Introduction

Beginning in the 9th century the Khmer empire, which was based in what is today northwestern Cambodia, began to gather power and territory in mainland Southeast Asia. It would grow to be one of the largest empires in Southeast Asian history, and at the height of its power the empire’s influence reached beyond the current boundaries of Cambodia and into present day southern Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand, stretching into the Malay Peninsula. Over the course of several centuries, the Khmer kingdom built nearly one thousand temples, shrines and monuments stretching across a significant portion of mainland Southeast Asia. The largest concentration of structures is located on the northwest tip of the Tonle Sap, or great lake, near the present day provincial capitol of Siem Reap. Among these temples is the largest religious structure in the world: the temple known as Angkor Wat.

In this lesson, students will learn about Angkor Wat and its place in Cambodian, and Southeast Asian, history. Students will attempt to “read” the temple, in a way which resembles the reading of a primary document, to gain insight into this history.
In addition, this lesson can also supplement world history lessons which focus on the migration of ideas and religions, such as the movement of both Hinduism and Buddhism to Southeast Asia.

**Guiding Questions**

- What is the significance of Angkor Wat, and what does the size and complexity of the temple say about the Khmer Empire?
- Is its use today the same as it was when it was first built, and what does the answer tell us about Cambodia’s history?

**Learning Objectives**

After completing this lesson, students will be able to:

- Identify where Angkor Wat is located on a map of Cambodia.
- Relate a basic history of the temple, including when it was built, by what civilization, and for what purpose.
- Discuss what the temple’s size and complexity tells us about the history of the Khmer Empire.
- Discuss the change in the use of the temple from a Hindu temple to a sacred pilgrimage site for Buddhists, and the purpose the temple fulfills in Cambodian society today.

**Preparing to Teach this Lesson**

This lesson has been designed to supplement both World History lessons on the history of Southeast Asia and the migration of Hinduism and Buddhism from India to other points in Asia.

- Review the lesson plan. Locate and bookmark suggested materials and other useful websites. Download and print out documents you will use and duplicate copies as necessary for student viewing.
- Familiarize yourself with the [history of Cambodia](https://www.edsitement.org/lessonplans/history-of-cambodia), which can be found at the EDSITEment reviewed web resources [Asia Source](https://www.edsitement.org/). This history of Cambodia should help to
contextualize the more specific history of Angkor which can be accessed through the EDSITEment reviewed website, the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

- Read the information on the migration of Buddhism and background information on Hinduism found on the EDSITEment reviewed web resource AskAsia.
- Review the map and images of Angkor Wat, which can be accessed through the EDSITEment reviewed web resource SARAI.

**Suggested Activities**

In this lesson students will be “reading” a structure as they might a primary document. The temple of Angkor Wat contains a wealth of information if students begin to scrutinize and to “question” the monument. Students should begin by looking deeply at the temple, noting information such as its size and the materials it is made from. They should then read the historical information that will give the structure a context, and will also provide more insight into the structure itself. Finally, they should use the information they have gathered from looking at the temple and from reading about its context as a foundation for asking questions. For example, a student might note that the temple is enormous. He or she should then ask: How many people did it take to build? How long did it take to complete? The answers can be used as clues in the search for a more complete conception of the ancient Khmer empire.

Some of the questions students will pose will have answers that can be confirmed. For example, scholars generally agree that the building of Angkor Wat took more than three decades to complete. However, it may not always be possible to confirm specific answers. Even where it may not be possible to confirm a specific answer, it will still be possible to glean a more complete view of the Khmer kingdom. For example, it is not possible to say exactly how much wealth the Khmer king would have had access to in order to build such a monument, however, the gilding and jewels decorating the walls of the temple indicate that the size of the kingdom’s treasury was substantial.
1. Finding the Temple in Time and Space

2. Seeing is Believing!

3. Messages Written in Stone

1. Finding the Temple in Time and Space

• Ask students to locate Cambodia on the map of Asia which can be found on the EDSITEment reviewed website AskAsia. Discuss with students the location of Cambodia in relation to other Southeast Asian nations and cultures, and to India.
  o How might geography have affected the movement of ideas and religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism?

• Using the map of Cambodia found on the EDSITEment reviewed website AskAsia ask students to locate the temples at Angkor. Discuss with students the location that the ancient Khmers chose as the site for the seat of their kingdom.
  o What differences can be found in the location of the early Khmer capitol at Angkor, and the later Cambodian capitol of Phnom Penh?
  o Why might the ancient Khmers have decided to build their capitol at Angkor? Students should pay particular attention to the location of the ancient and modern capitols in relation to the Tonle Sap, or great lake. The lake is so large that early European explorers thought it was an ocean. Each year the size of the lake grows, providing a bounty of fish and freshwater seafood such as shrimp, which is the main ingredient of a Cambodian food staple: prahok (dried shrimp paste).

Please note: The area that is today officially known as the Angkor Historical Park, which contains numerous temples and shrines, is often simply called “Angkor” or “Angkor Wat.” However, the title Angkor Wat specifically refers to only the temple known by that name. The word wat is the Khmer word meaning temple, while the word Angkor comes from the
Sanskrit word *nagara*, meaning city.

- Ask students to read about the history of Angkor found on the EDSITEment resource AskAsia. Depending on the reading level of your class, you may wish to complete this reading as a group, perhaps reading the paragraphs aloud and then discussing the material. Advanced students can read also the more detailed history of the height of Angkor found in the section entitled *The Angkorian Period—The Classical Age* in the history section of Angkorian history page accessible through the EDSITEment reviewed web resource, the Metropolitan Museum of Art. When they have completed all of their reading, have them answer the questions contained in this PDF Worksheet, or have them complete this web based interactive worksheet.

2. Seeing is Believing!

- Students should then be directed to investigate the temple by scrutinizing images of Angkor. An excellent series of images of Angkor Wat is accessible through the EDSITEment reviewed web resource SARAI.
- Ask students to form groups of three or four. Have each group work together to “read” the temple for the history of the Khmer Empire, and its capitol at Angkor. Ask students to click through the arrows to view the different parts of the temple. Each groups should work together to make notes about what the see. For example, in the first few photographs they will see a long causeway spanning over a moat. Students should note the walkway made of stone, the carved hand rails, the man-made moat, and the large exterior wall of the compound.
- Once students have compiled their notes on the photographs of the temple they should begin to work together as a group to formulate ideas about why the temple looks the way it does. Why do they think the temple is so large? Why do they think the builders dug a moat to surround the structure? One way to begin thinking about this structure would be to search for examples of other world architecture with which they might be more familiar.
Does this temple remind them of a castle? Or a cathedral? Or even the US Capitol building?

- Next, ask each group to think about what the physical properties of the temple might tell us about the Khmer Empire? More or less guidance may be necessary depending on the skill level of the class. Remaining in their groups, ask students to contemplate the following questions:
  - What does the size of the temple tell us about the power of the Khmer kingdom?
  - Although there are many temples from the Angkorian period, and many of them are very large, Angkor Wat is the largest temple in Cambodia. What does this tell us about the time period in which this structure was built?
  - It is also one of the most extensively and beautifully decorated temples in the Angkor Historical Park, and much of it is covered with low relief sculptures. It also contained many free-standing sculptures which were often gilded and decorated with precious gems. What does the wealth of decoration, and the addition of precious materials such as gold, tell us about the strength and stability of the Khmer Empire?

Students should focus on issues such as what the access to precious materials says about the Khmer Empire and its access to valuable resources and goods. In addition, an important point of discussion is the harnessing of this tremendous labor force needed to build Angkor Wat. The construction took more than three decades, and could not have been completed without the widespread use of corvée labor. The ability to draft and control thousands of corvée laborers gives an indication of the strength and power of the Khmer kingdom.

3. Messages Written in Stone

- Discuss with students the purpose of the temple. Using the factual information provided in the historical description of Angkor Wat as a foundation, ask students to theorize an explanation for the dedication of so much labor and wealth to the construction of the monument.
• Who built the temple?
  o Who is the temple dedicated to?
  o Why was it decorated so lavishly?

When King Suryavarman II (Sor-ya-VAR-man the second) initiated construction on this temple dedicated to the Hindu god Vishnu in the 12th century, he had the temple built as an offering to this deity. Discuss with students possible reasons why the temple was so meticulously and finely decorated. While the religious motivations are very different, teachers might think of the beautiful and opulent paintings and other decorations sponsored by wealthy patrons in European cathedrals as a starting point for thinking about this question.

• This temple was designed as a \textit{Vaishnavite} (for the worship of Vishnu) temple, and the presence of this Hindu god can be found in both the design of the structure, as well as throughout the decoration of the structure. However, the majority of the Cambodian visitors to the temple today are not Hindu. It is thought that Hinduism may not have been widespread beyond the aristocracy in the ancient Khmer kingdom, and that many of the average citizens of the kingdom were Buddhist. In the post-Angkorian years, the rulers of the Khmer kingdom moved away from Hinduism and began to build and dedicate temples and monasteries to the Buddha. With this shift in religious focus, images of the Buddha began to appear in many of the formerly Hindu temples, such as Angkor Wat. Today an image of the Buddha can be found in the main sanctuary of the temple, and numerous similar sculptures fill the interior galleries, where they are maintained and given offerings by visitors and monks from the monastery inside the temple’s precincts. Explore with students the historical changes that can be “read” in the change in purpose of visitors to the temple.

  o Do Cambodian visitors today visit Angkor Wat for the purpose for which it was originally designed?
Are there physical changes that have occurred (other than those wrought by the passage of time) which might give clues about historical changes in Khmer culture?

What other meaning might the temple have for Cambodians today beyond its status as a Buddhist pilgrimage site?

Many Cambodians visit the temple today not only because of its status as a sacred Buddhist site, but also because Angkor Wat is seen as an important historical site. It is no coincidence that every Cambodian flag since the country gained independence from France in 1953 has had the silhouette of Angkor’s towers at its center. An example of the current Cambodian flag is accessible through the EDSITEment reviewed web resource Internet Public Library.

**Assessment**

For beginning students: ask students to choose their favorite view of the temple from the photographs of Angkor Wat available through the EDSITEment reviewed web resource SARAI. Students should write a short essay about the image they have selected explaining what the picture shows, and connecting it to what they have learned about the temple in this lesson.

For advanced students: ask students to write a short essay explaining how “reading” the temple confirmed and expanded upon one or two pieces of information they received from reading the history. Students might write about how the written history stated that the kingdom was very powerful and had control or influence over a large area and its people. In viewing the temple, this was confirmed by its size, as it could only have been built by a large number of people working together.

Students should include in their short essay a section about a theory which they developed by combining what they had learned from the written sources with their scrutiny of the temple. This essay might focus on any number of theories or ideas, such as the tremendous rice harvest that would have been needed to sustain such a kingdom for hundreds of years, or that
Khmer society probably had artisan guilds in order to create miles of bas-relief sculpture. While there does not have to be a strict control on what theories students write about, it is essential that they are able to create a solid argument defending their theory, and that they show how the images of the temple support their theory.

**Selected EDSITEment Websites**

- **Asia Source** [http://www.asiasource.org/]
  - **History of Cambodia** [http://www.asiasource.org/cambodia/chandlerhistory.htm]
- **Metropolitan Museum of Art** [http://www.metmuseum.org/]
  - **Advanced history of Cambodia** [http://www.autoriteapsara.org/index.html]
- **AskAsia** [http://www.askasia.org]
  - **Hinduism** [http://www.religioustolerance.org/hinduism.htm]
  - **Map of Asia** [http://www.askasia.org/image/maps/asia.htm]
- **SARAI** [http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/indiv/southasia/cuvi/]
  - **Map and images of Angkor Wat** [http://www.orientalarchitecture.com/angkor/angkorwatindex.htm]
- **Internet Public Library** [http://www.ipl.org]
  - **Cambodian Flag** [http://flagspot.net/flags/kh.html]

**Other Information**
Standards Alignment

1. **NCSS-1**
   
   Culture and cultural diversity. [more](#)

2. **NCSS-2**
   
   Time, continuity, and change. The ways human beings view themselves in and over time. [more](#)

3. **NCSS-3**
   
   People, places, and environments. [more](#)

4. **NCSS-4**
   
   Individual development and identity. [more](#)

5. **NCSS-6**
   
   Power, authority, and governance. [more](#)

6. **NCSS-9**
   
   Global connections and interdependence. [more](#)

7. **NGS-1**
   
   How to Use Maps and Other Geographic Representations, Tools, and Technologies to Acquire, Process, and Report Information from a Spatial Perspective

8. **NGS-10**
   
   The Characteristics, Distribution, and Complexity of Earth’s Cultural Mosaics

9. **NGS-17**
How to Apply Geography to Interpret the Past

10. NGS-3

How to Analyze the Spatial Organization of People, Places, and Environments on Earth’s Surface

11. NGS-9

The Characteristics, Distribution, and Migration of Human Population on Earth’s Surface