

Cambodia's struggle for survival, 1432-1863

The more than four centuries that passed from the abandonment of [Angkor](#) around the mid-15th century to the establishment of a protectorate under the French in 1863 are considered by historians to be Cambodia's "Dark Ages", a period of economic, social, and cultural stagnation when the kingdom's internal affairs came increasingly under the control of its neighbors, the Thai (Siam) and the Vietnamese. By the mid-19th century, Cambodia had become an almost helpless pawn in the power struggles between [Siam](#) and [Vietnam](#) and probably would have been completely absorbed by one or the other if France had not intervened, giving Cambodia a colonially dominated "lease on life."^{[[citation needed](#)]} Fear of racial and cultural extinction has persisted as a major theme in modern Cambodian thought and helps to explain Cambodian intense [nationalism](#) and [xenophobia](#) and its original support to the [Khmer Rouge](#) during the 1970s. Establishment in 1979 of the [People's Republic of Kampuchea](#), a Vietnamese-dominated [satellite state](#), can be seen as the culmination of a process of Vietnamese encroachment that was already well under way by the seventeenth century.



Map of [Southeast Asia](#) in the 1400's.

The process of internal decay and foreign encroachment was gradual rather than precipitous and was hardly evident in the fifteenth century when the Khmer were still powerful. Following the fall of [Angkor Thom](#), the Cambodian court abandoned the region north of the [Tonlé Sap](#), to Siam, never to return except for a brief interlude in the late sixteenth century. By this time however, the Khmer penchant for monument building had ceased. Older faiths such as [Mahayana Buddhism](#) and the [Hindu](#) cult of the god-king had been supplanted by [Theravada Buddhism](#), and the Cambodians had become part of the same religious and cultural cosmos as the Siamese. This similarity did not prevent intermittent warfare between the two kingdoms, however. During the sixteenth century Cambodian armies, taking advantage of Siamese troubles with the [Burmese](#), unsuccessfully invaded the Siamese kingdom several times.

In the meantime, following the abandonment of the Angkorian sites, the few remaining Khmer survivors, with Siamese help, established a new capital several hundred kilometers to the southeast on the site of what is now [Phnom Penh](#). This new center of power was located at the confluence of the [Mekong](#) and the Tonle Sab rivers. Thus, it controlled the river commerce of the Khmer heartland and the [Laotian kingdoms](#) and had access, by way of the Mekong Delta, to the international [trade routes](#) that linked the China coast, the [South China Sea](#), and the [Indian Ocean](#). A new kind of state and society emerged, more open to the outside world and more dependent on commerce as a source of wealth than its inland predecessor. The growth of maritime trade with China during the [Ming dynasty](#) (1368–1644) provided lucrative opportunities for members of the Cambodian elite who controlled royal trading monopolies. The appearance of Europeans in the region in the sixteenth century also stimulated commerce.

King [Ang Chan](#) (1516–1566), one of the few great Khmer monarchs of the post-Angkorian period, moved the capital from Phnom Penh to [Lovek](#). [Portuguese](#) and Spanish travelers who visited the city, located on the banks of the Tonle Sab, a river north of Phnom Penh, described it as a place of fabulous wealth. The products traded there included precious stones, metals, silk and cotton, incense, ivory, lacquer, livestock (including elephants), and rhinoceros horn (prized by the Chinese as a rare and potent medicine). By the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Lovek contained flourishing foreign trading communities of Chinese, [Indonesians](#), [Malays](#), [Japanese](#), [Arabs](#), Spanish, and Portuguese. They were joined later in the century by the English and the [Dutch](#).

It was during this period (in 1555-1556) that the Portuguese [friar Gaspar da Cruz](#) made the first attempt to introduce Christianity into the country. According to his own account, his attempt was a complete failure due to the strong "[Bramene](#)" conviction of the king and the ruling classes; however, the brief report he made of his mission offers an interesting insight into the [nations' religious practices](#) of the time.^[2]

Because the representatives of practically all these nationalities were pirates, adventurers, or traders, this was an era of stormy cosmopolitanism. Hard-pressed by the Siamese, to repay his debts, King Sattha (1576–94) surrounded himself with a personal guard of Spanish and Portuguese mercenaries, and in 1593 asked the Spanish governor of the [Philippines](#) for aid. Attracted by the prospects of establishing a Spanish protectorate in Cambodia and of converting the monarch to [Christianity](#), the governor sent a force of 120 men, but Lovek had already fallen to the Siamese when they arrived the following year. The Spanish took advantage of the extremely confused situation to place one of Sattha's sons on the throne in 1597. Hopes of making the country a Spanish dependency were dashed, however, when the Spaniards were massacred two years later by an equally belligerent contingent of Malay mercenaries.

The Siamese, however, had dealt a fatal blow to Cambodian independence by capturing Lovek in 1594. With the posting of a Siamese [military governor](#) in the city, a degree of foreign political control was established over the kingdom for the first time. Cambodian chronicles describe the fall of Lovek as a catastrophe from which the nation never fully recovered. Siam ruled Cambodia for most of the next 300 years, finally losing Angkor Wat to the French in 1907 after holding it for over 450 years.

