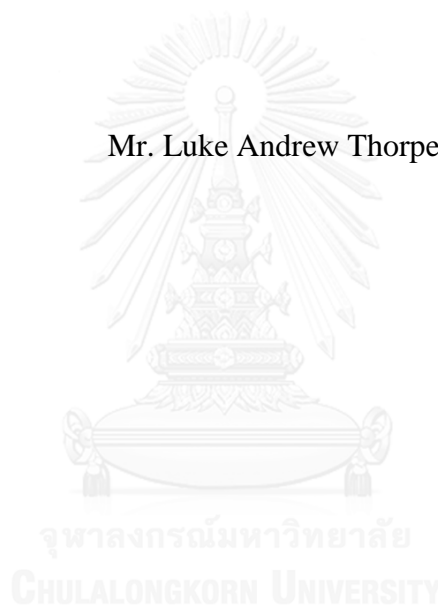


The Decline and Fall of Angkor in World History

Mr. Luke Andrew Thorpe



บทคัดย่อและแฟ้มข้อมูลฉบับเต็มของวิทยานิพนธ์ตั้งแต่ปีการศึกษา 2554 ที่ให้บริการในคลังปัญญาจุฬาฯ (CUIR)
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นักวิชาการซึ่งเป็นผู้เชี่ยวชาญได้ศึกษาเรื่องความเสื่อมและการล่มสลายของอาณาจักรเมืองพระนครมาเป็นเวลา 100 ปีแล้ว ความสำคัญของเรื่องนี้ในประวัติศาสตร์ก็มพูชาเป็นสิ่งที่ไม่เคยปรากฏมาก่อน งานวิจัยเรื่องนี้จะสืบสาววิวัฒนาการด้านประวัติศาสตร์นิพนธ์ของช่วงสมัยนี้ตามที่ได้ถูกผนวกเข้าไปในงานเขียนประวัติศาสตร์โลก ผู้วิจัยจะให้ภาพรวมของความคิดหลากหลายที่แสดงเหตุผลว่าเหตุใดอาณาจักรแห่งนี้จึงเสื่อมและล่มสลายลง จากนั้นงานวิจัยก็จะแสดงให้เห็นว่าประวัติศาสตร์นิพนธ์เกี่ยวกับเรื่องนี้ได้วิวัฒนาการควบคู่ไปกับการเขียนประวัติศาสตร์โลกอย่างไร งานวิจัยจะสรุปโดยการพิจารณาแนวคิดหลากหลายเกี่ยวกับลักษณะของความเสื่อมและการล่มสลายของอาณาจักรเมืองพระนคร และเสนอแนวทางใหม่ในการตีความเหตุการณ์นี้โดยอาศัยข้อค้นพบใหม่ๆ ทางวิชาการ โดยเน้นเป็นพิเศษทั้งในส่วนที่เป็นการรื้อฟื้นกระบวนการทัศน์ที่เคยยึดถือกัน และกรอบทางทฤษฎีอื่นๆ ที่จะเป็นประโยชน์ในแง่ของการศึกษาเปรียบเทียบ

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LUKE ANDREW THORPE: The Decline and Fall of Angkor in World
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Scholars have studied the decline and fall of the Angkorean kingdom for one hundred years. Its significance in the history of Cambodia is without precedent. This paper will trace the evolution of the historiography of this period as it has been incorporated into the writing of World History. The author will provide an overview of the various theses elucidating the reasons for the decline and fall of the kingdom. The paper will then demonstrate how this historiography has co-evolved with the writing of World History. The paper will conclude with a discussion of multitudinous conceptualizations of the nature of the decline and fall of the kingdom and offer several novel means of interpreting the event in light of both recent scholarly findings, with a particular emphasis on the revitalization of previously held paradigms, as well as additional useful comparative theoretical frameworks.

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Introduction

The decline and fall of Angkor is the most significant event in the history of Cambodia. Its occurrence formed four nations. The historical ramifications affected tens of millions of people who inhabit the former kingdom. The mystery which surrounds its demise continues to plague scholars. Was it a collapse precipitated by environmental changes both local and global? Was it a usurpation by an energized, ethnically homogenous conquest elite? Was it an exhaustion brought about by civilizational decadence? Was there a popular rebellion spurred by a radically egalitarian theology? Was it an economically rational abandonment in response to shifting international patterns of trade? Or was there no decline at all but, rather, a shift in power among competing elites who shared a similar set of beliefs who dispersed into competing polities that continued their contestation in newly-founded cities to their own advantage?

This thesis proposes to investigate the nature of the decline and fall of Angkor both as a unique historical conundrum itself as well as how this event has been written of by scholars who have ventured to write World History. This paper has three substantial sections. The first is an

outline of the century-long inquiry into the attempt to understand the seemingly intractable question of how such a socially and politically complex polity that characterized Angkor at its height could cease to exist as an important settlement of economic, military and political power.

The second section will seek into the complicated topic of how the decline and fall of Angkor has been assimilated into the writing of World History. This section will cover both those historians who have attempted to write World History independently as well as those who have written textbooks, encyclopaedias and dictionaries covering the topic of World History. The third, and concluding, section will assess the decline and fall of the Angkorean kingdom in a theoretical manner. It will determine the nature of this historical period by drawing upon disparate analytical models from a variety of disciplines. The author will assess whether the abandonment of Angkor was a collapse or a continuation of successive historical factors in Cambodian history. We will attempt to compare the nature of Angkor's fall to a variety of similar polities. The question will be raised if there are useful models from other historical periods that would be advantageous in the conceptualization of the fall of Angkor. Finally, we will attempt to utilize contemporary scholarly data in the rejuvenation of formerly discarded historiographical

schemes which could prospectively be fruitful in the understanding of the fall of Angkor.

Note on the sources for Late Angkor

Angkor collapsed without an erudite mind to tell its tale. The fullest account of the empire at its height was composed c. 1296-97 by a Chinese emissary.¹ The last inscription was composed in 1327.² Although this paper is not concerned with an investigation into the decline and fall of Angkor as a subject in its own right, it is worthwhile to note that much of what scholars have come to rely upon in their understanding of the event derives from disparate, and as we shall see, increasingly sophisticated, sources. These include chronicular records, of varying degrees of accuracy,³ from both Thailand and Cambodia, orals legends and accounts told to early European visitors, suppositions drawn from a study of the extant inscriptions, complex archaeological and climatological data and pure conjecture. It should be stated at the outset that this paper is a study of the *historiographical* record and how it has come to be incorporated into World History and, while the author will conclude the paper with suggestions regarding prospective

¹ Zhou Dagan (2007).

² Coedes (1968), pp. 228.

³ See Vickery (1977) for the preeminent account of the chronicular records.

conceptualizations regarding the nature of the decline and fall of Angkor, it is not an attempt to evaluate and propose the author's own theory concerning the event itself.⁴

The Historiography of the Decline and Fall of Angkor

The Pre-Colonial Period

“In the province still bearing the name of Ongcor, which is situated eastward of the great lake Touli-Sap...ruins of such grandeur, remains of structures which must have been raised at such an immense cost of labour, that, at first view, 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—a rival to that of Solomon, and erected by some ancient Michael 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 the nation is now plunged...one seeks in vain for any historical souvenirs of the many kings who must have succeeded one another on the throne of the powerful empire of Maha-Nocor-Khmer. There exists a tradition of a leprous king, to whom is attributed the commencement of the great temple, but all else is totally forgotten. The inscriptions, with which some of the columns are covered, are illegible; and, if you interrogate the Cambodians as to the founts of Ongcor-Wat, you invariably receive one of these four replies: “It is the work of Pra-Eun, the

⁴ For helpful papers analyzing the use of sources in the study of Angkorean history see Bourdonneau (2003), Groslier (1960 and 1986), Khin (1988), Nepote (2009) and Vickery (1998, particularly Chapter 1).

*king of the Angels; “It is the work of the giants; “It was built by the leprous king; or else, “It made itself.”*⁵

Of Lost Races, Giants and Leper Kings

The words of the Anglo-French explorer Henri Mouhot, quoted above, succinctly explicate the many folk memories of the fall of the Angkorean kingdom. As Chandler and Sokhieng have noted, the legend of the king with Hansen’s disease, while perhaps having a modicum of historical truth, is very likely to be a metaphor for the decline of the kingdom after the reign of Jayavarman VII.⁶ The affliction of leprosy upon the royal figure would have been viewed as a curse upon the ruling dynasty and a reflection of the kingdom writ small.

While the thought of Angkor having been built by angels or giants may seem fantastical, there are those who posit that this may, in fact, be a subtle hint that the temples were not constructed by the peoples who currently live among their ruins. This is a common theme found in Thai historiography,⁷ which will be discussed below, however, there are some who speculate that Angkor is part of a larger world-wide network of

⁵ Mouhot (1989), pp. 278-279.

⁶ Chandler (2008) and Sokhieng (2008). Chandler proposes that the leprous king was Indravarman II.

⁷ Charnvit Kasetsiri. “Thailand-Cambodia: A Love-Hate Relationship.” *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia* 3 (March 2003). Accessed at <http://kyotoreview.org/issue-3-nations-and-stories/a-love-hate-relationship/> on 25 October 2015.

temple structures which were erected based on the esoteric principles of archaeoastronomy and that their abandonment was due, in part, to the collapse of influence of the ruling faction which maintained this knowledge.⁸ The idea that the disparity between, as Mohout notes, the grandeur of the temples and the comparative level of social and political complexity of the contemporaneous inhabitants was so vast that it was difficult to contemplate any relationship between the two was the persistent theme running through the earliest speculations of Westerners who arrived in Cambodia.

Early Speculations

The earliest extant account by a Westerner of the fate of Angkor derives from a 1599 manuscript of the Portuguese explorer Diogo Du Cuoto who claimed that a Cambodian king “rediscovered” Angkor while on an elephant hunt and that “it is certain that this kingdom formerly belonged to the Chinese.”⁹ More than 150 years later the Jesuit priest Father Martin Martini in his work *Sinacae Historiae Decas Prima* would

⁸ Mason, Walter. The Lost City of Angkor Wat & the Mysteries of a Great Civilization. *New Dawn Magazine*. January 15, 2014. Accessed at <http://www.newdawnmagazine.com/articles/the-lost-city-of-angkor-wat-the-mysteries-of-a-great-asian-civilisation> on October 22, 2015 and “Quest for a Lost Civilization.” Accessed at <http://m.youtube.com/watch?v=T5DNvYMtkyk> on October 22, 2015.. The most serious work investigating the links between the construction of the temples and their astronomical alignment is Mannika (1996) which demonstrates the profound relationship between the layout of the temples both as a complex and in their internal structures with annual astronomical phenomena.

⁹ Groslier (2006), pp. 49-50.

reiterate this claim and even managed to pinpoint the date of 340 B.C. as the year a “Chinese emperor” constructed the temple complex.¹⁰

A frequent speculation of early Westerner visitors to Cambodia was that the temples were constructed by one of the most military ambitious of the Greco-Roman conquerors. F. Marcello e Ribdeneyra in his *Historia de Las Islas del Archipelago, y Reynos de la Gran China* writes the following in 1601:

“And according to the Spaniards who went to Camboja for the first time and other persons who have been before in this kingdom, they are in this kingdom ruins of an ancient town, which some say was built by Alexander the Great or the Romans, because its plans and fortifications make one think of them. And it is a surprising thing that none of the natives of this kingdom can live there, and so the only inhabitants are savage and wild beasts. And the Gentiles maintain the tradition that this town must have been built by foreigners.”¹¹

The implication of these speculations, of course, is that with the collapse of the respective empires of Macedonia and Rome, the temple-city at Angkor was abandoned.

The most curious conjecture was that the Angkorean temples were the work of Oriental Jews. This was first put forth by Gabriel Quiroga de San Antonio in his 1604 work *Breve y Verdadera relacion de los sucesos de Reyno de Camboxa*. He writes:

¹⁰ Groslier (2006), pp. 99-100.

¹¹ Groslier (2006), pp. 56-57. See also Lach pp. 1149. The long-time resident of Siam the Frenchman Nicolas Gervaise repeats the claim, in 1688, that Alexander the Great was the builder of Angkor. See Groslier (2006), pp. 99-100.

“...there are many Jews in the Kingdom of China; it is they who built in Camboxa the town of Angor which, as I have said, was discovered in the year 1570. They abandoned it when they emigrated to China, as the Jews of the East Indies related to me, when in passing by there, I asked them these questions...”¹²

It is reasonable to surmise that many of the earliest Westerners, having had strong Christian inclinations, believed that as the Jews were famously known to have been antiquity’s greatest temple builders and had spread throughout the world, it would not be incongruous to believe they could have constructed the temple complex at Angkor.

In retrospect, the earliest considerations were widely off the mark. However, given the then limited grasp of geography and the limited number of historical accounts it is easy for a contemporary to understand many of the suppositions. As early as 1609, Bartolome L. de Argesola wrote of the difficult nature of attempting to evaluate the fate of Angkor.

He wrote in his *Conquista de las Islas Malucas*:

“I confess that I have hesitated to write this; and that it seemed to me to be the imaginary city of *Atlantis* of Plato, or that of his *Republic*. But there is no fact or admirable event which does not encounter great skepticism...A Man versed in the world of books supposes that these are the works of Trajan. And although this person extended the Empire more than any of his predecessors, I have not read that he came as far as Camboxa. If the histories of China were as well known as ours, they would give us the reasons why such a large number of men emigrated.

¹² Groslier (2006), pp. 57. Also Groslier (2006), pp. 97 quoting the 1676 manuscript of Brother Domingo Fernandez Navarrette who speculates on all of the above: Jews, Romans or Alexander the Great. Lach also cites writings about “Chinese Jews” on pp. 1150.

They would explain the inscriptions of the monuments and everything else which even the natives do not know.”¹³

It would not be for another two hundred years before any serious attempt would be made to evaluate and understand the decline and fall of the Angkorean kingdom.

The Rise and Fall of Greater India

Interestingly, the earliest scholarly attempts to understand the decline and fall of the Angkorean kingdom did not come during the early French colonial period. Coalescing in the early 1920s a group of politically engaged Indian scholars and historians began to re-evaluate relations between India and Southeast Asia. These scholars formed the *Greater India Society* and used it as a vehicle to reassess the historical contacts between India and the peoples of Southeast Asia, in particular those lands which comprise modern-day Indonesia and Cambodia.¹⁴ This project stemmed from a broader debate among Western Orientalist scholars and their Asian counterparts regarding the nature of the “Indianization” of Southeast Asia.¹⁵ While the influence of India was then considered without question, the principal

¹³ Groslier (2006), pp. 59-60.

¹⁴ See the introductory chapter of Chong-Guan (2013) and Bayly (2004).

¹⁵ For overviews of the debate on “Indianization” see Wales (1967), Coedes (1968), Brown (1996) and Acharya (2013).

contention was the means by which Indian influence was spread throughout Southeast Asia. The scholars who contributed to this debate disagreed whether the driving force were itinerant merchants, sacral Brahmins or members of the princely-warrior caste. However, they all agreed that men originating from India were the impetus in the development of Southeast Asian high civilization. Their paramount exemplar was the prominent Indian nationalist historian R.C. Majumdar.

While Majumdar implicitly accepted that Indian emigration to Cambodia was the stimulant in the creation of its civilization, he posited that the downfall of Angkor arose from the military pressure of the “Thais.”¹⁶ This arose from the gradual erosion of Angkorean influence among their northwestern conquests which eventually evolved into the earliest Thai principality, Sukothai. Majumdar notes that “there is, however, no doubt that from the 14th century AD its (Angkor) power and prestige rapidly declined. The chief cause of this lay in the rapid progress of the Thais...”¹⁷

Majumdar and the school of thought stemming from the *Greater India Society* has continued to influence Indian historiography with

¹⁶ Majumdar (1944), pp.204-206, Majumdar (1957), pp. 742, Majumdar (1980), pp. 141-142. See also Kalidas (1926).

¹⁷ Majumdar (1977). pp. 483.

regards to the historical relationship between India and Cambodia.¹⁸

While the role of Indian influence has largely been tempered among contemporary scholars, it still exerts a great deal of influence among the lay public. However, the cross-influence of these ideas found fertile ground among contemporaneous scholars in close proximity to Cambodia.

Thai Historiography

The Thais have a rich historical tradition dating to the early Ayutthayan period. However, the modern historiographical form commenced in the early 20th century under royal patronage.¹⁹ While there has been an increasingly complex conceptualization of the decline and fall of Angkor within Thai historiography,²⁰ the principally unique feature of many Thai writings on the event cast it as a racial conflict between a newly emergent Thai confederation versus a “Khmer” people in rapid decline during the period in question.

This paradigm was heavily influenced by early Thai historians and writers who did not view the present-day Khmers as being the same peoples who, at the very least, founded, developed and ruled the ancient

¹⁸ See for example Bhattacharjee (1981) and Beri (1992) particularly pp. 129-135.

¹⁹ See “The Antiquarian Society of Siam Speech of King Chulalongkorn,” translated by Chris Baker (2001). See also Thongchai (1994 and 2011), Jory (2003) and Charnvit (1979)

²⁰ See Charnvit (1976) as the preeminent example.

Angkorean kingdom.²¹ An early example of this view was published by Prince Damrong Rajanuhab. In *The Journal of the Siam Society* in 1925, he wrote of “Angkor from a Siamese Point of View,”²² Damrong states that the “Khmer” of ancient Angkor are actually a combination of two different streams of “Indian immigrants” who intermarried with the locals to develop the “Khom” race and that the “South Indian kings” were the ones who built the city and its surrounding temples.²³ This view is further developed by *Luang Vichitir Vadakarn* in his 1941 work *Thailand’s Case*.²⁴ He states that “it is an established fact that the Khmers and the Cambodians are not the same people.”²⁵ Vichitir’s postulation is that the “Thai race” demographically overwhelmed the ancient “Khmers” and brought about the downfall of the ancient kingdom. To quote him at length:

“The Thai poured blood into Khmer veins with insinuating effect like water...The Khmers changed century by century. After five hundred years of blood mixture the Khmers became more and more similar to the Thais both physically and mentally...the coming-into existence of this new name “Camboja” marked the end of the old Khmer Race and the birth of a new people who have 90% of Thai blood. In the same way as the present Egyptians are not the same race as the Egyptians of Cleopatra, the modern Greeks are not the same race as the Greeks of

²¹ For the notion of the “Khom” in Thai historical writing see Charnvit (2003) and Bora Touch’s “The Thai’s Unique View of the Khmer People and History.”

²² Damrong (1925). See Breazeale (1971 and 1976) for an overview of the influence of Prince Damrong in the early development of modern Thai intellectual life and historical writing.

²³ Damrong (1925), pp. 142-143.

²⁴ Vichitir (1941).

²⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 129.

Socrates and the inhabitants of Rome at the present time are not the Romans of Julius Caesar, it is an established fact that the present Cambodians are not the Khmers of fifteen centuries ago.”²⁶

Writing during the same period *Phra* Sarasas shares a similar point of view noting that “the origins of the Khmer remains undetermined: nobody knows who they were or where they went. They simply vanished into thin air after having generated the Cambodians of the present day... probably the Khmer were swallowed up or absorbed by the Thai; leaving only the Cambodians as their acknowledged offspring.”²⁷ The two foundational features of Thai historiography regarding the decline and fall of Angkor are that the people who once ruled at Angkor are distinct from modern-day Cambodians and that the chief reason for Angkor’s collapse was Thai aggression.²⁸ As Sarasas concludes:

“(T)he Cambodian territory, little by little, became separated into a number of Thai feudal states, each governed by a Thai prince or a Thai king and quite independent of the others. And the kingdom of Cambodia shrank away like *kappa*; the frog-sun, in summer waiting for rain or death.”²⁹

²⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 129-130.

²⁷ Sarasas (1956 <1942>), pp. 19.

²⁸ See, for example, Rong (1993), pp. 32-33, Manich (1987), pp. 24-26 as well as Sarasas (1956), pp. 26-27.

²⁹ Sarasas (1956), pp. 25.

The “Gibbonian Trifecta”: Early Western Syntheses

It was not until the 1940s that Western scholars began to truly investigate the reasons for the decline and fall of Angkor. These studies began with the work of the eminent French philologist and Orientalist George Coedes.³⁰ His early works *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia* and *The Making of Southeast Asia* as well as his essays in various Orientalist journals exerted enormous influence on subsequent scholars, both Western and within Southeast Asia.³¹ While Coedes’ general histories concentrated on the Southeast Asian region as a whole, he had a rather straightforward perspective on the fall of Angkor. He posited that there was a general “crisis” of the thirteenth century arising from Mongol aggression throughout the northernmost areas of the Southeast Asian mainland. This compelled the Tai peoples to move south and develop “footholds” along the periphery of the Angkorean kingdom. Either on their own, or with Mongol assistance, the Tai peoples then waged aggressive war against the Angkorean kingdom until they managed to eventually establish their own principalities. This, in turn, weakened the outlying territories of the kingdom until the Thai were able to muster

³⁰ See Clementin-Ojha and Manguin (2007), pp. 128-129 for a biography of Coedes’ career in Southeast Asia.

³¹ Mukhom (2003), pp. 82-84 highlights Coedes’ lasting influence on Thai historians to the contemporary period.

sufficient forces to usurp power throughout a wide swathe of the western parts of the Angkorean kingdom leading to its sacking in 1431.³²

The earliest Western syntheses of the decline and fall of Angkor share a great number of similarities with Western Enlightenment accounts of the fall of the Western Roman Empire. These narratives, such as those of Montesquieu and Gibbon, highlight the themes of “decadence” and “spiritual exhaustion,” “barbarian” settlement along the imperial periphery and religious conversion as the principal factors in the collapse of a civilization.³³ The paradigmatic example of this school of thought is the first English language account of Angkor, published in 1951, by the American diplomat and Orientalist Lawrence Palmer Briggs.³⁴ In his narrative, Briggs traces the origin of Angkor’s downfall to both the physical settlement of the Thais along Angkor’s outlying provinces and the pernicious effect of the Theravada Buddhist form of worship. In a section titled the “Beginning of the Decadence” he notes that the:

“(F)orces of destruction were at work on the inside—a true ‘fifth column,’ under the form of Hinayanist bonzes, probably chiefly from Mon from the partly-Khmerized Mon region of Louvo... (who preached) a religion of the masses... (T)o the oppressed masses of Kambujadesa, who were compelled to construct and maintain enormous monuments and other works for their greedy gods, the presence of such a religion must

³² Coedes (1966), pp. 250-251 and Coedes (1983), pp. 195-196.

³³ Montesquieu (1734 <1965> and Gibbon (1776 <1993>). See, in particular, the introductory essay by the English historian Hugh Trevor-Roper in the Gibbon (1993) edition which traces the intellectual origins of his thesis.

³⁴ Briggs (1999 <1951>).

have been a high explosive for the State. Perhaps the most disastrous invasion of Kambujadesa was the peaceful penetration by the advance-guard of Hinayanist bonzes during the latter half of the thirteenth century.”³⁵

In addition to Mon-Thai monks, he remarks that this new form of worship was proselytized *via* prisoners, labourers and merchants amounting to a “superbolshevism” which undermined the hierarchical order of the Angkorean kingdom.³⁶ However, he believed that the successive Siamese invasions were an insufficient reason for the downfall of the kingdom.³⁷ He highlights the “building frenzy” which left the populace “exhausted,” “spiritless,” and “discontented” with their elites.³⁸ However, Briggs does note that the Thai conquests and usurpation of their western provinces led to a loss of revenue in internal trade as well as a loss of labor supply which undermined the means to maintain a sufficient labor supply for their hierarchical economic system and an army to withstand Thai aggression.³⁹ Inevitably, in Briggs’ estimation, the Angkorean elite, compelled by continual warfare, were forced to make a strategic retreat to a more secure position along the lower Mekong

³⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 242-243. For a more realistic appraisal of the rise of Theravada Buddhism in the region see the concluding chapter of Prapod (2006).

³⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 259.

³⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 258. See Briggs (1948) for his historiographical reconstruction of Siamese-Angkorean warfare in the period preceding the fall of the capital.

³⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 258-259.

³⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 259.

valley. Briggs, in his conclusion, theorizes that the “greatest factor” in the collapse of Angkor was the “internal transformation” of religious conversion which upended the unique basis of Angkorean civilization: its art and architecture.⁴⁰ He concludes his work by quoting the prominent French Orientalist Louis Finot:

“Like a serpent shedding its skin, the descendants of the fabled *naga* princess left their weary past behind them and moved on to a far region where they were no longer haunted by a nightmare of temples.”⁴¹

There are numerous examples of a similar theoretical model for the collapse of Angkor which continued to have influence throughout the 1950s and 1960s among Western scholars.⁴² As we will see below, this “Gibbonian Trifecta” of “decadence”/exhaustion,” religious conversion and “barbarian” invasion will be an influential synopsis, both for Cambodian and Southeast Asia broadly, for the fall of Angkor despite revisionist historical work to which we now turn.⁴³

The Revisionism of Michael Vickery

Beginning in the early 1970s, one scholar began to revitalize the way the decline and fall of Angkor occurred with a series of articles and an influential doctoral dissertation critiquing the Thai and

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 259-260.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, pp. 261.

⁴² See Herz (1958); pp. 16-21, MacDonald (1958); 60-63, Steinberg (1959); pp. 11, Giteau (1997); pp. 118 and Whitaker (1973); 27.

⁴³ See for example Tully (2006), pp. 50-51, who repeats these theses with little reference to later work on the economic and environmental factors concerning the decline of Angkor.

Cambodian chronicular records. Michael Vickery's 1977 doctoral dissertation *Cambodia After Angkor: the Chronicular Evidence for the Fourteenth to Sixteenth Centuries* amply demonstrates that nearly the entirety of the Thai and Cambodian chronicular tradition is, at best, anachronistically transposed or, more likely, largely fiction.⁴⁴ The implication being that nearly all of the previous historical work on the decline and fall of Angkor is speculation lacking empirical foundation. Instead, he proposed that since the chronicles are not helpful, it would be necessary to utilize external source material and a "higher level of abstraction."⁴⁵ Vickery states that "the question which needs to be asked and answered is whether any known developments of the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries can account for the decline of an inland agricultural empire and the rapid rise of its two former provincial centers located in favorable positions for maritime trade."⁴⁶ His answer is the shift in active Chinese maritime trade to a variety of seaports was the principal reason for the dissolution of Angkor.⁴⁷ Vickery contests the notion that Angkor "collapsed" but "would prefer to speak, not of a 'fall of Angkor,' but rather a gradual shift of power

⁴⁴Vickery (1977).

⁴⁵*Ibid*, pp. 510.

⁴⁶*Ibid*, pp. 517.

⁴⁷*Ibid*, pp. 517-520. See also Vickery (2004). Vickery uses Wolters (1975) as a heuristic device in his explication of the gradual shift of the Cambodian polity southwards to the riverine ports due to changes in regional commercial relations.

from Angkor to two new centers, Ayutthaya and Phnom Penh-Lovek, both on the lower courses of rivers with good access to the sea.”⁴⁸ As we will see below, Vickery’s “revisionism” would come to exert a great deal of influence on the historiography of not only this period of Angkorean history, but Southeast Asia as whole. His notion not of a collapse but a continuum of Angkorean tradition on mainland Southeast Asia will be discussed in greater detail in the concluding section of this paper.

Environmental Collapse

At the same time as Vickery was working on his revisionist interpretation of the decline and fall of Angkor, another scholar was developing the second theoretical model which would come to be the most influential in contemporary analyses of the event. Although, as we will see below, the idea that environmental factors played a crucial role in Angkor’s collapse was proposed very early in the historiography, it was the writings of the Cambodian-born French archaeologist and historian Bernard Phillippe Groslier which would become pivotal in spurring this interpretation.⁴⁹ In 1979 Groslier published his ground-breaking essay “The Angkorian Hydraulic City: Exploitation or Over-Exploitation of the

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 511.

⁴⁹ See the introduction by Lustig and Pottier in Groslier (2007) for the origins of Groslier’s thinking as well as the most thorough bibliography of works outlining this thesis.

Soil?” In the paper Groslier argues, in contrast to the majority of previous scholars, that the city of Angkor and its system of canals and *baray* (water reservoirs) were designed for practical, agricultural purposes. He famously noted:

“Even if it did not permit two (or three) harvests every year and if, on the other hand, it guaranteed the season’s rice harvest beyond doubt by smoothing out the effects of the accidental variations of climate, the hydraulic city fulfilled its role. It certainly amounted to a decisive leap forward, and history attests to its success in that it developed continuously, with the principles being repeated identically...it is only where hydraulic cities were developed that the Khmer could put up mountains of stone.”⁵⁰

Yet, Groslier points out that the nature of developing a city in this fashion held inherent flaws which would lead to its eventual downfall. The Khmer “once they adopted their course of action, they found themselves as if dragged down the slope without any power to stop themselves.”⁵¹ He cites two principal causative factors for the failure of the city. The first was the extensive deforestation in the clearing of land stretching from the city of Angkor proper north towards the Kulen mountains for the purpose of agriculture. While Groslier speculates that this deforestation may have been a breeding ground for new forms of

⁵⁰ Groslier (2007), pp. 171-172.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, pp. 174.

virulent malaria,⁵² of far greater effect of this process of agricultural expansion was the concomitant scale of the water system itself and the second-order effect of siltation. Groslier stresses:

“(T)he extension of the Angkorian network lengthened the time of storage, and stretched the distances travelled; in short it continually accentuated the decantation of the silt-laden waters. To put it another way, the deposits of fine elements-enriching-decreased with distance, with area irrigated, with the time of storage, and with the speed of circulation of the water. From irrigation with ‘red’ water, one passed to irrigation with less and less beneficial ‘white’ water...”⁵³

Put succinctly, as the scale of the system increased the ability of the canals and *baray* to sustain water with the rich nutrients needed for annual multi-cropping failed, thus, undercutting the very basis of maintaining the “hydraulic city.” Groslier concludes that “there are good reasons to think that, up to the middle of the eleventh century, progress was indeed steady. But after this period, agricultural exploitation had attained the peak of the curve and it remained only for it to decrease...in conclusion, it is clear that the Angkorian hydraulic city was a system of exploitation of space admirably adapted to the countryside, which permitted the blossoming, then the triumph of this civilisation. It reached, no less evidently, at just two-thirds of the way through its

⁵² *Ibid*, pp. 177.

⁵³ *Ibid*, pp. 175.

history, as a sort of blockage of itself which finally condemned it to asphyxiation.”⁵⁴

Because of the three decade civil war, scholars were not able to adequately test Groslier’s hypothesis. But starting in the early 2000s several teams of archaeologists began work which, with some modifications, confirmed much of Groslier’s prior speculations.⁵⁵ It should also be noted that Cambodia’s most distinguished architect, Vann Molyvann, in his work on the history of Cambodia’s urban settlements, came to similar conclusions as Groslier citing causative factors in the collapse of Angkor as deforestation, siltation of both the hydraulic system as well as the nearby Tonle Sap Lake, decrease in the underlying water table due to geologic shifts, and malaria.⁵⁶

Even more recent work on paleoclimatology has shed further light on the environmental factors which likely induced the collapse of Angkor. Brendan Buckley, in 2010, published his study of tree rings in south Vietnam has noted that the seven driest years during the seven century physical record occurred in the early 1400s.⁵⁷ This extended dry period were then proceeded by wide-scale flooding in the years prior to what is generally considered to be the year Angkor was abandoned, 1431. He

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 177-178.

⁵⁵ *Greater Angkor Project* (2003).

⁵⁶ Vann (2003), pp. 46-51.

⁵⁷ Buckley, *et al* (2010), pp. 6748.

posits that a “multi-decadal scaled period of weakened monsoon in the mid to late fourteenth century and a shorter though at times more severe drought in the early fifteenth century... (led to) Angkor’s eventual demise.”⁵⁸ Buckley contends that both the southern running canals into the city as well as the Angkorean “port” at Phnom Krom rapidly silted thus destroying the fundamental infrastructure of the city.⁵⁹ This data point is backed up by a team of Japanese paleoclimatologists led by Yoshinori Yasuda who, utilizing stratigraphical analysis, found flood deposits in the moat surrounding Angkor Thom during the same period.⁶⁰ Yasuda agrees with Buckley when she writes that “the accumulation of the sand layer-caused by deterioration of climate-was one of the major contributing factors for the demise of Angkor.”⁶¹

These localized environmental effects were, according to the scholars discussed, part of a larger shift in climate that roughly coincided with the period of Angkor’s history. The early success of Angkorean expansion coincided with the Medieval Climate Anomaly and the ability for the Khmer to have multiple annual rice harvests and the subsequent boom in demographic and economic windfalls this would entail.⁶² The subsequent

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 6749.

⁶⁰ Yasuda (2013), pp. 348.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Lieberman and Buckley (2012), pp. 1050-1056.

movement south of the Intertropical Convergence Zone⁶³ and the commencement of the Little Ice Age during the period of reduced precipitation⁶⁴ wreaked havoc on the ability of Angkor to maintain itself as a kingdom dependent on a continually expanding agricultural and demographic surplus. Yasuda is confident in stating that on a local scale:

“The dramatic cooling that began in AD 1430 and the associated weakening of the southwest monsoon may have crippled the cycle of rice cultivation in Cambodia. This may have been the ultimate cause of the demise of the Angkorian civilization... This discovery is the first concrete scientific evidence that supports the role of environmental change in the decline of the Angkor kingdom... our findings do not support the theories that the decline of Angkor had been brought about by social factors which would be manifested as a more gradual downfall.”⁶⁵

Lieberman and Buckley generalize this evidence into a broader framework by noting that “traditionally scholars have explained the ‘fall’ of Pagan, Angkor and Dai Viet by focusing on local, *sui generis* politics and institutions. *Now climate, for the first time, helps to provide a coherent regional narrative.*”⁶⁶

To summarize the arguments of the scholars who argue that the fall of Angkor was a “collapse” brought about by environmental factors, we should note that it is a two-level theory. Recent findings emphasize a large-scale historical change in climate which, in its early phase,

⁶³ Buckley (2010), pp. 6750

⁶⁴ Yasuda (2013), pp. 353 and Lieberman and Buckley (2012), pp.1096.

⁶⁵ Yasuda (2013), pp. 353-354.

⁶⁶ Lieberman and Buckley (2012), pp. 1075. Emphasis in the original.

facilitated the growth of Angkor as an inland agrarian kingdom. This early phase provided the means for the development of what Groslier has termed the “hydraulic city.” At the latter end of the climate cycle, the means by which Angkor had developed became an impediment to its continued sustenance and the reversal led to its collapse due to the inherent inability to adapt to changes in the environment which permeated down to the local level encompassing the city of Angkor proper and its immediate surroundings.⁶⁷

Southeast Asian Historiography

The concept of “Southeast Asia” has been contentious since its inception. In this section we will evaluate how the historiography of the decline and fall of Angkor has been incorporated into texts which have explicitly sought to write the history of the region. The evolution of the historiography has a noticeable pattern which reflects an adoption of the latest scholarly research by Cambodian specialists into the writing of general regional histories. As the theoretical framework of the investigation into late Angkor has developed there has been a mutual

⁶⁷ There is another speculative wrinkle to the environment as a causative factor in the collapse of Angkor in the form of plague, or the “Black Death,” that the author has chosen not to incorporate due to a lack of sufficient evidence. However, for those interested one can consult Terweil (1997), Reid and Jiang (2006) and Gundersen (2015) for attempts to hypothesize about what impact, if any, the transmission of plague to the Angkorean kingdom may have had in its demise. See also Boomgaard (2007) for an overview of the history of the environment in Southeast Asia.

influence in the writing of Southeast Asian history. Because of the complex and significant nature of the Angkorean polity there has been a reciprocal influence between the study of Angkor and the writing of regional history which we will now investigate.⁶⁸

The earliest text strictly covering the history of Southeast Asia was D.G.E. Hall's *A History of South-East Asia*.⁶⁹ His 1955 first edition noted that the principal factor in the fall of Angkor were the successive waves of Thai invasions.⁷⁰ However, his 1962 third edition expanded the concept into the tripartite formulation we saw above in the earliest Western syntheses. He notes:

“(R)oyal megalomania, showing itself in increasing extravagance in building and in wasteful wars of aggression undermined the economy and bred discontent with the established order. And when the machine was already beginning to show signs of strain, the persistent Tai raids deep into the metropolitan area ultimately wrecked it beyond repair.”⁷¹

Yet, the “most potent factor” was the “conversion of the people to the Buddhism of the Sinhalese Mahavihara sect.”⁷² This line of reasoning was continued for the next two decades amongst Southeast Asian historical texts. The southern advance of the Mongols and the conversion

⁶⁸ For studies on the nature of “Southeast Asia” as a concept see the following: Benda (1962), Emmerson (1984), Shaffer (1994), Andaya (2002 and 2006), Sutherland (2003) and Ablahin (2011).

⁶⁹ D.G.E. Hall (1955).

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 117-118.

⁷¹ D.G.E. Hall (1962), pp. 135.

⁷² *Ibid*, pp. 124.

to Theravada Buddhism were viewed as the principal causative factors in the works of Harrison,⁷³ Fisher,⁷⁴ Cady⁷⁵ and Tarling.⁷⁶ This tradition even had later proponents such as SarDesai⁷⁷ and can be found in Duncan Stearn's *Chronology of South-East Asia: 1400-1996*.⁷⁸ As late of 2014, Cotterell's general history of the region repeated the dual reasons of Thai aggression and religious conversion.⁷⁹

Eventually, the revisionist scholarship began to emerge in the region's texts. Milton Osborne, whose general histories would go through thirteen editions over three decades,⁸⁰ would be the first regional historian to incorporate the notion of a collapsed irrigation system as one of the important factors in the abandonment of Angkor.⁸¹ He would eventually come to conclude that it would be more fruitful "to think in terms of a changing pattern than in terms of decline and fall" and that simply because "Angkor collapsed in large part, because its economic structure could not be maintained under the pressure exerted by the newly powerful Thais" Angkorean forms did not cease to exist because the

⁷³ Harrison (1955), pp. 38-40.

⁷⁴ Fisher (1964), pp. 115.

⁷⁵ Cady (1964), pp. 110.

⁷⁶ Tarling (1966), pp. 17-18.

⁷⁷ SarDesai (1994 and 2010), pp. 29-30.

⁷⁸ Stearn (1997), pp. 15.

⁷⁹ Cotterell (2014), pp. 65.

⁸⁰ See Osborne (1979, 1997 and 2013)

⁸¹ Osborne (1979), pp. 27-28.

This proceeded to “absorb” the high culture of the civilization it bested.⁸²

The influential work *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia* would cement the previous revisionist theses into the new orthodoxy. It notes that “the end of Angkorean history came not with a dramatic collapse but rather as a reorientation of the Khmer polity...from a continental empire to maritime entrepot” with a change in religion from one that was “priestly to one that was monastic.” This occurred because of the complex relationship and competition between Ayutthaya and Angkor for seaborne access and maritime trade.⁸³ All future general histories accepted the revisionist causations as paramount in their explanation for the decline and fall of Angkor including Church,⁸⁴ Ricklefs,⁸⁵ Andaya⁸⁶ and Reid.⁸⁷ Neher summarizes the new paradigm well by incorporating both the classical conceptualizations with the revisionist framework when he writes:

“Angkor declined in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and its temples later became overgrown by jungle. The kingdom’s exhaustion was brought about by extravagant building projects, debilitating wars against the Siamese, conflicts among rival dynasties, the deterioration of

⁸² Osborne (1997), pp. 27.

⁸³ Tarling (1999), all quotes are from pp. 163 citing the work of Vickery.

⁸⁴ Church (2009), pp. 15.

⁸⁵ Ricklefs, *et al* (2010), pp. 109.

⁸⁶ Andaya and Andaya (2015), pp. 68 and 122.

⁸⁷ Reid (2015), pp. 53-54. Although Reid places greater emphasis on the possibilities of plagues and malaria due to changes in international commerce and global weather patterns.

the elaborate hydraulic network, debilitating epidemics of diseases such as malaria, and the increasing importance of overseas trade (meaning the capitals needed to be closer to the sea). Also contributing was the rise of Theravada Buddhism, with its egalitarian message. Buddhism undermined the rigid and elitist hierarchy because it did not support the belief in god-kings.”⁸⁸

In sum, the evolution of the decline and fall of Angkor as conceived in Southeast Asian regional texts closely paralleled that of the specialist literature with increasing attention being paid to the revisionist works as they became disseminated throughout the broader scholarly community.

Angkor in World History

Introduction

During his incarceration in a British colonial prison for subversive political activities, the future Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, wrote a letter to his daughter, Indira, explicating on the significance of the fall of Angkor in world history. He notes:

“In the thirteenth century Cambodia was attacked on several sides. The Annamese attacked in the east, the local tribes in the west. And in the north the Shan people were driven south by Mongols, and finding no other way of escape, they attacked Cambodia. The kingdom was tired out by this constant fighting and defending itself. Still the city of Angkor continued to be one of the most splendid cities in the East...But suddenly Angkor suffered a terrible catastrophe. About 1300 A.C. the mouth of the river Mekong became blocked by deposits of mud. The waters of the

⁸⁸ Neher (2010), pp. 36.

river could not flow through, and they backed up and flooded the entire region round the great city, turning fertile field into a great area of useless marshlands. The large population began to starve. It could not stay on, and was forced to leave the city and migrate. So “Angkor the Magnificent” was abandoned, and the jungle came and took possession of it, and its wonderful buildings housed wild animals for a while, till the jungle reduced the palaces to dust and reigned unchallenged. The Cambodian State could not survive this catastrophe for long. It collapsed gradually and became a province sometimes ruled by Siam, sometimes by Annam. But even now the ruins of the great temple of Angkor Vat tell us something of the days when a proud and splendid city stood nearby...”⁸⁹

What is most interesting about Nehru’s account of the fall of Angkor is not that he wove many of the variegated theses together regarding the abandonment of the kingdom’s capital but that he incorporated the fall of Angkor more broadly in a work entitled *Glimpses of World History*. Nehru’s writing was the first to attempt to place the fall of Angkor in a world historical perspective that covered both Eastern and Western histories in a comparative effort. While many of his empirical points are rejected by contemporary scholars his work is a fascinating lodestone in the historiography of Angkor in World History.

An equally intriguing work is one of the earliest textbooks which places the fall of Angkor in World History is a text used for high school students in colonial British Malaya entitled *South-East Asia in World History, Book One: The Growth of Civilization*. This 1964 textbook

⁸⁹ Nehru (1949 <1934>), pp. 250-251. See Kopf (1991) for a background to the writing of Nehru’s world history.

utilizes the development and sustainment of world religions as the focal point of their comparative perspective.⁹⁰ It posits the dual causes of religious conversion and Thai invasion as the principal factors in the fall of Angkor by noting:

“Because of these beliefs (Hinduism) the Khmer people were prepared to spend vast sums of money and a great deal of labour on building temples and cities for each ruler. But this proved a heavy burden on the country, especially on the ordinary farm-workers who had to pay heavy taxes and do most of the building work. Then from the thirteenth century onwards a new form of Buddhism spread through South-East Asia from Burma...When this new Buddhism reached the Khmer people they found it attractive and simple. As a result many of the Khmer people began to turn away from the costly beliefs of their rulers to follow Buddhism. Thus gradually the Angkor kings lost their hold on the people. A further reason for the downfall of Angkor was the arrival of a new people, the Thais...In 1431 the Thais attacked and destroyed Angkor.”⁹¹

It is to the textbooks, encyclopaedias and dictionaries which endeavour to explain World History that we now turn in an attempt to understand how the decline and fall of Angkor has been incorporated into these texts.

⁹⁰ Hilton and Tate (1964), pp. v-vi.

⁹¹ Hilton and Tate (1964), pp. 106-107.

The Fall of Angkor in World History: Textbooks, Encyclopaedias and Dictionaries⁹²

In a similar fashion to the evolution of the incorporation of the fall of Angkor into Southeast Asian history, the reasons invariably changed to reflect the latest in the specialist scholarly literature. While the very earliest texts made no mention of Angkor at all,⁹³ the first World History texts heavily emphasized the concept of a Mongol southward thrust which pushed the Tai peoples deeper into mainland Southeast Asia and served as the causal factor in the collapse of Angkor. The 1963 *Larousse Encyclopedia of Ancient and Medieval History* states that “the Mongol invasion led directly to the decline of the Khmer empire” with the Thai being the principal factor in the final collapse.⁹⁴ This theme was repeated the following year by Burns with the added generalization that it was competition among newly formed states which were affected by the new Mongol order which precipitated Angkor’s downfall.⁹⁵ Even one of the

⁹² The author surveyed 35 World History textbooks, dictionaries and encyclopedias ranging from the year 1940 to 2014. The recommended reading lists from the World History Association accessed at: <http://www.thewha.org/resource-links/bibliographies-recommended-books/>, the World History Connected Journal accessed at http://worldhistoryconnected.press.illinois.edu/3.2/ap_and_college.html, and the Advanced Placement website accessed at http://www.collegeboard.com/html/apcourseaudit/courses/world_history_textbook_list.html were included as well as those available at the Chulalongkorn University and Siam Society libraries.

⁹³ See, for example, Langer (1940 and 1948) and Lucas (1943).

⁹⁴ Duncan (1963), pp. 391.

⁹⁵ Burns (1964); pp. 302.

forefathers of World History, the eminent William McNeill, in his first World History text proposed this thesis.⁹⁶

The idea would later be repeated by both Braudel and Upshur in the general works of World History.⁹⁷ However, the preeminent example of this line of reasoning can be found in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural *History of Mankind: Cultural and Scientific Development, Volume III: Medieval Civilizations*. The collective of authors of this text state that Southeast Asia, as a whole, “showed... a marked trend towards decline from the beginning of the fourteenth century.”⁹⁸ They note that the “magnitude of the work of this most magnificent of the kings (Jayavarman VII) undoubtedly had its effect on the decline that followed that almost too brilliant reign”⁹⁹ but it was the significance of the Mongol southward drive which propelled the Tai speaking peoples into mainland Southeast Asia which was the precipitating factor.¹⁰⁰ The unique wrinkle the authors add, interestingly, is that the general crisis of Southeast Asia during the period of the decline and fall of Angkor was the after effects of the Turko-Islamic dominance

⁹⁶ McNeill (1967), pp. 269. He repeated this claim in the 3rd, and final, edition of his work stating, on pg. 337, that the “Burmese came down from the north at about the same time as the Thais. Both of these newcomers were dislodged by Chinese expansion.”

⁹⁷ Braudel (1993); pp. 258-261 and Upshur (1990); pp. 300.

⁹⁸ Wiet, *et al*, (1975). pp. 236.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 238.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, pp.238-239.

of India which “cut off the Indianized Far East from the flow of sap that had continually nourished it and the old indigenous background itself everywhere broke through the veneer of Hindu ideas...”¹⁰¹ The general implication, not dissimilar to the thesis of earlier Indian nationalist historians, is that once the influence of high Indian culture no longer was dominant in Angkor, it gave way to more localized traditions and mores and thus made it susceptible to internal weakness and eventual external exploitation.

Although World History textbooks, such as Gay and Garraty, Stearns and Adler,¹⁰² still maintained propositions from earlier historiographical traditions, such as religious conversion and popular rebellion, the majority of the more recent writers began to utilize a multivariable account which incorporated revisionist themes into their explication of the decline and fall of Angkor. An excellent example of this change was the widely used text *Civilizations*, published in 2000, by the prominent world historian Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, who explained the fall of Angkor thusly:

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, pp. 240. It is the author’s contention that the influence of the Indian historian R.C. Majumdar, who was the Indian representative for the UNESCO World History project may have had a role in formulating the novel thesis with regards to the suppression of Indian Hindu culture in the face of Islamic invasion and that this was the reason for India’s retreat from Southeast Asia as a whole. See Duedahl (2011) for an account of the writing of the UNESCO texts.

¹⁰² See Gay and Garraty (1972); pp. 358, Stearns (1995); pp. 211 and Adler (2003); pp. 222. The latter notes that “Hindu belief was supplanted by Hinayana Buddhism” and while there was continual attacks on the kingdom during this period, he believes that this religious conversions “seems to have been as much a consequence as a cause of the decline of royal powers.” pp. 222.

‘(T)he Khmer were not committed to long-range trade in the manner of such really successful states in the region in the late Middle Ages...Nor could the elite of Angkor continue indefinitely to pay for armies, any more than for lavish building projects, on the old scale...the Thai state grew in wealth, dynamism and aggression while the Khmer stagnated. Eventually, in the 1430s, the Khmer withdrew into a more compact defensive ring, centered on Phnom Penh and left Angkor, after the Thai had carried off whatever booty could be carried, to the forest.’¹⁰³

Fernandez-Armesto highlights the shift in international commerce which an inland agrarian kingdom, as that of Angkor, could no longer compete and the Thai state, which had grown increasingly wealthy due to overseas trade, began to overtake it in the ability to maintain an army which was eventually utilized for aggressive purposes.

A similar adoption of revisionist arguments can be found in the highlighting of the collapse of the complex system of irrigation works which sustained the abundant rice fields surrounding the kingdom’s capital which provided it with its surplus of men and wealth. The texts of Lockard and Duiker and Spielvogel pinpoint this as one of the principal reasons for the deterioration of Angkor and its eventual abandonment.¹⁰⁴ Buliet is specific in emphasizing that the irrigation system is the overriding factor in the fall of Angkor by stating that “in the fifteenth century, the great Cambodian system fell into ruin when

¹⁰³ Fernandez-Armesto (2000), pp. 250-251.

¹⁰⁴ Lockard (2011); pp. 259 and Duiker and Spielvogel (2014); pp. 240.

the government that maintained it collapsed.”¹⁰⁵ He makes the comparison to the irrigation of Ceylon and the concomitant outbreak of virulent malaria and subsequent invasions which, as we will see below, will be an influential theme for those scholars who attempt to write World History as a whole.

However, the most surprising aspect of this inquiry was not the evolution of the historiography of the fall of Angkor one finds in world history textbooks, but the fact that the near majority of texts the author surveyed make *no mention at all* of its occurrence. Of the 35 textbooks examined, 17 do not mention the decline and fall of Angkor whatsoever. This includes the extremely influential early world historian Leften Stavrianos whose World History textbooks served as a guide for many future world historians. His textbooks went through dozens of editions from 1970 through the early 1990s, yet never once mentioned the fall of Angkor.¹⁰⁶ The seven volume *Encyclopedia of World History*, published in 2008, makes no mention of Angkor.¹⁰⁷ The 21 volume *World History Encyclopedia*, published in 2011, merely has a map of the kingdom with no entry.¹⁰⁸ Other World History textbooks, encyclopedias and dictionaries that make no

¹⁰⁵ Buliet (2011), pp. 370.

¹⁰⁶ See Stavrianos (1970) and (1990).

¹⁰⁷ Ackerman (2008).

¹⁰⁸ Andrea (2011).

mention of the fall of Angkor include Tannenbaum,¹⁰⁹ Strayer,¹¹⁰ Spodek,¹¹¹ Boyd¹¹² and Craig.¹¹³ Even World History textbooks published in the last decade which, often, heavily emphasizes non-Western civilizations and peoples and the general interactions between these societies make no mention of the event. These textbooks include Tignor,¹¹⁴ Reilly,¹¹⁵ Goucher¹¹⁶ and the prominent historian Richard Overy's *Complete History of the World*.¹¹⁷

In sum, while the evolution of the historiography found, primarily within World History textbooks themselves, has evolved coterminous with the pace of the rapidly evolving literature among specialists of the decline and fall of the Angkorean kingdom, there is still a paucity in the form as a whole, particularly acute in World History references such as encyclopedias. Before we turn to the depiction of the decline and fall of Angkor in the writing of World History itself, a note should be briefly made on the historiography of World History in the 20th and 21st centuries.

¹⁰⁹ Tannenbaum (1973).

¹¹⁰ Strayer (1989).

¹¹¹ Spodek (1998).

¹¹² Boyd (1999).

¹¹³ Craig (2003).

¹¹⁴ Tignor (2008).

¹¹⁵ Reilly (2009).

¹¹⁶ Goucher (2013).

¹¹⁷ Overy (2012).

A Note on the Historiography of World History

Although there have been attempts by scholars to write World History prior to the 20th century,¹¹⁸ the general scholarly consensus is that the writing of World History is a twentieth-century endeavor which began in the second decade at the conclusion of the First World War. These early attempts, particularly those by Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee, sought to elaborate an overall Philosophy of History which encompassed the entire world, or at least its principal composite civilizations, into an ordered whole with defining characteristics of genesis, sustenance, decay and eventual dissolution.¹¹⁹ Gradually, these efforts were superseded by a plethora of critiques which highlighted their putative “Eurocentrism,” lack of concern for economic matters, dismissal of disparate factors such as the impact of various environmental causes such as climate and disease, as well as a disregard for power relations between the diverse civilizations and peoples of the world for whom they claimed to write their history.¹²⁰ Eventually, the “classical” interpretations of World History gave way to a “revisionist” school which came to emphasize global

¹¹⁸ See, for example, Harbsmeir (1989) and Subrahmanyam (2005).

¹¹⁹ Bentley (1995); pp. 5-8.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*; pp. 13-21.

macroeconomics, trade and cultural interconnections, an emphasis on worldwide environmental change and a “de-centering” of the previous accentuation of the Western world to one of a World History on a truly global scale. This formulation now characterizes the “orthodox” school of thought which is now dominant and forms a near total scholarly consensus.¹²¹ It is with this evolution in the historiography in mind that we now turn to how the decline and fall of Angkor has been treated in the works of 20th and 21st century writings on World History.

Angkor in World History

Given the discussion above regarding the protracted delay in the scholarly discussion of the decline and fall of Angkor, it is not surprising that the very earliest attempts in writing World History during the first two decades of the 20th century did not include this event in their work. For example, Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*¹²² does not mention Angkor at all. The only writer who does mention Angkor is H.G. Wells in his *Outline of History* where he makes an erroneous and

¹²¹ See Manning (2003), McNeill (1990), O’Brien (2001 and 2006), Segal (2000) and Allardyce (1982 and 1990). For critiques of the “revisionist” interpretation of World History see Duchesne (2001, 2009 and 2011 particularly Chapter 1), Hall (2004) and Dawson (2003).

¹²² Spengler (1947 <1923>)

anachronistic assertion about the nature of the Khmer kingdom.¹²³ The first world historian to seriously take up the question of the decline and fall of Angkor is the eminent British historian Arnold Toynbee who would serve as one of the two founts for future world historians in their conceptualization of the fall of Angkor.

In the opening volume of his *A Study of History, The Geneses of Civilizations*, Toynbee reiterates the then current thesis that Angkorean civilization “was not native to the soil but was imported ready-made from overseas, Cambodia was a colonial outpost of the Hindu civilization, and not a region with an independent civilization of its own” and that “by establishing itself there cannot have been a spontaneous product of this environment, since it remains bears evidence that it originated far away, in India.”¹²⁴ Whereas it is generally accepted that this thesis is, at least in this forceful form, inaccurate, Toynbee goes on to make a heretofore prescient point in the opening pages of his second volume, *The Range of Challenge and Response*, which would become a dominant theme in the conceptualization of Angkor’s fall among world historians. He notes the striking similarity between Angkor and Medieval Ceylon in that both

¹²³ Wells (1940 <1920>). Wells asserts that there was significant Chinese influence on Angkor during the 8th-9th centuries, pp. 590-591. To note another, later, writer, Carrol Quigley, in his *The Evolution of Civilizations* (1979) does note that Angkor is a “major” civilization in a manner similar to Toynbee, but does not include the Khmer civilization in his overall work. See pp. 83.

¹²⁴ Both quotes from Toynbee (1934) Vol. 1 pp. 261.

were “jungle civilizations” with extensive irrigation systems.¹²⁵ In commenting on this fact, Toynbee records that, as the irrigation system of Ceylon collapsed it led to virulent outbreaks of malaria and a concomitant civil war.¹²⁶ The implication being that a similar fate befell Angkor. Toynbee concludes, with typical flourish, that “when the jungle swallows the village up, we realize in retrospect that we have been reading a tale of human prowess which surpasses the tale told by the ruins of Angkor Wat.”¹²⁷

The comparison of Angkor to Ceylon would continue in the work of the most pivotal writer to influence the “revisionist” school of world historians through the remainder of the 20th century, the French scholar Fernand Braudel. In the first volume of his *Civilization & Capitalism, 15th-18th Centuries, The Structures of Everyday Life*, he writes:

“In the fifteenth century Angkor Wat was a thriving capital, with rice-fields irrigated by muddy water. Siamese attacks were not themselves responsible for its destruction; but they threw daily life and agriculture into confusion. The water of the canals cleared and malaria triumphed, and, with it, the invading forest.”¹²⁸

Braudel’s contention that Angkor was felled by environmental catastrophe in the form of malarial outbreak would be the first link in the

¹²⁵ Toynbee (1934), Vol. 2 pp. 6.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, Footnote 1.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 9.

¹²⁸ Braudel (1993 <1967>), pp. 149. Braudel cites the French geographer Pierre Gorou’s *L’Asie* as his source. He also makes the comparison to the collapse of 17th century Bengal.

chain which would continue through the “revisionist” interpretation of world historians. For example, K.N. Chaudhuri in his 1990 work *Asia Before Europe: Economy and Civilization of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750*, a pivotal work among this school of thought, would cite Braudel. His contention being that Asian polities with complex irrigation networks would lead to an over-production and over-reliance on agriculture and the systems eventual collapse would be the impetus for malaria and plague which, as he notes, the “experience of Cambodia was very similar.”¹²⁹

The most influential work of the “revisionist” world historians is that of Andre Gunder Frank. His writings evolved from the World-Systems analysis school of Immanuel Wallerstein¹³⁰ to coalesce into a new framework for the analysis of World History which has become a principal tenet of the new orthodoxy in World History.¹³¹ Gunder-Frank’s work *Re-Orient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* has had a revolutionary impact on the conceptualization of World History.¹³²

However, his treatment of the decline and fall of Angkor is entirely

¹²⁹ Chaudhuri (1990), pp. 37.

¹³⁰ See the introductory chapter of Wallerstein (2004) for the most concise explication of this form of world historical analysis. Another influential work that falls into this school of analysis is Abu-Lughod (1989) who does not mention the decline of Angkor despite her work overlapping with its commonly accepted period. Her only reference is to the expanding trade of the Southeast Asian region as a whole and its concomitant impact on Angkor in the 10th and 11th centuries, pp. 268.

¹³¹ See Gunder-Frank (1990) and Gunder-Frank and Gills (1993) for this framework on a world historical scale.

¹³² Gunder-Frank (1998).

derivative of the works outlined above. He cites Chaudhuri's work who, as we saw, cited Braudel on the environmental decline as the causative factor in Angkor's demise.¹³³ The chain which begins with Toynbee and, later, Braudel emphasizing the collapse of the irrigation system and the subsequent malarial outbreaks and demographic collapse is the new orthodoxy among the preponderance of world historians.

However, several regional specialists have recently endeavoured to incorporate Southeast Asian history into World History. The earliest proponent of this attempt has been Craig Lockard.¹³⁴ In his work *Southeast Asia in World History* he expounds a multivariable thesis for the decline and fall of Angkor. He notes:

“Angkor declined due to a combination of causes: military expansion overstretched resources, increased temple building resulted in higher tax levies and more forced labor, which prompted rebellions. The irrigation system may also have broken down.”¹³⁵

He concludes that these were prerequisite factors which prompted Tai aggression and “repeated sacks of Angkor by the 1400s” led to a final abandonment in 1431.¹³⁶ The revisionist paradigm is also echoed in the work of Anthony Reid who, in his work *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680*, wrote:

¹³³ *Ibid*, pp. 229.

¹³⁴ See Lockard (1981 and 1995).

¹³⁵ Lockard (2011), pp. 48.

¹³⁶ *Ibid*.

“The age of commerce was a period of sustained urban growth. The fifteenth century marked a decisive shift in power to trade-based cities at the expense of older capitals that had owed more to tribute in labour and agricultural produce. Ayutthaya, enjoying extensive trade and diplomatic relations through its control of the Chao Phraya River, destroyed the ancient capital of Angkor in 1432, and the city of temples was abandoned. When a Cambodian capital was re-established it was based no longer around the elaborate old irrigation works but at a major entrepot for Chinese and Japanese trade at the junction of the Tonle Sap and Mekong rivers near modern Phnom Penh.”¹³⁷

The notion of a shift in power based on global trade dynamics has already been discussed in the work of Michael Vickery and will further be elaborated by the author below.

Yet the preeminent exemplification of a scholar placing both Southeast Asian history and the fall of Angkor in a global context is Victor Lieberman. His work *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830* is the first sustained attempt at placing Southeast Asia, as a whole, in the domain of World History. Lieberman began to develop his regionally comparative World History model in the late 1990s.¹³⁸ His intellectual mission was two-fold. First, as a Southeast Asianist he seeks to develop a new historiography which he terms the “Fourth Approach.”¹³⁹ This formulation emphasizes a “multifaceted

¹³⁷ Reid (1993), pp. 62.

¹³⁸ Lieberman (1999)

¹³⁹ Lieberman (2003), pp. 21. In Lieberman’s conception the first three approaches are the “externalist” approach of the majority of the earliest Orientalist scholars, the second being the

coalescence” of historical transformations which characterize, in particular, the history of mainland Southeast Asia as a series of successive polity collapses, the interregnum between each one shrinking in the number of years, which eventually produce the administrative states which formed the basis of contemporary Southeast Asia.¹⁴⁰

Secondarily, as a World Historian, he has attempted to compare and contrast the Southeast Asian region to Eurasia as a whole using this newly formulated historiography. The effort is a *tour de force* and one of the most important pieces of scholarship written on the history of Southeast Asia.¹⁴¹

However, for the purpose of this paper, we will be concentrating on how Lieberman has treated the decline and fall of Angkor in World History. Lieberman describes Angkor, as well as Pagan and Dai Viet, as one of the three “charter states” which served as the nucleus for the eventual formation of the modern mainland Southeast Asian political order.¹⁴² In assessing the fall of Angkor, Lieberman employs the full range of theses which have been outlined above. Although he is critical

“autonomous” conceptualization and the third being the “Age of Commerce” thesis developed by Anthony Reid. Of the latter, see Reid (1993).

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*, pp 21-22. The most accessible formulation of Lieberman’s ideas can be found in Lieberman (2012)

¹⁴¹ Lieberman’s initial two-volume effort totals more than 1500 pages of text as well as a several hundred page bibliography.

¹⁴² *Ibid*, pp. 216. For the most concise explication of Lieberman’s notion of the “charter state” see Lieberman (2011).

of the notion of “popular exhaustion and religious liberation” as they do not have “mainland synchrony” with comparative religious changes such as Dai Viet’s reversion from Mahayana Buddhism to Confucianism, he does concede that Mon-Thai monks may have carried with them “destabilizing Theravada doctrines” into the Angkorean kingdom prior to its decline.¹⁴³ His general thesis is three-fold. First, he notes that because of Mongol intervention, the Tai became a “newly empowered people beyond the frontier” of the loosely held-together kingdom.¹⁴⁴ The Tais were initially “low-level tributaries and mercenaries” but rapidly came into “growing prominence (which) reflected both martial skills....and superior agricultural techniques.”¹⁴⁵ The latter interpretation is important as Lieberman’s second line of reasoning rests on the idea that “agrarian and demographic cycles” both in mainland Southeast Asia, and Eurasia as a whole, were due to “shifts in hemispheric climate.”¹⁴⁶ This climatic shift allowed for prodigious growth in Angkor during the 10th and 11th centuries, however, its subsiding led to “intra-elite conflict and land shortages” in Angkor and afforded the Tai peoples to experience an

¹⁴³ The first two quotes come from Lieberman (2011), pp. 941 and the third from Lieberman (2003), pp. 242.

¹⁴⁴ Lieberman (2011), pp. 943.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 954 and Lieberman (2003), pp. 237-239. Lieberman relies heavily on the work of O’Connor (1995) in assessing the superior agricultural techniques of the peoples who moved north to south into mainland Southeast Asian and their ability to take advantage of ecological niches which led to greater rates of demographic growth and the eventual displacement or conquest of the pre-existing polities with who they came into contact.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 942. See also Buckley (2010) as discussed above.

“agronomically induced population growth” due to the different modes of agriculture between the two during the period coterminous with Angkorean decline fuelling a manpower disparity which was vital for both warfare and agricultural expansion.¹⁴⁷ The final reason was the shift in international commercial relations which provided an inducement for provincial elites at hospitable sites of trade to develop their own centers of power. Lieberman speculates as well that “commercial expansion facilitated Black Death transmission and/or provincial defections.”¹⁴⁸ It was this combination which eventually led to the fall of Angkor. In Lieberman’s summation:

“Tribal assaults, the Black Death, and commercially generated provincial defections then magnified those strains to the point of open rupture.”¹⁴⁹

Yet, despite the above conclusion, Lieberman notes that Angkor *as a form* did not collapse but, instead, continued its customs within a “hybrid culture” with a “complex ethnicity” at its successor state of Ayutthaya.¹⁵⁰ It is to the nature of the decline and fall of Angkor that we now turn in an attempt to understand how the problem should be

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, the first quote is from pp. 948 and the second if from pp. 957.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 944.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 962. Lieberman makes the same comparative argument with Pagan noting that “both Pagan and Angkor succumbed to a combination of ecological strains in the core, climate deterioration, maritime shifts, and Mongol-assisted incursions.” Quote from Lieberman (2003), pp. 242.

¹⁵⁰ Lieberman (2003). Quotes are from pp. 245-246.

conceptualized and whether there are novel ways of understanding the central tenet of this paper.

Angkor in the World

The outpouring of work in the various fields of archaeology, paleoclimatology and in the writing of World History has led to a revolution in the understanding of the decline and fall of Angkor. The scholarship over the last two decades, building upon the revisionist works of disparate scholars in several disciplines, has made the understanding of this event now on par with those of other similarly complex polities whose own declines and collapses have formed the bases in the study of the social sciences. No longer can the momentous occurrence of Angkor's demise be relegated to the realm of speculation or as a mysteriously romantic Oriental curiosity. With this in mind, the author would like to evaluate several of the conceptual frameworks which may shed further light on the place that Angkor's demise has in World History.

On Collapse...or Regeneration

In the afterword to the revised edition of his work *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, the eminent orthinologist and world historian Jared Diamond dedicates the section to the collapse of

Angkorean civilization. He is unequivocal in his judgement noting that “the devolution of a sprawling metropolis into a largely empty landscape surely deserves to be termed a collapse.”¹⁵¹ Diamond argues that the Angkorean collapse fits his five-fold model: 1) unintentional damage (deforestation in the Kulen mountain region); 2) climate change (a change in the monsoon pattern destroying the canal system); 3) hostile neighbors (the Thai peoples); 4) initial maritime trade opportunities offering a temporary advantage and then becoming restricted (the change in international Chinese commerce) and 5) inherent problems becoming exacerbated and a “doubling-down” response (the expansive growth of the agricultural system and the concomitant canal system continuing *ad hoc*).¹⁵² He concludes that “there is no evidence of massive die-offs of people. But the result, nevertheless, was unequivocally a collapse.”¹⁵³

Diamond’s summation largely follows in the wake of a resurgence in the study of the collapse of complex societies, particularly the classic work of Tainter.¹⁵⁴ Meta-studies on the subject stress that:

“Societal collapse represents transformation at a large social or spatial scale, with long-term impact on combinations of interdependent variables: (i) environmental change and resilience; (ii) demography or

¹⁵¹ Diamond (2011), pp. 550.

¹⁵² *Ibid*, pp. 552-553.

¹⁵³ *Ibid*.

¹⁵⁴ Tainter (1990). See, in particular, his summation on pp. 193-215.

settlement; (iii) socio-economic patterns; (iv) political or societal structures; and (v) ideology or cultural memory.”¹⁵⁵

With this definition in mind, it seems clear that Angkor collapsed. The change in climate had a noticeable localized, deleterious effect on the complex hydraulic system that sustained the imperial capital; one in which the political elites of the late Angkorean period proved incapable of circumscribing, thus, demonstrating a lack of resilience. The demography of the capital and its most important provincial centers such as Preah Khan, Banteay Chmar and Sambor Prei Kuk all demonstrate serious demographic decline during the period of Angkorean collapse.¹⁵⁶ The socio-economic patterns drastically changed in orientation during the period leading up to the putative abandonment of the capital in 1431 as greater emphasis was placed on overseas trade and the development of trade relations with the region’s most important economic polity, China.¹⁵⁷ It is clear that the political structures of the kingdom changed as there was increasing fragmentation of the periphery with the emergence of the Thai as well as independent contacts among previously unified outlying provincial capitals such as Luovo and “Hsien.”¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ Butzer and Endfield (2012), pp. 3628, emphasis in the original. See also Butzer (2012). For a more thorough understanding of the evolution of the concept of “collapse” see Middleton (2007).

¹⁵⁶ Evans (2016)

¹⁵⁷ Vickery (2004).

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

Finally, the ideology of the Angkorean civilization demonstrated a marked change from a syncretic Hindu Brahmanism-Khmer animism to a more uniform acceptance of Theravada Buddhism which reflected itself, to a degree, in the cessation of monumental stone temple construction as well as a de-emphasis in the use of Sanskrit as a sacral language and a resurgence of the use of Pali as the language of religious and philosophical thought.¹⁵⁹ Thus, it certainly seems as if Angkor is an excellent candidate to add to the pantheon of previous civilizations that collapsed due to the above-described factors. Yet, did Angkor actually collapse?

There are many scholars who are deeply critical of the notion that civilizations or societies “collapse” in any meaningful sense of the term.¹⁶⁰ In the context of Angkor one of the most vociferous opponents of the notion of the thesis that the civilization of Angkor collapsed is the noted archaeologist Miriam Stark. In her essay “From Funan to Angkor: Collapse and Regeneration in Ancient Cambodia”¹⁶¹ she argues that the “Angkorian state represents the endpoint in a 1,500 year developmental sequence, the beginnings of which lie in the late prehistoric period. From

¹⁵⁹ Interestingly Kirsch (2011) argues, contrary to nearly all previous scholars, that it was, in fact, this form of syncretic Khmer religiosity which was the inherent problem which led to the eventual downfall of Angkorean civilization in the face of the “eventual triumph of the Thais.” See pp. 32-33.

¹⁶⁰ See, for example, Cogwill (1988) and McAnany and Yoffee (2009)

¹⁶¹ Stark (2006).

the mid first millennium AD onwards, Khmers constructed brick, stone and laterite monuments with dedicatory stelae bearing Khmer, Sanskrit or Khmer inscriptions” and that “no later than the first millennium AD, individual Khmer states rose and fell for more than nine centuries.”¹⁶²

She notes that the study of these indigenous documents demonstrate “economic and ideological foundations of the Khmer civilization (which) exhibit substantial continuity through time and counterbalance political continuities in the kingly reigns that historians generally study.”¹⁶³

Stark is emphatic in arguing that “Cambodia’s cycles of collapse and regeneration can be fit within a long-term pattern of resilience and stability.”¹⁶⁴ She notes a series of “continuities” which formed the basis of a Khmer “template” which persisted through the cyclical periods of collapse through the whole of Cambodian history. The first being the maintenance of a “rural economic base” that provided the Angkorean elite with the necessary supply of manpower for its sustenance which was coupled with a “persistent importance of local (or clan) temples” that served as the nucleus of social life for the common peoples.¹⁶⁵ These two “populations supplemented their indigenous animistic religion with an Indic-derived religious ideology and notions of statecraft” which

¹⁶² *Ibid*, pp. 144-145.

¹⁶³ *Ibid*, pp. 159.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 165.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid*.

served as a unique Cambodian symbiosis that maintained itself through a socio-political organization that heavily “emphasized bilateral descent.”¹⁶⁶ Stark maintains that while this specific form of Cambodian social organization remained it was “shifts in international economic orientation (that) reflect pan-Southeast Asian dynamics” which were the underlying factor in the cyclical collapse and regeneration of Cambodian polities from the emergence of Funan through the abandonment of Angkor and its regeneration as a maritime polity along the lower banks of the Mekong river in a pattern which sustains itself to this day.¹⁶⁷

On an even broader scale, Lucero and Fletcher argue that the fate of Angkor was one that can be found in a number of previously high-density urban tropical civilizations to one of an urban diaspora where climate instability affected the imperial core of the civilization but not the people themselves.¹⁶⁸ They note that:

Former subjects continued farming, but many did so in different areas within smaller community networks engaged in a different kind of urbanism on the periphery of the former states. The dispersal involved the disjunction between five major components: the urban hierarchical political system; substantial infrastructure; urban-rural integration; diverse farming practices; and climate change.”¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 165-166.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid*.

¹⁶⁸ Lucero, *et al* (2015).

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 1148.

In the case of Angkor, “much of the residential population disappeared from Angkor and its vicinity and established small towns in a wide arc from Battambang along the southern side of the Tonle Sap, along and up the Mekong river, and in a great arc through Isan far to the north. Khmer elites moved towards the Phnom Penh region, initially migrating between multiple capitals.¹⁷⁰ Their conclusion reiterates Diamond’s earlier notion of no evidence of a “die-off” but, instead, as Tainter has pointed out in his work on the collapse of complex societies,¹⁷¹ when a society’s inability to maintain a previously elaborate socio-political system becomes self-defeating and can no longer return the gains it once did, these societies tend not to collapse, but instead, become steadily less complex in order to accommodate their inhabitants. As Stark outlined in her notion of historical continuities in the long-term of Cambodian history and as the work of Lucero and Fletcher has shown, it seems that the Khmer maintained the form of Angkorean/Khmer civilization yet dispersed it throughout mainland Southeast Asia.

So, the question arises for an inquiring scholar if there is a useful paradigm for this historical occurrence? It is to this question that we now turn.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ Tainter, *supra*.

A “Late Antiquity” in Southeast Asia

Nearly coterminous to the revisionist interpretations outlined above regarding the decline and fall of Angkor, a similar thesis began to emerge in the study of the classical case of the “collapse” of a civilization in the writing of Western history, that of the Western Roman empire, began to emerge. The British historian Peter Brown, first in his 1971 work *The World of Late Antiquity: From Marcus Aurelius to Mohammed*,¹⁷² argues against a several centuries long historiographical tradition that treated the dissolution of the Western Roman empire as a catastrophic event largely levelling a previous “high” civilization and plunging much of the European world into what was then commonly referred to as the “Dark Ages.” In contrast, Brown emphasizes in his revolutionary revisionist interpretations that much of the socio-political forms and cultural and theological mores which would form the bases of European civilization would emerge prior to the putative “collapse” of the Western Roman empire and would sustain European civilization to eventually flourish in the outpouring of the early modern era of European history. The “barbarians” who were long held to be the immediate cause of the collapse of the empire would, in turn, revitalize it and become “Romans”

¹⁷² Brown (1971) See also Brown (1978) for his fuller explication as well as Brown (1997) for his mature reconsiderations. Finally, see, Ando (2008) for a contemporary look at the debate. For contemporary interpretations of the fall of the Western Roman empire which argue contrary to this thesis see Ward-Perkins (2005) and Heather (2006).

or the new “Europeans” and that the religious transformation that occurred with the wide-scale adoption of Christianity from the previous form of European paganism would be the vital factor in propelling Europe to greater heights of civilization.

Is there a comparative history for the decline and fall of Angkor? I would argue that the revisionist elements found in the work of both Vickery and Lieberman, discussed above, can adequately fit this paradigm. Vickery had already revolutionized the historiography of the historical event by emphasizing that Angkor did not, in fact, “collapse” but instead transformed into several new polities for reasons that were on a greater historical scale and had their origins embedded into the pre-existing cycle of Cambodian history. His work, with even greater meticulousness than Stark, has emphasized that there has been a unique form to Cambodian civilization that preceded Angkor¹⁷³ and, more contentiously, continued after it in both Cambodia proper *as well as* what is commonly referred to as Thailand. He argues that the continuities can be seen in the language usage found in inscriptions,¹⁷⁴ the ethnic composition of the ruling classes,¹⁷⁵ the continuous similarity in royal and

¹⁷³ See Vickery (1996), (1998) and (2004) as examples.

¹⁷⁴ Vickery (1973). See also Vickery (2004), pp. 18-20.

¹⁷⁵ Vickery (2004), pp. 3 *et passim*.

official titles¹⁷⁶ and, most importantly, the persistent conflict, post-Angkor, between the two emergent maritime polities of Ayutthaya and the Phnom-Penh Lovek region. Vickery argues that the former polity was in fact founded by a Mon-Khmer elite and, despite a gradual increase in Thai influence, maintained its identity as a “Khmer” society until the eventual conquest by the northern Thai kingdoms in the 16th century.¹⁷⁷ In sum, in contrast to many of the most prominent scholars, Vickery maintains that there was no “Dark Ages” in Cambodian history but only a continuous cycle of reformation, which while dependent on the exigencies of broader regional and global changes, particularly in international commerce, reasserted itself despite the movement of the kingdom’s metropolitan capital.¹⁷⁸

Lieberman’s work is even more explicit in the conceptualization of this period of mainland Southeast Asian history as one of a “Late Antiquity.” His notion of Angkor as a “charter state” which formed the basis of future mainland Southeast Asian polities, particularly those of the “barbarian” Thais, is a striking parallel to Brown’s thesis of Rome as incorporating those very same “barbarians” who would then serve as the

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 39-41.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 49-52. See Baker (2003) for the most thorough explication of Ayutthaya as being founded as a maritime polity based on a pre-existing, non-“Thai” population.

¹⁷⁸ See, for example, all four editions of David Chandler’s general history of Cambodia (1983, 1992, 2000 and 2008) which persistently used the term “Dark Ages” for the period between the 1431 abandonment of Angkor and the arrival of the French in the 19th century.

fount of future European civilization. Lieberman's description of a "hybrid culture" and "complex ethnicity"¹⁷⁹ also dovetails with Vickery's thesis that the later and post-Angkorean periods were not one of discrete "Khmer" and "Thai" societies competing over a specified geographic area but instead was a variegated blending of cultural forms which only differentiated themselves at a much later period. Finally, his stressing of a disparate break-up a former empire into smaller polities only to re-emerge as discrete, and more centralized, units with previous historical transformations, in this case the adoption of Theravada Buddhism, as a principal causative factor, shares an interesting parallel to the "Late Antiquity" thesis.

What the author intends is not to propose that there is a neat-fitting comparison between the "Late Antiquity" thesis describing the transformative effects of late Roman and early Medieval European history and that of the decline and fall of Angkor. Instead, I am noting that there are prospectively fruitful parallels that may be a guide for further comparative research on the transformation of Angkor, the post-Angkorean period and the eventual emergence of the Thai polities which would come to dominate the region while still maintaining a semblance of a cultural and political continuum. Interestingly, there is a comparison

¹⁷⁹ Lieberman (2003), pp. 245-246.

that has been made between these two events and it is to this question that we now turn.

On Comparisons

In a work rarely cited in the historiography of the decline and fall of Angkor is the 1965 comparative history of the English Orientalist H.G.Q. Wales, *Angkor and Rome: A Historical Comparison*.¹⁸⁰ Wales notes that there are “striking parallels” in that “each had the similar good fortune to occupy a promising geographical situation while each was deeply influenced by one of the world’s most idealistic (whether rational or emotional) civilizations, the Greek and the Indian respectively.”¹⁸¹ Despite this influence, Wales is emphatic that the “Khmer and Roman civilizations have as much right to stand as original and independent civilizations as have the Greek and Indian.”¹⁸² Wales’ work follows strongly, perhaps consciously so, in the tradition of Gibbon in his formulation of the decline and fall of Angkor. He categorizes the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius and the Angkorean king Jayavarman VII as “preservers” of empire¹⁸³ after which there was a period of two and a half centuries of decline which parallel the 3rd-5th centuries for the Roman

¹⁸⁰ Wales (1965).

¹⁸¹ *Ibid*, pp 3.

¹⁸² *Ibid*, pp. 6.

¹⁸³ *Ibid*, pp. 62-68.

empire and the 13th-15th centuries for Angkor.¹⁸⁴ As we have described above in the classical interpretation, Wales ascribes the two principal causative factors to the fall of Angkor to “barbarian” Thai aggression and the conversion to Hinayana Buddhism.¹⁸⁵ In true Gibbonian fashion, he notes that it was the settlement of these “barbarians” along the imperial peripheries of the respective polities that laid the basis for the future collapse of both. Wales also equates the Angkorean monarch Jayavarman Pamesvara IX to the Roman emperor Constantine in that he was the ruler most responsible for the conversion of his state’s subjects to the new “popular” form of religion, in the former case Hinayana Buddhism and in the latter Christianity, which undermined the previous ideological order which served as its historical foundation.¹⁸⁶

Wales’ comparative effort may now seem quaint and a mere historiographical curiosity today given the advancements in scholarly research on the subject, but the question of comparison is an important one that must be addressed if one is to place the decline and fall of Angkor in World History. A geographically proximate polity which one could turn to is that of Pagan and its Burmese successor states. Michael Aung-Thwin has repeatedly argued that the principal causative factor in

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 69.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 74-80.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid*, pp 76-77.

the decline and fall of Pagan was a conflict between the interests of the church (*sangkhum*) and the state.¹⁸⁷ He notes that “the most important institutional relationship in Pagan was that between state and church, a relationship where the focus of economic resources had shifted significantly by the second half of the thirteenth century, upsetting the domestic balance of ideological and political power, which in turn weakened the state and invited internal as well external forces to bring to completion a process that had been occurring for close to two hundred and fifty years.”¹⁸⁸ While this thesis does not compare well with that of Angkor, Aung-Thwin has forcefully argued for an aspect of Burmese history which does parallel well. Aung-Thwin insists that there is a “continuity of the classical system” which “at Pagan were laid the institutional foundations of the modern Burmese society.”¹⁸⁹ In a similar manner as we outlined the arguments of Stark above, Aung-Thwin stresses that while there are cyclical crises, there remains a fundamental foundation of cultural and socio-political beliefs which remain inherently Burmese regardless of the collapse of dynasties or the movement of the kingdom’s capital.¹⁹⁰ This comparison can also be seen in Lieberman’s

¹⁸⁷ See Aung-Thwin (1985, 2011 and 2013).

¹⁸⁸ Aung-Thwin (1985), pp. 183.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 1999.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 200-204. See also Aung-Thwin (2011).

selection of both Pagan and Angkor as “charter states” whose cultural and social forms persistently echoed throughout preceding mainland history.

Beginning with Arnold Toynbee’s characterization of Angkor as a “jungle civilization,” many scholars have sought to compare it to the tropical polities with high-density settlements in their metropolitan core. The noted expert on the Classical Mayan collapse, Michael Coe, in his general history of Angkor¹⁹¹ makes this argument as has Jared Diamond who also draws comparisons to the Incan collapse at Tikal.¹⁹² Diamond notes that there are similarities in rapid population growth which eventually leads to localized deforestation and the concomitant destruction of the complex hydraulic systems through siltation and erosion. The eminent archaeologist of Southeast Asia Charles Higham also draws comparisons to the Mayan civilization in his work.¹⁹³ While he notes that there are differences between the two societies in that Angkor used rice as their food staple, had powerful draft animals and developed iron technology, he notes that the similarities were many in the fact that both had “crowded settlements in low-lying river valleys” which was “linked with a surge in population investment in canals and the formation of drainage and agricultural improvements to maintain the

¹⁹¹ Coe (2003), pp. 197.

¹⁹² Diamond (2009). See also Lucero, *et al* (2015) for similar comparisons.

¹⁹³ Higham (2014).

loyalty of followers.”¹⁹⁴ However, “the greater the complexity of the infrastructure overseen by water managers, the more it was prone to failure” which eventually occurred in both due to change in monsoon patterns and rapid fluctuations in weather patterns in the form of flooding eventually causing the complex water systems to collapse.¹⁹⁵

Coupling the previous two discussions, it is the author’s contention that the most useful means of constructing a comparative framework for the decline and fall of Angkor is to attempt to ascertain similar polities that both shared hierarchical, high-density settled metropolitan cores that, when their usefulness no longer brought increased gains in social and economic complexity to the populace, were then abandoned to a more widely dispersed series of competing polities which continued their cultural forms but in a de-evolved fashion. The most useful frameworks for this study is to further the work developed by both Lieberman and Lucero discussed above.

Khom or Kaundinya in Angkor

As we outlined above, the very earliest works in the historiography of the decline and fall of Angkor conceptualized the event utilizing racial terminology. This manner of historical theorizing largely went into disfavor in the aftermath of the Second World War and as scholars began

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 405.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 406.

to develop more complex theoretical models emphasizing social and economic factors as the principal components of history. However, there has been increased scholarship in the field of population genetics which makes the previous theories tantalizing in their possible resurrection.¹⁹⁶

The very earliest recorded founding myths of the Cambodian peoples refers to a conquering Indian prince named Kaundinya who arrived upon the Khmer shores and, depending on the version, took for his bride a local princess and established a ruling dynasty that would go on to serve as the foundational royal house through the Angkorean period.¹⁹⁷ Early Orientalist scholars saw this myth as a *post hoc* metaphor for the “Indianization” of Cambodian society while, as we outlined above, many Indian nationalist historians argued that it was an accurate depiction of the overseas movement of Indians in their “colonization” of Southeast Asia. Eventually, this “externalist” approach to the history of Southeast Asia was generally relegated to more autonomous approaches that emphasized cross-cultural interaction and a selective appropriation of Indian forms as they suited the interests of the indigenous Southeast Asians themselves. However, a recent world-wide population genetics

¹⁹⁶ For general introductions to Southeast Asian population genetics see Baer (1995) and Patcharee, *et al* (2008).

¹⁹⁷ See Gaudes (1993) for a detailed discussion of the myth and how it likely evolved post-Angkor into the Buddhist version.

study done by Pickrell and Pritchard¹⁹⁸ may shed new light on the historical veracity of this putative legend. In the conclusions to their study they note:

“Two inferred edges were unexpected. First, perhaps the most surprising inference is that Cambodians trace about 16% of their ancestry to a population equally related to both Europeans and other East Asians (while the remaining 84% of their ancestry to other Southeast Asians). This is partially consistent with clustering analyses, which indicate shared ancestry between Cambodians and central Asian populations... The predicted admixture event implies that allele frequencies in Cambodia are more similar to those in African populations than would be expected based on their East Asian ancestry... We conclude that the Cambodian population is the result of an admixture event involving a southeast Asian population related to the Dai and a Eurasian population only distantly related to those present in these data.”¹⁹⁹

Given the high percentage of such a relation it is not unreasonable to reassess whether there was in fact a sustained movement of central Eurasians, likely Indians, into Cambodia during an early period and both the spur in the development of its civilization and, prospectively, the eventual fall of Angkor due to the proposed collapse of Hindu culture may have to be reassessed.²⁰⁰

In the section on Thai historiography, we noted that many Thai historians saw the collapse of Angkor as one of a demographic

¹⁹⁸ Pickrell and Pritchard (2012).

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 9.

²⁰⁰ See Khan (2015) for a discussion of the possible time period during which this movement of peoples would have to occur in order for there to be such a marked amount of “foreign” genes in the Cambodians.

overwhelming of the indigenous Khmer by a newly energized ethnic conquest elite. In Vichitir's phraseology the "Thai poured blood into Khmer veins" and they "changed century by century."²⁰¹ This too has been validated by recent studies, one of which notes:

"The main observation from our study is that the genetic divergence between populations, in the paternal lineages, is higher in the Mon-Khmer than in the Tai. This difference is probably a signature of historical and/or demographic processes combined with cultural differences in post-marital residence patterns. A plausible explanation of our results is that Tai immigrants maintained genetic homogeneity whereas drift, during and after the Tai colonization, enhanced the genetic divergence among Mon-Khmer populations, since after the Tai invasion in the thirteenth century, the Mon-Khmer group was fragmented and some ethnic groups were exiled to rural areas...the second hypothesis, assuming that Tai immigrants incorporated Mon-Khmer residents, with the latter partially maintaining their identity, appears more likely and compatible with our results on the genetic structure of the two groups."²⁰²

In sum, given the rapid advancements in the world-wide study of population genetics, many of the earlier historiographical frameworks that explained the decline and fall of Angkor in strictly ethnic terms, may have to be reconsidered and reincorporated, much in the same manner as the revisionist works in the environmental sciences, into the multivariable factors which explain the event.

²⁰¹ Vichitir, *supra*, pp. 130.

²⁰² Wibhu, *et al* (2011), pp. 6-7. See also Wangkhumhang, *et al* (2013) for similar conclusions.

Concluding Thoughts on the Fall of Angkor in World History

As we have outlined above, the study of the decline and fall of Angkor has had a rapid and dynamic series of revisionist interpretations that have compelled scholars studying the period to incorporate increasingly complex theoretical models to adequately understand and outline the event. This paper outlined the evolution of the historiography by local and regional specialists and demonstrated that their conclusions concerning the decline and fall of Angkor were gradually assimilated by scholars of World History into their own writings. Although, due to the paucity of sources, comparatively late commencement of its study and difficulties arising from a protracted civil war, scholars were eventually able to revise earlier theoretical models and test revisionist theses which allowed for a more robust understanding of the historical event. With the additional role of regional specialists, such as Victor Lieberman, beginning to write World History, the decline and fall of Angkor is now more fully understood on a world-historical scale. Angkor is now firmly planted alongside other high civilizations in the writing of World History.

The author would like to make several brief suggestions to further its study. The first, already being undertaken by ambitious young archaeologists, would be to develop a greater material understanding of

the region outside the capital of Angkor itself. A more robust sense of when areas considered to be the kingdom's provincial centers began to experience decline, demographic displacement, problems with their hydraulic structures or abandonment would further facilitate not only an understanding of the decline and fall of Angkor itself, but, also afford a greater opportunity for comparative studies on a global scale.

Secondarily, a fuller understanding of the genetic structure of the Cambodians both in what is today modern Cambodia but also in regions formerly part of the kingdom, such as the *Khmer Krom* of Vietnam, as well as "ethnic minorities." This would prospectively assist in the reconstruction of the demographic movements that were known to have occurred during and after the fall of Angkor. Finally, it would be advantageous, if possible, for established professionals in the field of Southeast Asian regional studies to reiterate to their colleagues in the field of World History the importance of Angkor to the actual development of the region and attempt to have them incorporate this historical period when writing textbooks and encyclopedias that cover World History.

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