

## **Embedding Meanings in Text, Image and Context: The reclining Vishnu and Lakshmi carvings at Phnom Kulen**

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This paper discusses the 11th century carvings of Vishnu and Lakshmi located on the Kulen range in Cambodia, and its links to Angkor's water management network. I argue that their interconnected relationship embodied the religious, eco-political aspirations and concerns of the kingdom's ruling elite. For centuries, the sacred essences of ancestral spirits and sculpted deities in the form of Vishnu and Lakshmi on a riverbed on Kulen were dispersed by the Kbal Spean river to the kingdom several kilometers away. An autochthonous sacred site, Kulen was marked as the location of the first Angkor capital in an 11th century inscription. The carving of the Brahmanical deities on the riverbed likely also referenced royal ancestors, deified after their death. A river threading through the ancient capital and over the sculpted images descends onto the plain below where the core of the Angkor

kingdom was located. This river was part of a vast water distribution system that profoundly influenced the economic status of the kingdom. The carvings of Kbal Spean should therefore be perceived through its interaction with landscape (natural and anthropogenic), and through the prism of local ancestral beliefs and the localization of Brahmanical elements. Such an integrated approach helps understand the religious and eco-political landscape of ancient Cambodia.

**Soumya James** studies premodern South and Southeast Asian art. She received her PhD in Art History from Cornell University. Her dissertation focused on the cultural and eco-political significance of the divine feminine at three Angkor period sites. Her research investigates the relationship between landscape and built form, gender and sexuality, and the art historical links between premodern South and Southeast Asia. Following her graduation, she continued her research while working as the coordinator for the Science and Society Programme at the National Centre for Biological Sciences, Bangalore, India. She was a Postdoctoral Associate at the Franke Program in Science and the Humanities and a Fellow at the Whitney Humanities Center, both at Yale University. She is currently working on a book manuscript and planning her next fieldtrip to Cambodia.

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