Fall 2026 Arts of Asia Lecture Series
Unknown Makers, Lasting Beauty: Rethinking Fine Art Across Asia
Sponsored by the Society for Asian Art

Cosmos and Eternity: The West Mebon Viṣṇu on the Waters of Creation, Preservation, and Dissolution

Vasudha Narayanan, Distinguished Professor, Religion, University of Florida
November 6, 2026

Gods and Goddesses:
Vishnu ("all pervasive"); depicted in images as standing, sitting, and reclining. He reclines on the serpent, Ananta ("without end," i.e., infinite). *This is the image in the West Mebon temple.* Also known as Narayana, "he whose abode is water."
The term "Anantasayi" ("He who reclines on Ananta") is frequently used to denote the reclining form of Vishnu.
Vishnu has many incarnations (*avatara*), and eventually, ten of them become important.
The second avatara is as a turtle, seen in a story that becomes very popular in Cambodia: the Churning of the Ocean of Milk. Other *avatara*s include well known ones as Rama (hero of the epic *Ramayana*) and Krishna.

Lakshmi The goddess of good fortune, grace, and one who gives salvation as well. She is seen as abiding on the chest of Vishnu and also on a lotus blossom. In images of reclining Vishnus, she is frequently at the feet of Viṣṇu. The original West Mebon Viṣṇu had a Lakshmi at his feet.
When depicted independently, as in pediments in the Banteay Srei and Pre Rup temples, she is flanked by two elephants showering her with sacred waters. This "anointing" is a coronation ritual, consecrating her as the empress of the universe.

Shiva ("the auspicious one"); sometimes seen as dancing, as in a pediment of Banteay Srei, a tenth century temple; sometimes depicted with five heads. He is frequently depicted in an aniconic form, a *linga* ("mark" or "symbol;" used grammatically for gender.) Considered to be a cosmic pillar, this column rests on a *yoni*, or womb. Together, they represent the transcendent and immanent masculine and feminine energies of the universe.

Brahma (pronounced Brahmaa) is a relatively minor god who creates the universe at the command of Vishnu. When Vishnu reclines on the ocean and it is time for creation, a lotus stalk rises from his navel. Brahma sits atop this lotus flower. The West Mebon Vishnu had a Brahma rising from his navel.

Chronology
Pre Angkorian Period: before c. 802 CE
Early kingdoms-- Names seen in Chinese documents:
Funan: c. first to seventh cent. CE
Zhenla or Chenla: approximately late sixth to early ninth cent. CE
Angkorian Period: c. 802 – 1431

A few kings and queens we will be talking about:

Kulaprabhavati: Queen of an early Jayavarman of Funan (early 6th cent CE), and later, ruler of Funan. Made one of the first endowments to a *reclining Vishnu*

Jayavarman II: (early 9th cent.)

Suryavarman I: c. 1002 to 1050 CE The West Mebon construction was probably started during his reign.

Udayadityavarman II: Reigned 1050 to 1066 CE. The West Mebon is said to have been completed during his reign.

Suryavarman II: Reigned c.1113-115 CE. Builder of Angkor Wat.

Jayavarman VII: Reigned 1181–c. 1220. Mahayana Buddhist king, builder of the Bayon. Cambodians think of him as one of the greatest kings of the Khmer empire.

Languages used in inscriptions

Sanskrit and Khmer

The longest Sanskrit inscription is probably one that was found in the Pre Rup temple (10th century) –part of the Angkorian group of monuments.

Words

Anantasayi	Reclining on [the serpent] Ananta
Makara	A crocodile, a sea creature, a mythical animal. It has several meanings and the word could refer to an imaginary, hybrid animal.
Parinirvana Buddha	Buddha about to attain the supreme state of Nirvana
Ganga	Name of a large river in India; rivers in Cambodia were likened to the Ganga.
Angkor Wat	Name of the largest Hindu temple (now Buddhist), dedicated to the god Vishnu. Angkor comes from the Sanskrit word *nagara* (town) and Wat is from *vaatika* (garden, courtyard)

Places on the map I will show in my talk:

West Mebon	Temple on the West Baray, a large human-made reservoir, built in the 11th century.
West Baray	One of the largest reservoirs of its time (
Angkor	Angkor Wat is the main temple, the generic term "Angkor" (from the Sanskrit *nagara* or "town") is used in several contexts including time periods as well as a group of temples.
Kbal Spean	Located about 25-30 km from the Angkor group of temples, it is a site on the river Stung Kbal Spean, a tributary of the Siem Reap River. There are many carvings of reclining Viṣṇu in Kbal Spean. It is connected with, but distinct from the Phnom Kulen hills.

Bibliography

Specific to the West Mebon Viṣṇu:

Baptiste, Pierre, David Bourgarit, Brice Vincent, and Thierry Zéphir, eds. 2025. *Royal Bronzes: Cambodian Art of the Divine*. Minneapolis: Minneapolis Institute of Art and the National Museum of Asian Arts-Guimet, Paris.

Feneley, Marnie. 2023. *Reconstructing God: Style, Hydraulics, Political Power and Angkor's West Mebon Viṣṇu.* National University of Singapore.

A bit more technical:
Feneley, Marnie, Dan Penny, and Roland Fletcher. 2016. "Claiming the hydraulic network of Angkor with Viṣṇu: A multidisciplinary approach including the analysis of archaeological remains, digital modelling and radiocarbon dating: With evidence for a 12th century renovation of the West Mebon." *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports.* https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352409X16302875

Aurélia Azéma, Pierre Baptiste, et al. 2018. "Angkorian Founders and Bronze Casting Skills: First Technical Investigation of the West Mebon Visnu." *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* Année 2018 104 pp. 303-341, https://www.persee.fr/doc/befeo_0336-1519_2018_num_104_1_6276

General Introduction to Angkor and nearby temples:

Bhattacharya, Kamaleswar, ed. 2009. *A Selection of Sanskrit Inscriptions from Cambodia*. Siem Reap: Center for Khmer Studies.

Chandler, David. 1995. *History of Cambodia*. 4th ed. Boulder: Westview Press

Coedès, George. 1968. *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*. Honolulu: East-West Center Press.

Dallapiccola, Anna and Anila Verghese. 2017. *India and Southeast Asia: Cultural Discourses*. Mumbai: The K.R. Cama Oriental Institute.

Freeman, Michael. 1998. *A Guide to Khmer Temples in Thailand & Laos*. Bangkok: River Books.

Narayanan, Vasudha. 2018. 'The "monument Visnuite" at the Musee Guimet and the Luminous Pillar.' In Anna L. Dallapiccola and Anila Verghese, *India and Southeast Asia: Cultural Discourses*. Mumbai: The K.R. Cama Oriental Institute, 245-27.

------ 2024. "Residing on the hair of Śiva, Rising from the Foot of Viṣṇu: The River Gaṅgā in the Khmer Landscape." In *Pilgrimage, Place, and Pluralism: Essays in Conversation with Diana Eck,* edited by Jennifer Peace and Elinor Pierce. Monkfish Publishing, 2024, 110-118.

Roveda, Vittorio. 2005. *Images of the Gods: Khmer mythology in Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos*. River Books.

Zephir, Thierry. 1998. *Khmer*: *Lost Empire of Cambodia*. London: Thames and Hudson