A Model of the Temple on the River of Cut Stone

by

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In my report on the partial reconstruction of the temple on the Sungei Batu Pahat in Central Kedah, the work of Louis Contant of the Conservation d'Angkor and myself from July to December 1959, I included a very tentative reconstruction of the building in an attempt to convey some impression of what it must have looked like when it was built. I have since made a model on the basis of this reconstruction, and a photograph of this model is reproduced here.

How accurate is this model? In broad outlines the original building must have looked something like this, but many of the details here are guesses which can never be confirmed because the evidence is just not there. The main plan of the site has now been determined with some degree of accuracy. The terraces leading up to the main structure can still be seen on the ground. Traces of the wall surrounding the main structure still survive, though, of course, there is no way of determining its height or the nature of the entrances in it. The ground plan of the main temple structure, a pillared hall leading by steps to a platform on which stood a tower surrounded by a verandah, has now been worked out with great certainty. From the stone pillar-bases which have survived we can tell the number and

Model of a reconstruction of the Sungei Batu Pahat temple, Central Kedah. (Model and photo: A. Lamb).
location of the timber pillars which once supported much of the superstructure. The details of this superstructure, the shape of the roof of the pillared hall for example, we cannot determine, and we can but guess at the exact shape of the tower.

In the model I have made no attempt to reconstruct the pillared hall (mandapa). Each square on the low platform indicates a stone pillar-base. On these bases originally rose timber columns supporting a roof covered with atap or wooden shingles. No sign of a brick tile was found while excavating this site. The roof was probably very simple in design, but we have no way of even guessing at its appearance since no timber structure from a time anything like as early as this temple (perhaps 8th to 10th centuries A.D.) has survived anywhere in South East Asia. The same considerations, of course, apply to the roof of the verandah surrounding the tower; but here the ground plan has to some extent dictated the shape of the roof, which cannot have been very different from that which I have put in my model.

A peculiar feature of the original temple was the presence of angled pillars around the base of the tower—two such pillars can be seen in the photograph. There can be no doubt of their presence because the pillar bases for them have angled mortises which permit of no other explanation. What were these for? One cannot say with any certainty, and I have attempted no explanation in the model. It seems probable, however, that they were intended to support some sort of gable in the centre of each side of the verandah roof, a gable made from solid timber and, perhaps, ornately carved. Such a feature, of considerable weight, would need reinforced supports.

The exact shape of the tower is unknown. The original tower fell down many hundreds of years ago leaving very little trace. Some of its decorative features, however, have survived, and it is on these that I have based my reconstruction. We possess the stone from the very summit. We have some of the corner decorations (antefixes) from the first tier of the roof. We know, from the great mass of debris, that the tower was constructed entirely, or very largely, of stone. Some of the stones from the tower are shaped, thus giving clues to its general outline. On this evidence I have made the tower in the model not as an exact replica of the original but as a general impression of the sort of structure that must have at one time been here.

The great problem in attempting any reconstruction of an ancient Kedah temple is to find other structures for
comparison. It seems reasonable to suppose that what we have in Kedah must have been like buildings elsewhere in South East Asia, perhaps in Sumatra, perhaps in South Thailand. But our archeological knowledge of both these regions is very slight indeed. A 13th century Buddhist shrine, Biaro Si Topajan, from Padang Lewas, Tapanoeli, Sumatra, has a plan remarkably like that of the Sungei Batu Pahat temple, as I have pointed out in the 1960 volume of the Federation Museums Journal; and this must indicate the presence of a common architectural tradition in Sumatra and Malaya. This Sumatran site, however, is much later in date than our Kedah structure, and, moreover, it shows many features of local origin since Padang Lewas is a Batak region; so the minor details of its construction and decoration are not much help.

In Southern Thailand a number of early buildings have survived. A small Buddhist shrine from Wat Mahtat in Ligor (Nakorn Sri Dharmaraj) probably dates from the 9th century A.D., and some of its features may very well relate to Kedah, but not, unfortunately, to the Sungei Batu Pahat temple. The Ligor shrine, in any case, has been much modified by later Thai influence so that the reconstruction of its original appearance requires the exercise of some considerable imagination. Other sites of potential value in this context in South Thailand, in Ligor, Chaya, Takuapa, Wieng Sra, require a great deal more study before they can begin to tell us much.

Our reconstruction of the temple on the Sungei Batu Pahat, in fact, is something of a pioneer effort. Many of the details may subsequently be proved to be wrong, and probably will be. But if our model does no more than inspire attempts to show up its inaccuracies, it will still have served its purpose; for the solution of the problems presented by these Kedah sites demands the combined efforts of researchers in Malaya, Thailand and Indonesia. Without some attempt at presenting a reconstruction of a Malayan site, workers in this subject outside Malaya will have nothing concrete upon which to base either their comparisons or their criticisms; and progress in this field requires both.