Capacity building and local knowledge: 15 years of site conservation in Angkor Wat

Hans Leisen

Cologne Institute of Conservation Sciences (Fachhochschule Köln/Cologne University of Applied Sciences)

In the region of Angkor with its multitude of temples a lot of international groups work for its preservation. The entirety of international projects is the world biggest preservation project coordinated by UNESCO. Angkor Wat is the principle monument of the Angkor World Heritage Site. Much of the surface of this extra-ordinary temple is decorated with carvings in bas-relief of battle scenes, of triumphant processions, of religious scenes and of single or groups of female figures. Nearly 1.850 of these female figures, popularly known as Apsaras, adorn the surface of Angkor Wat, many of them as well as parts of the Bas-reliefs and the pediments are in an extremely alarming state of preservation.

The German Apsara Conservation Project (GACP), directed by the author started research, conservation and maintenance of the carved surfaces of the temple of Angkor Wat in 1995. Funded by the Federal Foreign Ministry of the Federal Republic of Germany it has developed special methods and procedures that are specific to the very particular needs of this extra-ordinary site. The “high-tech” conservation and documentation techniques are the focal point of a training programme for young national and international conservators that play a key role in the process of sustainable development outlined by UNESCO. GACP is the only project in Angkor which is specialised in conservation of natural stone, architectural polychromy and wall paintings and which provides training in modern conservation methods for Cambodians. It works in collaboration with both UNESCO and APSARA National Authority towards the conservation of these unique monuments. In the year 2003 GACP has established the project GARUDA with the aim to extend the GACP activities to the other temples of the Angkor Park and to the remote heritage sites on the Kulen hill and the Koh Ker temple site.

Since 1997 the work of conservation is being performed by local conservators and by students and lecturers of the Cologne Institute of Conservation Sciences. The GACP team has at first set itself the goal of preventing the further rapid decay of the Apsaras. The present day conservation works are mainly concerned with the Apasaras, Bas-reliefs and pediments at Angkor Wat. However the GACP services are also requested by the APSARA National Authority and several international projects. At the moment GACP conservators are execution research and conservation work in eight different cooperation projects on several temples. Presently a team of 18 Cambodian restorers perform the daily conservation works at the Angkor temples.

Bio

Studies of Geology, Palaeontology, Mineralogy at Ludwigs-Maximilian-Universität, Munich/Germany

PhD in Geology, Tectonics, Remote Sensing at Ludwigs-Maximilian-Universität, Munich/Germany

Since 1990 professor for “conservation and restoration of stone objects and other inorganic porous materials” at Cologne University of Applied Sciences

National research projects at Cologne Cathedral, Rostock Cathedral, gravestones on Christian and Jewish cemeteries, Graffiti protection etc.

International research projects in Cambodia (conservation of the reliefs of Angkor), Egypt (preservation of the Ptolemaic temple Athribis, rock paintings and petroglyphs in Wadi Sura/Gilf Kebir), Uruguay (rock paintings in the province Flores), Turkey (Marble conservation in Milet)

Member of ICOMOS and ICOM
Publications


