

Jayavarman IV, however, did this outside of Angkor! Why could that be? The inscriptions are silent on that issue. We may rightly think that the relocation of the empire's capital was not only governed by the simple whim and non-regional patriotism of Jayavarman IV. Evidently, this major decision must have been the consequence of numerous factors. Or was it that perhaps he was reigning in a hornet's nest in the old capital region and he chose the 'warmth of his homeland' as a safer and more loyal environment? Was the decisive factor in the choice that the considerable sandstone and laterite reserves at Koh Ker offered easier and more rapid success in realising 'prestige developments'? Did Koh Ker have significant temporary resources that in the early 10th century added to the value of its earlier provincial role? Until now the most popular has been the interrogation of this latter question.

Perhaps this is because most people are dissatisfied with the hypothesis that a talented provincial ruler marrying into the royal family could rise above those already seeking the throne. Although perhaps Jayavarman IV was able to acquire political and military support—with his good sense of timing, perhaps also relying on his older connections, and preparing consciously to seize power—which enabled him to take it before the candidates from the families from the capital were ready to jump.

In Koh Ker the source of some 'extraordinary wealth' has been suspected for a long time, as many believe without that it would be more difficult to explain how Koh Ker could become the centre of the Empire as the only other option besides Angkor.

A popular view, although many are sceptical, is that the currently arid, poor and scarcely populated character of the area today mirrors the situation a thousand years ago. Based on that view, it was held for a long time that Koh Ker, as opposed to Angkor, had a disadvantage in that the local basic food supply was unable to support a large population.

This presumption is only partly true. In the central areas of Koh Ker a poorer quality of soil indeed has been registered, but to-date there are lands in the research area that are suitable as rice paddies with little investment of energy. Moreover, within the close proximity of a twenty kilometre radius the soil even today is expressly fertile. Considering all this, Koh Ker could not have competed with Angkor's by then excellently operating rice 'factories'. At the same time the question may arise: could securing the food supply of a centre populated by a few thousand

people really be such a difficult issue considering the appropriate logistics of an empire?

Since Koh Ker certainly could not have generated any extra income from rice farming, other hypotheses have been propagated: for example, that perhaps Koh Ker controlled the valuable science and raw material production of iron smelting and the closely connected production of arms. The weaker aspect of this view is perhaps that the known 'medieval iron forges' are located a considerable distance (several tens of kilometres south) from the Koh Ker centre.

Another interesting presumption is that the place perhaps possessed valuable 'natural resources'. Thus its contemporaneous name in the Khmer language in the principle seat inscription was: Chok Gar Gyar (dense koki-tree forest), it refers to the centre of the principality by the name of the *Hopea Odorata*, also known as iron-tree. Although this wood type is primarily valuable as a tropical material for furniture, its spread is so wide and its current use is so different from that in the Middle Ages that no firm conclusions can be drawn from that either.

Aware of the latest research results, there are some who try to explain Koh Ker's outstanding importance through strategic and logistical aspects. Experts conclude that the settlement developed because it was a natural port and junction of mainland routes and waterways (River Sen, Tonle Sap) as a site for loading and unloading. They see it as verifiable that the pilgrimage and trade routes, from Angkor to Wat Phu in current Southern Laos, i.e. from the west to the northeast, as well as from the north to the south, i.e. from Preah Vihear on the edge of the Korat Plateau to Angkor, also lead across this region. We expect that along the roadside archaeologists will find resting places, 'fire-keeping houses', 'hospitals', around 12-15 kilometres apart, just as dozens have already been mapped up along the road leading westward from Angkor, through the border crossing of today's Poipet towards Thailand. The laterite bridges uncovered on the road connecting Beng Mealea with Koh Ker seem to reinforce these presumptions. Perhaps that is precisely why, rather than agriculture based on irrigated rice farming, it was trade itself and then the later religious and militarily significant migrations that made this location difficult to avoid and thus made it prosper.

The expansion, structure and architectural periods of the territory of Koh Ker remain fascinating issues. The hypothesis can no longer be held that all significant buildings were constructed under the reign of Jayavarman IV. Although almost all the

35-40 shrine ruins uncovered in the mid 20th century are from the 10th century, today heritage experts have records of nearly 200 locations which, from an archaeological perspective, constitute an organic part of the medieval settlement structure. Such are, for example: basins with stone steps, high dykes stretching for kilometres, series of holes carved into rock that supported wooden piles for bridges, locks, reservoirs, fencing walls, basements of carved wooden palaces, terraces covered with stone slabs at

the transfer locations between waterways and highways, dried-out riverbeds with mythological figures carved into rocks — all await the archaeologists. Understanding the urban structure, resolving the history of the land that certainly has been transformed by the human hand over centuries promises numerous archaeological and historical discoveries.



Prang ***

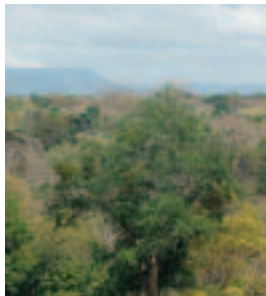
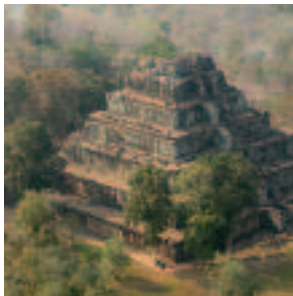


- Type:** monumental terraced mountain temple
- Visit:** 15 minutes, preferably early morning
- Curiosity:**
- The tallest Khmer pyramid
 - Steps only on the eastern side

Jayavarman IV, as he mounted the Angkor throne in 928, began the building of the largest Khmer „pyramid“ of all time. The terraced „pyramid“ shape was the due of state temples in Khmer ‘capitals’. In Angkor beautiful examples were built in the preceding century (e.g.: the Bakong and the Phnom Bakheng). The symbol of the state cult was placed in the shrine raised at the top of the mountain temple. In the case of Koh Ker that shrine is no longer present, but inscriptions praise its beauty and also the image of the enormous god, greater than any other, that was kept in it. In the history of Angkor, the Lord that stood above all other gods can be identified with the originally Hindu Shiva. His symbol is the linga, which inscriptions testify was larger than any previous one. The yoni, on which the linga traditionally sits, was held high by sixteen prancing lions. Its size led researchers to presume that the linga was roughly one metre in diameter and could well have been several metres tall. On the upper terrace of the 35-metre tall „pyramid“, considering the features of the classical tower, a shrine of at least five metres in height must have stood erect. It is easy to imagine that in the blooming of Koh Ker, the area must have had less tree-coverage and the mountain shrine, exceeding 40 metres, was in all probability visible some kilometres away.

A path leads to the „pyramid“ from the east through a 175 x 150 metre wall, actually from Prasat Thom. The „pyramid“ has a 62 x 62 metre ground plan and reaches six storeys, with one single set of steps leading to the top on the eastern side. However, unfortunately, they are at the moment impassable. It is true that only the details of the platform held by the lions can be seen currently on the upper terrace, yet the view above the tree-foliage is something for which it is worth hoping that the restoration work will be possible soon.

In the meantime, as an alternate, follow the track that goes round of the mountain temple on the north, which is the right side coming from the Prasat Thom. It leads us, climbing through the ruinous back wall, to Phno Sdach Damrei Sa, the Tomb of the White Elephant King, whose legend you can read in an earlier chapter of this booklet. From the top in good weather you can clearly make out the lines of Dangrek Mountains that form the border of Cambodia on the north.



Rahal (Baray) ***

- Type:** A huge, partly silted up baray
- Visit:** 5 minutes, more early morning or late afternoon
- Curiosity:** A thousand year-old artificial basin still containing water

Baray were the essential constructions of the Angkor centres, and so a reservoir worthy of the capital was built also at Koh Ker. The spectacle of the astonishing water surface, which stands at 1200 x 600 metres today, more than a thousand years after its construction, is reduced by large areas being silted up and covered by plants. Meanwhile, at the northwestern corner, along the main road, wet areas can be hoped for even in the late dry season. It is therefore here where we can get a glimpse of this vast reservoir. Quite often, one can spot bathing buffalos and cows in a distance as well, adding to the charm.

Rahal is a regular, rectangular reservoir established with classic Angkor technology (soil embankment, minimal deepening), yet it differs from the Angkor barays in several aspects. For example, the longer side is almost exactly twice the length of its shorter borders, and its orientation is not east-west but north-south. Also, the water yield of the nearby streams is less spectacular than that of the Angkor rivers that were deliberately redirected. Evidently, neither can be seen accidental.

The north-south orientation is attributed to the aspect of the surrounding hills. More precisely to the fact that the bed of the Rahal is actually a natural 'basin'. Thus, with the appropriate embankments it is easy to catch the waters flowing off the surrounding hills in the rainy season. The Rahal's dykes are therefore more marked to the north and west (the land slopes that way) and water remains here even in the dry season from the off flow that gathers. The water supply to the Koh Ker baray was ensured, in addition to the rain, by only a few modest streams. The most 'notable' of them can be found in the rainy season in the ditches among the smaller hills stretching behind the eastern dyke, roughly at the southeastern corner. A similarly minor brook (channel) taps the water from the basin in the northeastern corner (which also dries out in the dry season). The water storage capacity of Koh Ker's baray must be much less than it was in the old days, but even allowing for that it is difficult to imagine that in a reservoir maintained in perfect condition enough water could have accumulated to suffice for significant agricultural usage. Consequently, it is easier today to see Koh Ker's baray as a spectacular representation, a verification of royal prerogative and the realisation of an expected and accepted symbol.

