

CHAPTER THREE: EARLY EXPLORERS

The impact of the French presence in Cambodia during the first half of the French colonial project was not always deeply felt, particularly by much of the country's rural population. However, beginning in the 1860s Cambodia had begun to enter into the consciousness of people in France. Although they had not had an extended history in the area in 1863 when the French signed the treaty that made Cambodia a French protectorate, French travelers had already visited and written about the territory, often in the form of travelers' accounts in magazines and other periodicals. Nor was travel writing a new genre in 1863. The travel narrative had gained popularity in the eighteenth century as an adjunct to the Grand Tour. Travel diaries, guidebooks, autobiographies, and various other works of "heroic or mock-heroic"¹ aspirations were all produced with growing popularity throughout the eighteenth century, and on through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, through to the present.

It was during the early period of French colonization in Southeast Asia that the idea of distant places such as Cambodia, and eventually the idea of them as part of "Greater France," began to form. The initial concept, and for many people in the *métropole* the only concept, of Cambodia came through the writing of explorers, scientists, and geographers. A major part of the formation of these ideas came through popular writing, such as travel journals, stories, and novels set in distant colonies. Many of these were serialized in publications like the *Journal des Voyages*, while others were compiled as book-length monographs. All of them contributed to the "certain fascination" that locations

¹ Jeremy Black, *The British Abroad the Grand Tour in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), p. 3.

such as Cambodia produced for many French citizens.²

During the colonial period travel writing came into its own. Not only did travelogues gain a larger audience during this period, but the number of travelers publishing accounts of their journeys also expanded rapidly during this period. While some of the travelogues written during the second wave of colonial activity³ in the nineteenth century focused on travel within Europe, many of these accounts related journeys made in newly acquired or potential colonies. These travelogues were often amongst the first glimpses that reading audiences in countries like France had of the distant parts of the empire. The lenses through which these early explorers saw places such as Cambodia, and the way in which they subsequently wrote about these places, would set the stage for the ways in which the explorers and adventurers who followed saw and comprehended the same places. At times the earlier tellings of a location determined not only how travelers saw a place, but even *what* they saw in that place: later travelers came expecting to see certain features, buildings, or people, and searched until they had found what they were looking for, sometimes even ignoring what was incongruous.⁴ In this chapter I will be investigating the views of Angkor during the first decades of contact between Cambodia and France, and how the early European travel writers framed the monuments.

In much the way that Mary Louise Pratt delineates the “production” of “the rest of the world for European readerships at particular points in Europe’s expansionist trajectory,” the writing by French travelers “produced” Cambodia

² Meyer, 1985, p. 106

³ The first wave of French colonial activity had occurred primarily in the 18th century, and had focused on the Caribbean and North America.

⁴ This will become particularly important in subsequent chapters dealing with views of Angkor in France in the 1920s and 1930s, as well as present-day views of the monuments and of Cambodia.

for French reading audiences, creating a narrative of the country, its culture, art, and history through their writing.⁵ In this chapter I will be exploring the early “chapters” of that narrative by examining the published accounts of some of the explorers during the early period of the second wave colonialism. In this chapter I will be concentrating on three accounts from the 1860s, beginning with the published journals of Henri Mouhot, the man who is often given credit for “discovering” Angkor. The remaining two publications chronicle one subsequent mission: The Mekong Exploration Commission. Both Louis de Carné and Francis Garnier wrote accounts of that commission’s trip up the Mekong River into China. Garnier’s account also incorporates the notes on Angkor written by the commission’s leader, Doudart de Lagrée, who died during the course of the journey. A fourth member of the commission, Louis Delaporte, also wrote an account of the journey, however, his book is most notable for his drawings and engravings and will be examined in a subsequent chapter, although many of Delaporte’s engravings illustrated Garnier’s account. These “chapters” of the narrative form the foundational framework through which Cambodia would come to and continue to be seen by not only the reading audience in the *métropole*, but also by subsequent travelers to the area.

Henri Mouhot’s Angkor

One of the most important travel journals published during the early years of the French colonial period in Cambodia was that of the French naturalist Henri Mouhot. His collected notes and journals describe his journey to Southeast Asia in 1860-61. Although Mouhot was French, his papers were

⁵ Pratt, 1992, p. 5.

compiled by his brother and first published in England by the Archaeological Society of London, which had originally funded his trip to Southeast Asia.⁶ They would be published in France soon afterwards. (Figure 5)⁷

Mouhot passed several years traveling to and around Southeast Asia, and spent significant periods of time in Siam, Annam, and Cambodia before traveling on to Laos, where he met an untimely death from illness in Luang Prabang. Amongst the experiences which left a deep impression on him was his visit to the

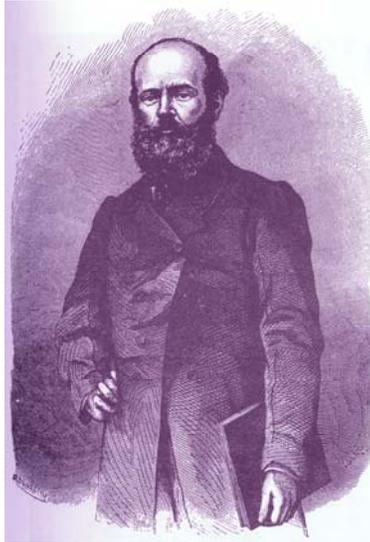


Figure 5 Henri Mouhot

temples at Angkor: three of eighteen chapters were dedicated to describing the monuments and discussing his thoughts, observations, and theories about their origin and history.

⁶ Both of the Mouhots were married to English women, and had connections in both countries, though in his brother Charles' dedication to the book he mentions that Henri Mouhot had difficulty gathering the financial support for his mission in France.

⁷ Portrait of Henri Mouhot from Henri Mouhot, *Travels in Siam, Cambodia, Laos, and Annam* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2000)

The remaining chapters of Mouhot's journals include discussions on a wide array of topics. Mouhot was primarily a naturalist, although, he appears to have turned his eye upon a vast array of interests over the course of his travels. During his time in Southeast Asia he is said to have translated Chinese tales gathered in Siam; worked on a manuscript, which remained unfinished at the time of his death of his zoological studies; discovered and collected a number of entomological and conchological specimens;⁸ written an exhaustive and detailed journal; composed reams of letters to his friends and family; and compiled a Cambodian vocabulary.⁹ He is also the man often credited with having "discovered" Angkor.

Mouhot did not name himself as Angkor's discoverer, but the perception of Mouhot as the one who'd first stumbled upon the temples was widespread. There are written descriptions of Angkor by Europeans which predate Mouhot's, including Portuguese and Spanish missionaries, as early as the sixteenth century.¹⁰ Abel Rémusat translated into French the thirteenth century description of the city by the Chinese diplomat, Chou Da Guan, in 1819.¹¹ The monuments were reported by a French botanist named Pierre Diard who worked in the city of Touraine (Danang), and who visited the temples between 1821 and 1824.¹² Another Frenchman named C.-E. Bouillevaux wrote of the temples in his works, *Voyage dans l'Indochine (1848-1856)*, and *Ma visite aux ruines cambodgiennes en 1850*, a few years before Mouhot's journals were

⁸ He wrote descriptions of each of these specimens before having them deposited in Museums in London and Paris.

⁹ Mouhot, 2000, Preface.

¹⁰ For example, see Gabriel Quiroga de San Antonio, 1998. Originally published 1604, this volume relates the travels of Father Quiroga de San Antonio in the closing years of the sixteenth century.

¹¹ Francis Garnier, *Travels in Cambodia and Part of Laos The Mekong Exploration Commission Report (1866-1968) Volume I* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1996) p. 27.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 330.

published.¹³ In Mouhot's own writings he clearly states that he was guided through the jungle to the temple by the Abbé E. Silvestre of Battambang, who clearly must have known of the temples' existence or would not have been much use as a guide. And finally, and most significantly, there remains the fact that the temples were in daily use by the monks who lived around them and continued to use them as a sacred site, and were also known by the Cambodians who lived in the area.

Despite the picture that emerges of a place that was not hidden from the human world, the romantic notion of a "lost" civilization was from the beginning a key element of the story to its Western readers. The connection of Mouhot to the "discovery" of Angkor was—and to a certain extent remains—persistent.¹⁴ This role was established for Mouhot in part because of the posthumous biography that was included as a preface to the publication of his journals in which his biographer states that "he explored the provinces of Ongcor and Battambang, where he discovered splendid ruins, especially the Temple of Ongcor the Great..."¹⁵ While Mouhot himself does not make this claim within his journals the way in which he frames his visit to the temples does depict a largely unknown monument whose origins and history are shrouded in mystery and waiting to be revealed.

Mouhot's role as one of the earliest framers of European interactions with the monuments was particularly important during the nineteenth century.

¹³ C. E. Bouillevaux, *Voyage Dans L'indo-Chine 1848-1856* (Paris: Librairie de Victor Palmé, 1858).; *Ma visite aux ruines cambodgiennes en 1850* (Sanit-Quentin: Imprimerie J. Monceau, 1874).

¹⁴ Meyer writes in 1985 that sympathetic feelings toward Cambodia were a combination of factors, including "une certaine fascination depuis que le P. Bouillevaux puis le naturaliste Henri Mouhot avaient découvert, au Coeur la forêt, des temples immenses et abandonnés: Angkor." While Meyer notes the earlier visit to the temple of Father Bouillevaux, he is still giving credit for this discovery to the two Frenchmen, not only without acknowledging that it wasn't lost to begin with, but even going so far as to say they were "abandoned". Meyer, 1985, p. 106.

¹⁵ Mouhot, "Memoir of M. Henri Mouhot," 2000.

During the second half of the nineteenth century succeeding published travel journals often quote Mouhot, or compare what they see to what Mouhot described. Most often these writers agree with much of what Mouhot has observed. Perhaps more importantly, they often cast their observations in strikingly similar ways to Mouhot.

Mouhot's description of Angkor is comprised of three chapters which appear as the last chapter of the first volume of his published journal, and as the first two chapters of the second volume. While this was an important interlude in Mouhot's travels, his journey to Angkor is one of many extraordinary sojourns he completed during his time in Southeast Asia. Over the course of the more than two years that Mouhot spent in the area he visited a large cross-section of Siamese territory, from the temples of Ayuthia to the plains around Khorat; he had spent time in Phnom Penh and Battambang; he spent several months living with a group of Stiengs in the highlands of Cambodia and Vietnam; and had traveled through the largely unknown (by Westerners) territory of Laos as far as Luang Prabang. Despite his lengthy roster of destinations it is for these three chapters on the ruins at Angkor that he is principally remembered today.

Over the course of these chapters in his journals Mouhot describes each of the monuments he visited in turn. He spends the most time with Angkor Wat, but also includes descriptions of the Bakheng; the gates of Angkor Thom; the Bayon (which he calls "Prea Sat Ling Poun"); the Phimeanakas; the Khleangs (called "Prea Sat Sour Prot"); a temple he names as "Prea Sat Fiao Saie" (which may be Chau Say); one he calls "Prea Sat Iheur Manone Tireada"; Ta Keo; and Ta Prohm.

Mouhot opens his first chapter on Angkor with a section entitled "preliminary remarks," which, over the course of several pages, establishes his

assertion, through anecdotal evidence, that the origins of the monuments have been lost over time. The remainder of the chapter is taken up with giving a precise verbal catalogue of the monuments, beginning with Angkor Wat.

The initial description of Angkor Wat in Mouhot's journal is written in noticeably bare prose. For several pages he appears to have been concerned almost exclusively with measuring and verbally mapping the structures and one often encounters paragraphs that are little more than a list of physical characteristics: "From the north staircase, which faces the principal entrance, you skirt, in order to reach the latter, a causeway 230 meters in length by 9 in width, covered or paved with large slabs of stone, and supported by walls of great thickness..."¹⁶ The tendency towards including a section in Cambodian travel narratives of a stripped-down catalogue of the monuments begins, at Angkor, with Mouhot and continues in the writings of many subsequent travelers. Near the close of his description of Angkor Wat, Mouhot begins to describe the bas reliefs that blanket the walls of the monument's outer gallery.

The sections of his discussion of Angkor Wat which are devoted to the bas reliefs contain not only Mouhot's description of the images which appear on the walls, but also his interpretation of what he has seen in these images, which are confused as often as they are clear. This section soon gives way a return to the cataloguing of the monument's measurements as well as his opinion of the statues which line the higher galleries as he moves up to the upper levels of the building. The descriptive pattern Mouhot establishes in his presentation of Angkor Wat is repeated in brief in the sections of his journal dedicated to the remaining monuments he visited while in the area.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 223.

Over the course of his account of the monuments Mouhot establishes a series of frames through which he views the monuments. The frames that he utilizes influence the way in which Angkor is depicted in Mouhot's writing and have an impact on the ensuing writing about Angkor over the following decades. In addition, the frames which Mouhot set in place in the process of observing and depicting Angkor are an early act of "exposure," as described by Meike Bal, in the relationship between Cambodia and the West.

Mouhot states that he has written the segment describing the temples in the way he has in order to record the monuments for the benefit of science and scholarship. As he states in the paragraphs which lead to his catalogue of the temples, "I will endeavour to describe what I saw, for the benefit of others interested in these sciences (or architecture and archaeology), and, as well as I can, to draw the attention of Eastern *savans* (sic) to a new scene."¹⁷

Mouhot connects himself and his journal repeatedly to the cause of "science," both explicitly and implicitly, throughout his narrative. He writes about his entire journey largely in a style reminiscent of a scholar or scientist collecting data. For audiences who have read the previous chapters of Mouhot's journey his catalogue of the monuments will parallel the style of his descriptions of earlier stops on his journey. While the published narrative does not include all of his observations as a naturalist, his Cambodian "vocabulary," or his translations of myths from Siam, each of these accomplishments is described in the prefaces. This notwithstanding, by the time audiences have reached Mouhot's account of Angkor they will already have been treated to a

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 220.

taste of Mouhot's exacting style of information collection on a number of other topics.¹⁸

The precise style in which he presents the information he has gathered surely had the effect on contemporary readers of portraying Mouhot to his audience as a learned and knowledgeable man, rigorous and objective in his collection of information. Although he often uses seemingly precise information in order to lend authority to the notion of his having presented objective fact, his observations are, at times, inaccurate. The incongruity of his factual style and the inaccuracy of the content can be found, for example, early in his description of the setting for Angkor. Mouhot begins by giving the longitudinal and latitudinal location of Angkor (14th degree northern latitude, 104 degrees eastern longitude) and then states that the ruins are "on the banks of the Mekon (sic), and in the ancient kingdom of the Tsiampo (sic)."¹⁹ The mixing of the scientific (the longitudinal and latitudinal readings) with the misunderstood and assumed (the ruins are near the Tonle Sap Lake not the Mekong River; the monuments were never part of the Cham kingdom) likely left the impression amongst Mouhot's readers of an objectively factual basis for his entire narrative, even as what they were reading was erroneous.

By opening his description of the monuments with this kind of precise language for locating Angkor Mouhot has set himself within his narrative as a

¹⁸ For example, he includes a list of every ruler of Siam, along with the year, both according to the Buddhist and the Christian calendars, each king assumed the throne. Ibid, pp. 28-9.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 217. The "Tsiampo" of this description are the Cham. Although the Cham once had a kingdom whose capital was in present-day central Vietnam, and there are and were Chams living in the Mekong Delta and in Cambodia, the area around Angkor was never part of the Cham kingdom. Furthermore, the Cham kingdom had not existed as an autonomous entity since the kingdom had been enveloped by the Vietnamese in the late fifteenth century. Earlier in Mouhot's narrative he discusses the Cham, and quotes the theory of the Chams' origins written by a French missionary at length. The missionary believed that the Chams were one of the lost tribes of Israel, believing that this would explain some of their religious practices, such as the avoidance of pork. The missionary was probably mistaking some of the practices of Islam with those of Judaism, as a significant number of Chams are Muslim.

rational man of (Western) science. Not only did this create a sense of authority for his readers about his observations, but it also had the effect for his contemporary readers of placing his observations and analysis in opposition to the statements of the Cambodians he interacts with during his time at Angkor. This was accomplished by means of a series of implicit comparisons. Mouhot's discussion of the monuments contains a number of these implied comparisons between himself, as a representative of France (and England) and of the West, and the people in whose hands Angkor resided.

Mouhot's propensity towards cataloguing, such as the minute measurements of each architectural element, as well as his presentation of collecting this information together in the interest of scientific inquiry appear to hark back to the tone of exploration from a century earlier. Mary Louise Pratt notes in her 1992 study of travel writing the influence of the evolving processes of scientific inquiry on the focus and style of many travel writers and explorers during the eighteenth century. Surely Mouhot, himself a naturalist who undertook his journey to Southeast Asia in order to collect specimens of exotic flora and fauna, bears more than a passing resemblance to "the benign, decidedly literate figure of the "herborizer," armed with nothing more than a collector's bag, a notebook, and some specimen bottles" who begins to appear with great regularity in the travel writing of the second half of the eighteenth century.²⁰ Pratt notes the innovation that comes during this period, reflecting a more generalized interest in the natural sciences among the readership in Europe, of the infiltration of the "herborizer's" activities into the narrative of the journey: "With the founding of the global classificatory project...the observing

²⁰ Pratt, 1992, p. 27.

and cataloguing of nature itself became narratable. It could constitute a sequence of events, or even produce a plot.”²¹

Yet, it is notable that while it was possible for the collecting practices of a naturalist to become the focus of the journey’s account, this is not the case in Mouhot’s published rendering of his travels. It is noted in the preface of his published account that Mouhot kept copious journals during his journey cataloguing his observations as a naturalist. These observations seldom make their way into the text, which was published after his death, except obliquely. This may reflect the wishes of publisher or of Mouhot’s brother, who collected and edited his papers, as much or more than of Mouhot himself. As a result, it is not his scientific pursuits which constitute the narrative. But it is the tone of the naturalist, of the scientist in the process of collecting information and specimens, which permeates the narrative. By assuming the voice of the scientist in his descriptions of Angkor, Mouhot has assumed the authority of scientific inquiry and thought.

In thinking about the way in which authors such as Mouhot began to “produce” Cambodia for European readers through their travel writing, Mouhot’s scientific tone of inquiry is a significant component of the final product. This tone created one of the important frames through which Cambodia was seen and experienced by the European explorers who followed Mouhot as well as the reading audience who traveled with him vicariously from their sitting rooms in France and England.

As noted above, this tone likely had the effect of leaving the book’s audience with the impression that Mouhot’s assertions were researched facts rather than conjectures. The scientific style of writing furthermore created

²¹ Ibid, pp. 27-8.

additional impressions about Cambodia. These impressions might be elaborated upon by beginning with a question. Mouhot reports not only his observations, but also significant background and explanatory information in support of his observations. He often presents this material as fact, but he does not explain clearly from whom he received this information, prompting the question of who might have been his informants.

The most obvious place to look for Mouhot's informants on Cambodia, Angkor, and their history would be the Cambodians with whom he interacts. Yet, the occasions on which Mouhot mentions conducting discussions with Cambodians are few in number, and many of those he does describe specifically rather than generally occur between himself and one of Cambodia's royal family.²² One of the places in Mouhot's narrative where his informants seem conspicuously absent occurs in his discussion of the bas reliefs at Angkor Wat.

He does not begin to describe the decorative aspects of the Angkor Wat until he has completed more than four pages of measurements and a full catalogue of its architectural elements. When he does begin to recount what he saw in the bas-reliefs of Angkor, being unfamiliar with the mythology that is depicted, he is often at a loss to identify what he has seen. In addition, in several places he conflates the bas-reliefs of more than one temple in his recounting, describing the depiction of scenes from the Ramayana that are found in Angkor Wat as though they are contiguous with the scenes of daily life that are found on the Bayon.²³ Not far into his description of the images that appear in the bas-reliefs at Angkor Wat Mouhot acknowledges he is out of his depth: "Other

²² In the chapters in which Mouhot describes visiting Kompot, Phnom Penh, and Udong he tells of several discussions that occur between himself and Cambodia's kings and princes. These conversations often revolve around topics such as Napoleon's preference for the *Marseillaise* over *Mourir pour la patrie* and the king's taste in interior decorating. See, for example, Mouhot, 2000, p. 152.

²³ Ibid, p. 229.

subjects follow, the meaning of which I could not discover.”²⁴ However, this statement leads to the question: how has Mouhot “discovered” the meaning of the murals he has discussed to this point?

In the account of the bas-reliefs that follow it is clear that Mouhot has learned something about the images and their content. His description of the mural found on the southern wall of Angkor Wat depicting heaven and hell includes not only observational details, but also information which he must have gleaned from an outside source. This includes the name for the “king of the apes” as well as the name for a mountain pictured in another section of the murals.²⁵ It is unclear from whom he has received this information, as he does not indicate a source at any point in this portion of the narrative. For some pieces of information it appears that he may have been relying on his own imagination to interpret what he sees, such as his repeated identification of the *raksasas*, or demons, as “angels.”²⁶ But the appearance of a title, *comphubal*, which appears to be an attempt by Mouhot to capture the sound of a Thai or Khmer word, for the executioners pictured in the scenes of heaven and hell would seem to indicate that he had assistance from a local informant that he does not mention and to whom he does not attribute the information.

Why would Mouhot fail to mention that he was assisted by local informants on the contents of Angkor’s murals? In his earlier travels in

²⁴ Ibid, p. 230.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 231. The information he gives in these sections is somewhat confusing, is often inaccurate, and probably indicates Mouhot’s own imperfect understanding of what he was seeing, as well as possible problems with interpretation and translation. As he never indicates from whom he received this information it is unclear whether or not he heard this directly from a local informant while communicating in Thai- a language he indicates he has learned earlier in his journey- or in Khmer, possibly through the Abbé Silvestre, with whom he is traveling. The Abbé, who had lived in Cambodia for some time may have learned something of the stories previously and passed that information on to Mouhot on the occasion of the visit. However, as he had discussed earlier in the text that the Abbé was familiar with the temples it would seem odd that he would then fail to mention that the Abbé had been his informant on these stories.

²⁶ Ibid.

Cambodia Mouhot refers to a servant who acts as a translator for one of his conversations with the “second king.”²⁷ He also calls the servant an “Annamite,” the contemporary title for the Vietnamese among the French, and one is left to wonder what language was in use for the conversation. Did his Vietnamese servant speak both French and Khmer? Did the king speak Vietnamese? Was he misinformed about the identity of his interpreter? Furthermore, while Mouhot’s remark with regards to a Vietnamese interpreter might explain the means by which the information might have been conveyed, it does not necessarily explain the origin of the information. While it isn’t impossible that Mouhot’s Vietnamese interpreter might have known something about the monuments it seems far more probable that, if he were there (Mouhot does not mention him again), he would have acted as the conduit rather than the source.

The erasure of Cambodian informants at key junctures, such as Mouhot’s discussion of the bas reliefs, is notable. This elimination is supported by the erasure of Cambodia’s history, which Mouhot is at pains to emphasize throughout his discussion of Angkor. In fact, Mouhot commences his chapters on Angkor with a synopsis of what he designates as the “known” history of the Khmer kingdom. These “facts” are limited in number and fantastical in nature, including claims such as the assertion that “almost the only tradition preserved in the country” specifies that the Khmer Empire had five or six million soldiers and a “royal treasure (which) occupied a space of more than 300 miles.”²⁸ Mouhot does not indicate how he came to know these “traditions,” or for whom these are the only preserved pieces of Cambodian history. By inaugurating his

²⁷ Ibid, p. 152. “My Annamite was with me, and filled the office of interpreter, with a perfect tact which pleased the king.”

²⁸ Ibid, p. 217.

description of Angkor as a place nearly absent of traditions or history he sets in place an important frame through which he viewed the monuments, and which was taken up by subsequent writers.

While he does not claim the mantle of Angkor's discoverer, Mouhot has introduced the idea that the monuments are in need of discovery. If there were so scant an historical tradition tied to Angkor as he has described, the reader is left with the distinct sense of a place that has been lost, or somehow misplaced by the Khmer. It is in this section of his narrative that the image of the temples as abandoned takes root. The implication that the temples' creators had disappeared appears within the first page of his description of Angkor, where Mouhot's first impression of the monuments is recorded as:

...ruins of such grandeur, remains of structures which must have been raised at such an immense cost of labour, that, at the first view, one is filled with profound admiration, and cannot but ask what has become of this powerful race, so civilized, so enlightened, the authors of these gigantic works?²⁹

Although Mouhot will, on the following page, note the presence of local residents, precluding the monuments' having been completely abandoned, he nevertheless emphasizes his belief that the origins of Angkor have been lost to the passing of time, wars, and even earthquakes.³⁰ He remarks that the monuments contain inscriptions, but he calls them "illegible."³¹ He interrogates local residents as to Angkor's origins, and disdainfully reports the answers he receives, none of which he finds satisfactory.³² As he walks through the temples

²⁹ Ibid, pp. 217-8.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 218.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid. "... if you interrogate the Cambodians as to the founders of Ongcor-Wat, you invariably received one of these four replies: "It is the work of Pra-Eun, the king of the angels;" "It is the work of the giants;" "It was built by the leprous king;" or else, "It made itself.""

he “seeks in vain for any historical souvenirs of the many kings...of the powerful empire of Maha-Nocor-Khmer.”³³ Beyond the existence of a leprous king, Mouhot states of Angkor’s royal history that “all else is totally forgotten.”³⁴

Mouhot’s characterization of Khmer history as “totally forgotten,” and his description of Angkor as a place whose origins were entirely shrouded in mystery, was not, in fact, a completely accurate description. The royal court of Cambodia, the court of the king whom he describes meeting earlier in his narrative,³⁵ knew that the capital of the kingdom had once been situated at Angkor. The inscriptions found on the columns and steles at Angkor were not simply “illegible”: They would subsequently be read not only by scholars, but in Garnier’s narrative by a Cambodian monk. Rather, they were illegible to Mouhot and his travel companions. The “historical souvenirs,” literally the historical memories,³⁶ of Angkorian kings that Mouhot searches for in vain on the walls of the temples were before his eyes. The Bayon is surmounted by sculpted faces that are believed to be portraits of King Jayavarman VII; the southern gallery of Angkor Wat is ornamented with a bas-relief believed to show an historical procession being led by King Suryavarman II. The temples themselves are historical documents.

The chronology of Angkor was not, at the time of Mouhot’s journey, clearly delineated, and his claims about the mysterious origin of the temples does, in part, reflect the incomplete record of Angkor’s history. But Mouhot’s characterization of Angkor’s history is equally indicative of his unfamiliarity with and exclusion from the information that was available: the historical

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 131. Mouhot has a brief interaction with King Ang Duong at Kompot.

³⁶ “Souvenir” in French is the verb for “to remember.”

memories (souvenirs) that he searches for are not his historical or cultural memories. Mouhot's assertion that Angkor's history and origins are entirely lost to the ravages of time, as he states, "all else (but the leper king) is totally forgotten," frames his interactions with and interpretations of the monuments. Furthermore, this frame for viewing the temples reappears in nearly all subsequent travelogues by other explorers who visit Angkor, particularly over the following decades during which the monuments are not part of the Cambodian protectorate. The repeated refrain of Angkor's "forgotten historical souvenirs" would become familiar over the course of the colonial period, and the linking of the monuments to mysterious or unknown origins would persist in popular writing about Angkor well beyond the period when the chronology of the Khmer Empire had begun to be understood and clearly delineated. Importantly, even as the historical chronology was being clarified, even when the order of construction was known, among most French the pre-Interwar years were still thought of as a time when Angkor was "lost." It continued to carry as an identity marker even into the Interwar years and beyond for some.

I would contend that the distinction between the two situations—one in which the Cambodian informants are not only acknowledged, but are the focus of the story, and the other in which the Cambodian informants are removed—indicates the dimensions and style of the frame through which Mouhot is both viewing and presenting Angkor. In his interpretations of the murals' content the stories being depicted are discussed as though they come entirely from Mouhot's pool of knowledge. When, in describing the mural depicting the Churning of the Milk Ocean on the eastern wall of Angkor Wat, Mouhot states, "(t)he angel is seated on the celebrated mountain of Thibet (sic), Pra Soumer, and in different

places angels with several heads give assistance to those pulling the serpent,”³⁷ One wonders from whence Mouhot has received this information. He appears unaware that the scene is depicting an episode from the Vishnu *puranas*; that the multi-headed figures are demons; or that the “angel” he refers to as sitting atop the mountain is likely Vishnu himself. Without having these pieces of information it seems unlikely that he would have arrived at a name for the mountain, without assistance, which is pictured in this image as a spindle for churning the ocean and hardly bears a resemblance to a mountain.³⁸ However, to identify the origin of the information he has received about the murals as coming, directly or indirectly, from a local informant would contradict his earlier statements about the history of the monuments. Specifically, it would undermine his earlier claims that the stories with which he opens his account are “almost the only tradition preserved in the country.”³⁹

The distinction he draws between his unacknowledged but knowledgeable sources and the acknowledged but uninformed Cambodian sources is exemplified in his description of the Khleangs, which he calls Prea Sat Sour Prot. He notes that, “It served, they say, as a depository for the crown jewels,” without explaining from whom he received this information. This unattributed statement is immediately followed by the following description:

The Cambodians also believe that ropes were stretched from one tower to another, on which dancers exercised their skill in the

³⁷ Mouhot, 2000, p. 231.

³⁸ Nor is this the only instance where a nameless informant has provided assistance in interpreting the temples for Mouhot. For example, Mouhot informs his readers in Volume II of his work that outside the gates of Angkor Thom is a collection of towers (probably the Bayon) which top “a building called by the Cambodians “Prea sat Ling poun,” that is to say, “The Pagoda where they play hide and see.”” p. 242. But who says this? Again, Mouhot does not mention from whom he has learned the name of the building, or what the name means, instead leaving his informant anonymous.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 217.

presence of the king... All traditions being lost, the natives invent new ones, according to the measure of their capacity.⁴⁰

Within the space of three sentences Mouhot appears to be contradicting his own statements, for to whom, if not the “natives,” that he concludes are inventing traditions, does the “they” of the previous sentence refer?

Not all of his interactions with Cambodian informants are excised from his narrative. He does, earlier in his account, mention that he had “interrogate(d) the Cambodians as to the founders of Ongcor-Wat,” indicating that he had at least some interactions with local residents.⁴¹ The moments where Mouhot chooses to acknowledge his local informants contain within them an implied comparison between France and the West, personified by himself and emphasized in the scientific style of writing that characterizes much of his writing, and Cambodia.

The scene in which Mouhot describes the answers given by his Cambodian informants on the question of Angkor’s origins provides an example of the sharp contrast he draws in his writing. The list of answers includes several supernatural explanations and an unnamed king, and he makes clear his feeling that each of the explanations is preposterous in the sentence which follows. The scene is designed not only to confirm his opening statement that nearly all “traditional” knowledge of the temple is lost, but also to contrast himself and his style of inquiry with a characterization of Cambodians as superstitious and credulous. As noted, over the course of his opening paragraphs Mouhot has placed himself in the narrative as a representative of scientific knowledge and rational thought. This is done in order to present a comparison, where he has juxtaposed the answers given to his question which he considers

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 248.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 218.

irrational, and which he calls the “invariable” response of the Cambodians who live around the temples.

Throughout his narrative Mouhot sketches for his audience an image of Cambodia constructed through a series of similar comparisons. Most of these comparisons are not directly drawn, but are, like these examples, implied by the information that he does and does not provide for his reader. Over the course of his chapters on Angkor Mouhot has constructed as a narrative in which knowledge resides in the European mind rather than in the Cambodian mind or tradition—even when the subject is Cambodian. At the close of his description of Angkor Wat he poses a series of questions regarding the temple’s builder, designer, and origin, and then clearly delineates whom he believes capable—and whom incapable—of answering these questions:

As before remarked, neither tradition nor written inscriptions furnish any certain information upon this point; or rather, I should say, these latter are as a sealed book for want of an interpreter; and they may, perchance, throw light on the subject when some European savant shall succeed in deciphering them.⁴²

Mouhot is, of course, unfamiliar with the stories, characters, and religious implications of all that he is seeing in his journey. He likely did not know well the story of the *Ramayana*, and was not able to identify the difference between a Buddhist and a Hindu temple with ease. However, in drawing the comparison between himself (as a representation of France or the West) and the Cambodian population that surrounds Angkor, he set a precedent that is carried on in subsequent publications about the temples throughout the colonial period. This framing of Angkor was not something that was specific to Mouhot; rather, Mouhot’s journals reflect the more widespread narrative of the

⁴² Ibid, p. 237.

interaction of France and Southeast Asia. His description, and the “product” that became Cambodia for readers in France and England, conveys less information about Angkor than it does about the way in which Angkor, Cambodia, and Indochina were perceived by France. This perception appears in the example above, where, despite his ignorance, Mouhot shows that he believes Angkor to be a riddle that a European mind is best deposed to crack.

In the initial years of regular contact between France and Southeast Asia, including the period during which Mouhot is writing, many of the travelers are putting pen to paper not only to describe their journeys, but also with the hopes of spurring France to take actions that would add the territory to its empire. Mouhot is included in this group, at one point noting the advantages that would come to the city of Kompot if it were “under a better system of government.”⁴³ Mouhot makes it clear what form of government he believes would provide the best improvement when he goes on to warn that it will probably fall into the hands of an outside power soon enough, noting with hope that “possibly, France has her eyes fixed upon it.”⁴⁴ In fact, for Mouhot, Cambodia’s only salvation lies with its addition to France’s territories: “European conquest, abolition of slavery, wise and protecting laws, and experience, fidelity, and scrupulous rectitude in those who administer them, would alone effect the regeneration of this state.”⁴⁵

Mouhot is explicit in his own hopes for his home country’s political designs on Cambodia, and is equally unequivocal in his belief that Cambodia will be the better for it. However, while his visits to Kompot and Battambang elicit from Mouhot calls for intervention in the structure and implementation of

⁴³ Ibid, p. 128.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 128.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 213.

governance, his travels at Angkor bring forth a connected desire to intervene in order to gather lost history. This connection is made unambiguously in his statement that it will only be possible to “throw light on the subject when some European savant shall succeed in deciphering them,”⁴⁶ a statement which echoes his earlier claim that Cambodia would only be “regenerated” through “European conquest.”⁴⁷ It is in these statements—one of the earliest “productions” of Cambodia for French audiences—that I contend can be found not only the opening chapter of the narrative this dissertation is concerned with, but also the beginning of the direct link by Europeans, and the French in particular, of the recovery of historical “souvenirs” and the “civilizing mission.”

As one of the most widely read early European accounts of Angkor Mouhot’s description carried particular weight. The travelers and explorers who would follow in his footsteps would do so after having read his words. To a certain extent many of the subsequent travelers would have their views of Angkor tempered by Mouhot’s words and impressions. Mouhot’s journals were the first frame through which many of the European travelers to Angkor understood and saw the monuments; his words permeated their vision before they had even seen the temples. Each traveler embarked on their journey to Angkor expecting to find Mouhot’s “ruins of such grandeur” that one can’t help but wonder “what has become of this powerful race... the authors of these gigantic works?”⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 237.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 213.

⁴⁸ Ibid, pp. 217-8.

Mekong Exploration Commission

While Mouhot can not be given credit for the “discovery” of Angkor, he did open a period of increased European interaction with and interest in the monuments. Cambodia, which did not even appear as a country in the 1838 publication of the most trusted French atlas, *Univers illustré*, became the destination of a number of well-documented expeditions, which were narrated in subsequent publications, by Europeans in the 1860s.⁴⁹ The echoes of Mouhot’s narrative in later travelogues of journeys to Cambodia and to Angkor reverberate for many decades, and can even be found in travel journals describing trips to Angkor published as recently as within the last decade. Among the earliest examples of narratives which confirmed and expanded upon Mouhot’s “translation”⁵⁰ of Angkor are a number of descriptions of the same journey: the writings of members of The Mekong Exploration Commission. (Figure 6)⁵¹

Not long after the finalization of the treaty that made Cambodia a French protectorate,⁵² the Marquess de Chasseloup-Laubat, Minister of the Navy,

⁴⁹ Garnier, pp. 27-28. Garnier mentions works describing the monuments by the president of the German Geographical Society positing great similarity between Cambodian and Javanese sculpture; the journey and publication undertaken by an attaché of the English consulate in Bangkok and a Scottish photographer; and the journey undertaken in 1866 by Durand and Rondet.

⁵⁰ I am using translation here in the sense described in the Introduction of this dissertation, p.16

⁵¹ From Garnier, 1996.

⁵² Angkor was not part of the Protectorate of Cambodia at this time. The temples and the surrounding provinces would become part of the Protectorate in 1907.



Figure 6 Mekong River Commission

sponsored an expedition up the Mekong river in search of its origins, and, more importantly, in search of a route through which the French might reach the interior of China. This expedition, called the Mekong Exploration Commission, set out in the summer of 1866. It would be more than two years before their journey would come to its end. The price exacted on the members of the Commission was high, and many of the original members, including its leader, Doudart de Lagrée, did not live to see the journey's completion.⁵³

Upon their return from China, several of the Commission's members wrote about their experiences during the journey, including the commission's official report, written by Francis Garnier. Garnier was the deputy to M. de Lagrée, the Commission commander. Much of his writing about the journey

⁵³ The Mekong Exploration Commission lost communication with the Western world not long after they left Cambodian territory and were presumed dead when they reappeared on the Chinese coast in 1868. The period in which they were presumed to have died overlapped with the famous disappearance of Dr. David Livingston in what is now the Congo. Henry Morton Stanley, the sensationalist newspaperman who would later find the lost doctor, would depart on his journey to retrieve the doctor (or his remains) from the jungle in 1869. The two disappearances and reappearances were sometimes discussed in conjunction with each other in journals and newspapers of the period.

was first published in the magazine *Le Tour du Monde* between 1869 and 1871, and these articles were collected, along with other pieces of his writing, and published as a single volume by Hachette at the instigation of his brother, Léon, in 1885.⁵⁴

Another publication by a member of the mission can be found in the edited journals of the Commission's representative from the department for foreign affairs, Louis de Carné. De Carné's writings were published posthumously with a preface describing de Carné's life by his father, the Count de Carné.⁵⁵ Although the younger de Carné survived the mission, he died of an illness that he contracted while on his travels in Asia soon after returning to France.⁵⁶

According to de Carné, the expedition had been sent to Southeast Asia not only to update the maps of the area and to test the navigability of the Mekong as a river route into China, but also in order to:

gather information respecting the sources of the [Mekong], if it proved impossible to reach them; to solve the different geographical problems,... (and) to report any miscellaneous facts which might throw light on the history, the philology, the ethnography, or the religion of the peoples along the great river,... [w]e had instructions to seek for a passage from Indo-China to China... [i]t was, moreover, essential, since the establishment of France in Cochin-China, to know our neighbours of Laos better; the resources of their country, and their relations with the Indo-Chinese powers, of which they were vaguely known to be tributaries.⁵⁷

While much of de Carné's narrative, particularly in later chapters, would be taken up with discussing the specifics of river travel, navigational

⁵⁴ By the time of their collection into a single volume, Francis Garnier had already been dead more than a decade, having been killed in Tonkin while fighting the Black Flag pirates.

⁵⁵ de Carné, 2000.

⁵⁶ It is thought that de Carné contracted tuberculosis while in Asia.

⁵⁷ de Carné, p. 36.

difficulties, and what sorts of goods were best for trading, much of his first chapter is dedicated to his impressions and descriptions of Angkor. While de Carné is clearly intrigued by the monuments, Garnier's writings about the journey of the commission, particularly his description of Angkor, are far more extensive and detailed than those of de Carné.⁵⁸ Furthermore, Garnier's detailed description of the monuments reveals a more favorable impression of the architecture, the sculpture, and of Cambodia in general than his companion's estimation of the same. Yet, for each of the differences that can be found in the two accounts, there are also significant similarities between the two descriptions. As they are describing the same journey, their chronologies reflect each other, and in the descriptions of Angkor the focus of the discussion is similarly framed.

After preparing for their journey in Sàì gòn, The Mekong Exploration Commission moved up the Mekong River to the city of Phnom Penh. Before continuing onward to Laos their mission headed northwest towards Angkor, de Carné declaring that he “could not leave Cambodia without visiting the ruins which are at once its glory and its shame.”⁵⁹ De Carné's introduction to Angkor echoes the frame through which Mouhot viewed the monuments before him: “(Angkor) is grander than anything left to us by Greece or Rome, and presents a sad contrast to the state of barbarism in which the nation is now plunged.”⁶⁰

Mouhot's published journals are one of several sources of information that both Garnier and de Carné quote from in their discussions of Angkor. In

⁵⁸ Garnier's words are accompanied by numerous illustrations, often executed by Louis Delaporte, an accomplished draftsman and naval lieutenant, who joined the Commission in order to record what the group observed. Delaporte did not take up his pen only to draw, but also to write his own account of his travels in the Kingdom of Cambodia, and his observations of the temples, in a volume entitled *Voyage au Cambodge l'Architecture Khmer*, which was first published in 1880. Delaporte's work will be discussed in Chapter Five.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 37.

⁶⁰ Mouhot, 2000, p. 218.

addition to Mouhot, de Carné mentions the writings of Christoval de Jaque,⁶¹ a sixteenth century Portuguese missionary who went to Angkor after having been expelled from Japan, and the Abel Rémusat translation of Chou Da Guan's notes on Angkor from the fourteenth century.⁶² Garnier, too, mentions both the Rémusat translation and Christoval de Jaque, as well as a number of additional European historical sources.

Mouhot and de Jaque were not the commission's only guides to the monuments. Doudart de Lagrée, the mission's commander, had spent two years living in Cambodia as the French *Résident*, and had already visited the ruins a number of times. Garnier notes on numerous occasions the breadth of knowledge about Cambodia and Angkor possessed by his commander, and both Garnier and de Carné turn to de Lagrée for elaboration on some of the temples' details. However, it is often Mouhot's description which has the most definitive influence not only on what de Carné, and to a lesser extent Garnier, writes about Angkor, but even what they see.

De Carné exposes the frame through which he encountered the ruins when he notes, early in his description, that he had "just re-read the pages of M. Mouhot on Angkor; but in spite of all, I felt overcome. I had, as it were, a shock of astonishment."⁶³ Garnier similarly opens the first paragraph of his description of Angkor Wat by commenting that the monument "was not, as Mouhot said, a temple rivaling Soloman's temple... but the masterpiece of an unknown Micahelangelo."⁶⁴ Thus, before arriving at the monuments both de Carné and

⁶¹ "According to Christoval de Jaque, one of the Portuguese who took refuge in Cambodia during the sixteenth century,... Angkor was no longer a royal residence in 1570." Ibid, p. 43.

⁶² Although de Carné notes the name of the (French) translator, he does not mention Chou Da Guan by name: "...it is only necessary to read the Chinese traveller of the thirteenth century, whose narrative M. Abel Rémusat has translated, to be convinced that (true civilization) was never reached by the Khmers." De Carné, 2000, p. 44.

⁶³ Ibid, p. 40.

⁶⁴ Garnier, 1996, p. 11

Garnier have turned to Mouhot in order to prepare for what they would see. Although re-reading Mouhot did not completely ready de Carné for the monuments, it did frame what he and his companions would be looking for once they reached the temples. The subjects of the commission's examinations are similar to those found in Mouhot's description of the monuments.

Among the most important foci of Mouhot's writing on Angkor are the paired assumption and assertion that Angkor was deserted and that its history was forgotten and in some way encrypted. These two assumptions form the observational foundation for both de Carné's and Garnier's interactions with Angkor, and their descriptions often appear to be as much an attempt to confirm these preconceived notions as they are an account of what they saw.

De Carné mentions on several occasions that Portuguese travelers had visited Angkor in earlier centuries. The only specific reference to one of these earlier travelers is his mention of Christoval de Jaque. Yet, he tells nothing of what de Jaque might have seen at Angkor, only that he "seems to say that even at that period (Angkor) had already been deserted by its inhabitants."⁶⁵ Throughout his narrative de Carné draws an image of Angkor that seems to recall, centuries later, de Jaque's observation of the monuments as having been "deserted" in the 1570s, saying that his initial astonishment was followed by "sadness... when, having passed the magnificent entrance, one comes on a dense forest filling the vast enceinte shut in by its great walls. It is necessary to pass through closely-tangled thickets to reach the ruins of the few buildings of which vestiges still survive, and to have recourse to the compass to keep from losing oneself in these solitudes, peopled only by wild creatures..."⁶⁶

⁶⁵ De Carné, 2000, p. 43.

⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 43.

Over the course of de Carné's description of the temples he does not mention the appearance of local residents, or even of the monks whose monastery was noted to be within the grounds of the temple during Mouhot's visit just five years previous. The local population, which makes only fleeting appearances in Mouhot's narrative, has disappeared almost entirely in de Carné's, with one exception. In de Carné's introduction he mentions one interaction with a Cambodian monk at Angkor:

“I have seen the chief bonze (monk) of Cambodgia (sic) read, in the grand pagoda of Angkor, some inscriptions chosen from among those which, from the place where they occurred, seemed the most important. He easily understood the fragments written in the ancient Cambodgian language while it was still free from any foreign alloy, and they were found to refer only to pilgrimages, religious ceremonies, and confused incidents of Buddhist legend, without offering an historical interest.”⁶⁷

De Carné's later description of the interior of Angkor Wat as given over to the jungle and roamed only by “wild animals” appears incongruous with this earlier image of the monk reading inscriptions for de Carné in his introduction. By mentioning the chief bonze's appearance at the temple de Carné has contradicted his later assertion that Angkor was completely deserted, and appears to tacitly confirm the existence of the monastery mentioned by Mouhot, for a chief bonze would have bonzes beneath him. I would argue that de Carné introduces the chief bonze, and makes explicit that he is the chief bonze of Cambodia, despite the fact that it contradicts his later statements, for a very specific reason. And this reason is similar to why Mouhot occasionally introduces local informants into his own description of Angkor: in order to

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 8.

create an implied comparison between himself and his local informants, and to affirm his statement that all historical record of Angkor's origins had been lost.

Garnier, too, turns to the accounts of the temples written by sixteenth and seventeenth century Spanish and Portuguese missionaries in his narrative. And as de Carné finds the temples deserted in the 1570s, so does Garnier. Garnier goes a step further in stating not only that the temples had been abandoned by that time, but that “the inscriptions of these ruins were already unintelligible to the Cambodians.”⁶⁸ As he will soon relate the same information about the contents of the inscriptions that de Carné does in his story about the chief bonze, Garnier is quick to add a caveat to this statement, noting that “this must certainly have been the case only for the oldest (inscriptions).”⁶⁹

Unlike de Carné's description of the excursion to Angkor, Garnier's account does note the presence of a local population and the monks who reside in the monastery on the temple's grounds.⁷⁰ He also mentions the presence of a number of people—mostly refugees from recent unrest—who are living within the walls of the ancient city.⁷¹ Although Garnier's account acknowledges the presence, and even the participation, of local residents and informants in ways that de Carné's narrative does not, the implications of the two accounts are ultimately quite similar.

In the case of de Carné, he introduces his sole local informant not in the body of his narrative of the trip to Angkor, but in the introduction to the entire book. The story that he tells about the chief bonze is set within the section of the introduction which deals with Cambodia's history. In order to present the

⁶⁸ Garnier, 1996, p. 27.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ “As I have said above, some monks are attached to the ancient sanctuary and they have carefully brought together in... all of the statues or fragments of stone statues...” Garnier, 1996, p. 17.

⁷¹ Ibid, p. 32.

history of the Angkorian period as unknown he introduces the chief bonze as proof of that period's lost record. Where Mouhot sees Angkor's inscriptions as "illegible,"⁷² de Carné has found someone who is able to decipher them. But he insists that deciphering them has not brought the history of the place into view. Rather, he states that even translated the inscriptions remain virtually "illegible" to him: Little more than religious ramblings and "confused legends." When he has the inscriptions translated and does not receive a list of dates or facts, de Carné declares it improbable that such a record even exists: "It is possible that some inscription may one day be found which will throw light on the past of this kingdom, but there is too good ground to fear that the events of which it has been the theatre have never been written."⁷³

The appearance of de Carné's local informant at this point in his narrative is his evidence that Mouhot's assertion that the history of Angkor is lost, or that it is at least lost to the Khmer. De Carné makes particular note that he receives this information from the "chief bonze of Cambodia," a fact that is highlighted in order to give particular weight and authority to his translation of the inscription: whom would be better equipped to confirm that the inscriptions of a religious monument are empty of historical reference than the chief religious authority of the country? Yet, the chief bonze who appears in the historical background section of the introduction disappears in the telling of the Mekong Exploration Commission's interaction with the monuments.

When Garnier seeks information from the local residents on various aspects of the temples, particularly on the question of Angkor's historical origins, he often portrays his interrogations as being unnecessarily difficult, or even as being fruitless. He describes hearing similar answers to those received

⁷² Mouhot, 2000, p. 218.

⁷³ De Carné, 2000, p. 8.

by Mouhot when he asks the local inhabitants questions about how the monuments were built.⁷⁴ Echoing de Carné's statements in the introduction of his own journal, Garnier also notes that there are monks who are still capable of reading the inscriptions found in the temples, but that the inscriptions that have been thus far translated are "without historical importance."⁷⁵ Finally, in describing de Lagrée's attempts at gathering information from Cambodian sources he depicts these sources as withholding information: "It was not without the greatest trouble that Mr. de Lagrée obtained from the locals the necessary information to enable him to reach all of the ruins. In spite of the authority of his position, his knowledge of the Cambodian language, the gentleness and the simplicity of his manners, he did not always manage to overcome the resistance of the inhabitants and to have them take him to the places in the forest which harbor monuments of some importance."⁷⁶

Furthermore, while Garnier makes note of the Cambodians who reside within the confines of the monuments, he describes their residency as reluctant. He states that is only from utter necessity that these occupants "overcome the terror inspired by this dreaded place,"⁷⁷ as they are normally filled with "superstitious fears" of "spirits" that haunt the forests.⁷⁸ These statements imply that, according to Garnier, were it not for special circumstances, Angkor would be as empty as it was described in the 16th century.

Tellingly, the person whom Garnier and de Carné notes acted as their guide to the monuments was the commander of the mission, Doudart de Lagrée.

⁷⁴ "The locals who attribute the construction of this edifice to spirits and who would not know how to conceive a human power capable of lifting such loads, say that, according to a tradition already reported by Mouhot, Prea En (the god Indra?) formally shaped all the parts of the monument in clay..." Garnier, 1996, p. 16.

⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 17.

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 29.

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 32.

⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 30.

De Lagrée had lived in Phnom Penh, where he had been acting as the French *Résident*, for two years. De Carné states at one point in his narrative that only de Lagrée was able to communicate, in Khmer, with the translator they had hired to accompany them to Laos, and both he and Garnier affirm that de Lagrée had visited the temples on numerous occasions.

Within the roles, in relation to Angkor, which de Carné assigns the chief bonze and de Lagrée with relation to Angkor is an implied comparison. De Lagrée is presented as knowledgeable enough about the temples to act as their guide, to translate the monuments for his companions, while the chief bonze is depicted as unable to access the temples' history despite his knowledge, despite his ability to translate the text. Neither de Carné nor Garnier questions de Lagrée's ability to "translate" the monuments for them.⁷⁹ Yet, his understanding of the temples is accepted as being as knowledgeable, if not more so, than that of the chief bonze or any of the local residents.

De Carné makes it clear in his closing paragraphs on the monuments that he believes he, de Lagrée, and other Europeans will never feel as emotional or as emotionally connected to Angkor as they would about European monuments which "move us more deeply (because) (m)en of our own race have thought behind these walls, have fought behind these battlements we can reconstruct their lives, can follow the traces of their footsteps."⁸⁰ If historical monuments can, according to de Carné, only be accessed and appreciated through the reconstruction of the past—the lives of the people who lived in them, the traces of their footsteps—who can appreciate a monument whose past is opaque? By beginning his book with his telling of the chief bonze who cannot access the

⁷⁹ The "translation" here is invoked in the sense discussed in the Introduction to this dissertation on p. 16.

⁸⁰ De Carné, 2000, p. 44.

history of Cambodia's monuments, even through reading the inscriptions, it appears that de Carné believes that Angkor is not even accessible to the Khmer: "Here, in this spot of the extreme East, all is dead, even to the memory of that brilliant theocracy..."⁸¹

If de Carné believes that the monuments and their memory are "dead," does he believe it is possible to engage with them or to enjoy them? He does, but only in a particular ways. One way is a method which he shares with Mouhot: it is the method of scientific inquiry. "The research of science, which leads us, little by little, towards our origins and shows us our brothers in the first castes of India, interests the mind rather than touches the heart..."⁸²

It is also on the level of aesthetic pleasure that de Carné is able to engage with Angkor. The members of the Mekong Exploration Commission make regular use of an aesthetic comparison model, and the civilizations, architecture, and sculpture of Greece, Rome, and even Egypt appear in their accounts of the monuments. These references continue to appear in similar narratives for decades to come.⁸³

These kinds of references by European explorers to ruins found closer to home were, at least in part, a translation mechanism. The monuments at Angkor were, for the home audiences for whom these travelogues were being written, without a direct referent, and might be thought of as having been built in a "language" with which those audiences were unfamiliar. In order for the temples to be brought to the attention of those European audiences, Angkor would have to be rendered—to be translated—into a visual "language" that

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 44.

⁸² Ibid, p. 44.

⁸³ For example: "...at that moment, I came close to adding a fourth era, the Khmer, to the three classical centuries of Pericles, Augustus and Louis XIV.... Remarkable as some of these heads that are found there may be, they are nevertheless far from the masterpieces of the Greek chisel." Garnier, 1996, p. 9.

audiences could understand. The comparisons that were made regularly with Greece and Rome were an attempt at translating Angkor into an understandable language for European reading audiences.

In the process of “translating” Angkor into a visual language with which European readers would be familiar, de Carné, Garnier, Mouhot, and others ultimately both add and remove information from the monuments. By framing Angkor through the lens of Rome or Greece, these writers have covered Cambodian monuments in a veneer of Western antiquity. Readers would likely not have assumed from these comparisons that Angkor looked like Roman ruins, but by relating the two repeatedly in each narrative, and across each of the most popular travelogues, a sense that there was a similarity between them or that they shared certain elements must have been conveyed and confirmed to the books’ audience. The most likely component of the ruins of Rome and Greece that would have overlaid Angkor in the minds of readers was the most obvious aspect they had in common: their identification as ruins.

The word “ruin” could be used simply to describe the state of a structure, however, in the nineteenth century when each of these men was writing it was also a term laden with additional meaning. Ruins had been co-opted by the Romantics earlier in the century as a potent and melancholy symbol of the past. The “romanticizing” of Roman ruins was also, as Janowitz notes, directly connected to the aestheticization of those ruins—a process that is, in part, repeated at Angkor.⁸⁴

The use of these initial frames in viewing the country informed the Western, and specifically French, conceptualization of “Cambodia,” the evolution of French colonial scholarship, and the ways in which the *mission*

⁸⁴ Janowitz, 1990, p. 43. This process will be discussed at more length in chapters six and seven.

civilisatrice was implemented in the protectorate. In contemplating the most commonly elaborated ideas in the early (and in later) travelogues, it is striking to consider that Angkor—whose emblematic quincunx towers were already, by the end of the 1860s, beginning to be inextricably interwoven with the idea of Cambodia—was not, at this time, physically in Cambodia; the provinces of Angkor, Sisophon, and Battambang had been nominally under Siamese control, and definitively out of Cambodian control, since the late eighteenth century.

With the temples, situated at the top of the Tonle Sap lake, beyond the boundaries of the French protectorate in Cambodia, the focus on the ruins at Angkor from the earliest Western writing about the territory—even those predating the 1863 treaty—appears motivated as much out of a desire for imperial expansion as archaeological interest. Perhaps part of the archaeological interest was, in fact, the product of interest in imperial expansion.

There were, certainly, practical, expansionist reasons for focusing on the provinces that had been lost to Siam. Their return of the provinces both extended France's territorial control, and created a larger buffer zone between the French territories in Vietnam, and the British interests in Burma, and its influence in Siam. It would also give control of the entire Tonle Sap basin, the most fertile land in Cambodia, to the French. Many of the early French descriptions of Angkor served a number of purposes, one of which was to clearly connect the ruins with Cambodia. Many of the authors writing in the decades before Angkor was retroceded made clear that Angkor had been the capital of the Khmer Empire and that the temples had been built by the ancient Khmer: These writers were careful to emphasize that Angkor was Khmer, not Siamese. Contained within that declaration is the implication of an historical claim on the monuments and the surrounding land. That historical claim could,

and would, be used as leverage in discussions with the Siamese on the topic of retrocession.

The view, also, that the temples' history had been completely obliterated by the sands of time left open the possibility for the declaration that there was a need for outside intervention. On the one hand, this assertion implied that by being separated from the kingdom (the capital had long since been moved south to Oudong) had led to an historical amnesia. It was further implied that continued separation by means of an international border would only lead to continued amnesia. Furthermore, these accounts make it clear that the writers believed that the recovery of historical memory cannot occur until that situation changed. Rather, each writer discussed in this chapter—Mouhot, de Carné, Garnier—states definitively his belief that the recovery of the historical record, and by implication the historical memory of the Cambodian people, will only occur through the work of Western scholarship.

Accordingly, contained within the sections that each of these writers frames as a simple description of what he has seen is an argument for French intervention, and the exposure of that argument. It is an argument that carries on even when it is not the overt object of the passage, and it is an undercurrent that appears as an act of “exposure.” In the repeated contentions by each of the authors that Angkor has become historically unmoored, each author exposes the object, the focus, and the purpose of their missions and their government. As an argument for intervention, the claim that Mouhot, Garnier, de Carné, and others from the period make regarding Angkor's needs form the foundation for the arguments made in subsequent years in favor of France's *mission civilisatrice*, or “civilizing mission,” in Cambodia.

Angkor plays a key role in the argument for French intervention in the area, and a key role in the case for their continued presence. In the next chapter

I will discuss some of the ways in which the French restoration work at Angkor was presented as “proof” not only of that need, but of their success as evidenced by the “results” at Angkor.