London's Royal Geographic Society.¹ The colonial-expansionist movement towards Southern China via the Mekong River first gained momentum with the British in India and Burma to the southwest

and with the French in Cochinchina, a region including Saigon in the southeast of the Indochinese Peninsula. Mouhot's report on his three-week stay at Angkor in January 1860 was first published in French in the popular *Tour du Monde* in 1863, in revised form in English in 1864 under the monograph title *Travels in the central parts of Indochina*, and re-edited in French in 1868.² Finally, it was republished in both languages in 1989 as Cambodia was on its way to being 'reborn' as the youngest Asian nation-state under UN supervision and French leadership, and as the myth of Angkor entered a new stage of a global commodification through cultural heritage politics (see chapters XI and XII in the second volume of this book).

Overlooking for the moment the interesting variations in the different publications, the significance for this study lies in the fact that French-colonial propaganda and the mass media did not simply posthumously make Mouhot (who died in Laos near Luang Prabang on 10 November 1861) into the 'discoverer of Angkor' and a compatriot and hero; it is even more important and often overlooked that Mouhot himself formulated his architectural hymn to Angkor using a unique blend of a French colonialist and missionary rhetoric:

Ongcor [...] one is filled with profound admiration, and cannot but ask what has become of this powerful race so civilised, so enlightened, the authors of these gigantic works? One of these temples [Ongcor Wat] – a rival to that of Solomon, and erected by some ancient [*Oriental*, in Mouhot 1863, 299] Michel Angelo – might take an honourable place beside our most beautiful buildings. It is grander than anything left to us by Greece or Rome, and presents a sad contrast to the state of barbarism in which this [Cambodian] nation is now plunged. [...] European conquest, abolition of slavery, wise and protecting

¹ On the detailed context of Mouhot's involvement in the British interest in Cambodia and his private initiative, see Pym 1966, xi–xxii. His maps of Cambodia and the greater Angkor regions were never published and are until today stored at the archive of the Geographic Society in London (see chapter IX).

² A new comment was published by Chovelon 2001.