My Son (Vietnam)

Identification

Nomination My Son Sanctuary
Location Duy Phu Commune, Duy Xuyen District, Quang Nam Province
State Party Socialist Republic of Vietnam
Date 28 July 1998

Justification by State Party

My Son, a valley surrounded by mountains, was chosen as the site for a religious centre for the capital of the Champa Kingdom. The My Son sanctuary area is one of the most famous Champa architectural and sculptural monuments in Vietnam. The material remains contribute to the understanding of the evolution of Cham thought.

The majority of the My Son towers were built in the 10th century AD. Many were damaged during the recent war; they are being preserved to await decisions on future repair work.

Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a site.

History and Description

History

The Champa Kingdom began in AD 192 when the people of the Tuong Lam area rose up against their Chinese overlords and founded an independent state in the narrow strip of land along the coast of central Vietnam. This state is known from sporadic Chinese records, in which it appeared successively as Lam Ap, Hoan Vuong, and then Chiem Thanh, a transcription of Champapura, meaning "the city of the Cham people." The Cham economy was based on farming (wet-rice agriculture), fishing, and seaborne trade.

The Cham came under the influence of the Hindu religion of the Indian sub-continent early in their development, though the exact date is not known. Many temples were built to the Hindu divinities, such as Krishna and Vishnu, but above all Shiva. Mahayana Buddhism must have penetrated the Cham culture later, probably in the 4th century, and became strongly established in the north of the Champa Kingdom, but Shiva Hinduism remained the state religion.

There were two sacred cities in the Champa Kingdom, each belonging to a large clan. My Son (the name in Vietnamese means "Beautiful Mountain") was sacred to the Dua clan (Narikelavansa in Sanskrit), who worshipped the mythical king Srisanabhadresvara and governed Amaravati, the northern part of the kingdom; it was also the capital of the whole Champa Kingdom. Whilst the religious significance of My Son was important, its location, in a small valley surrounded by high mountains gave it strategic significance as an easily defensible stronghold.

Successive kings in the 6th to 8th centuries favoured My Son and endowed it with fine temples. Between 749 and 875 the Cau clan were in power, and for a time the capital was moved to Vivapura in the south of the territory. Nevertheless, My Son retained its religious importance, and resumed its paramountcy in the early 9th century during the reign of Naravarman I, who won many battles against the Chinese and Khmer armies.

From the beginning of the 10th century the influence of Buddhism began to wane, to the advantage of My Son, where Hinduism had always been strong. By the reign of Giaya Simhavaram in the later 10th century it had achieved parity with Buddhism in the Cham Kingdom. It was at this time that most of the finest surviving architectural monuments were built there.

Most of the 11th century was a period of continuous warfare and My Son, along with other sacred sites in the Champa Kingdom, suffered grievously. It was Harivarman IV who brought peace to the kingdom. He had moved his capital to Do Ban towards the end of the century but he undertook the restoration of My Son. Warfare broke out again in the 12th century, when Jaya Indravarman IV attacked the Khmer Empire and sacked its capital. This resulted in an immediate reprisal, and the Champa Kingdom was occupied by the Khmers from 1190 to 1220.

From the 13th century the Champa Kingdom slowly declined and was absorbed by the growing power of Vietnam. It ceased to exist as an entity in the later 15th century, when worship ceased at My Son.

Description

Within the nominated site, which represents the ancient settlement and sanctuary area, eight groups of tower temples have been singled out, denominated A-H in accordance with the classification of the French architect and archaeologist Henry Parmentier, who studied My Son in the earlier 20th century and recorded nearly seventy monuments.

In date they cover the period from the 10th to the 13th century, and this long date range is reflected in different architectural styles. All are constructed in fired brick with stone pillars and decorated with sandstone bas-reliefs depicting scenes from Hindu mythology.

The basic layout of a tower-temple, which mirrors the Hindu cosmogony, centres around the main tower (kalan), symbolizing the sacred mountain (meru) at the centre of the universe. The square or rectangular base (bhuvakola), representing the human world, is built in brick or stone blocks and decorated with reliefs. Above this rises the main tower (bhuvakola), constructed entirely in brick, with applied
columns and a false door facing east, also lavishly ornamented. The interiors are plain, with small niches for lamps; the Shivalingam was situated on a plinth in the centre. It symbolized the spirit world. The towers were separated from their roofs (svaraloka) by a decorated frieze. They consisted of three storeys forming a stepped pyramid, and represented Kailasa, the mountain sacred to Shiva. It is known that many of these roofs were originally covered with gold or silver leaf.

In front of the kalan there was a smaller gate-tower (gopura), built in brick with stone pillars. Most of the temple complexes had long buildings (mandapa) with tiled roofs adjacent to the gate-towers, for religious ceremonies. In many cases there were smaller two-roomed temples (kasagraha) for the worship of lesser deities around the kalan. Each complex was surrounded by a thick wall of brick, but these have almost entirely disappeared over the centuries since My Son ceased to be a sacred centre.

The predominant style of the architecture and sculptural decoration of the My Son temples derives directly from India. There are, however, some elements of Vietnamese art, from the north, to be observed, most significantly the boat-shaped roofs of one or two of the buildings that are characteristic of Dong Son architecture.

There are thirteen temples within the enclosure designated Group A, the main one of which, A1, is the highest in My Son (24m). Close by is the subsidiary Group A’ with four temples. Most were built in the 10th century, apart from A10, from before 875.

Group B, with the associated Groups C and D, is the largest concentration of temples at My Son, 27 in all. They range in date from the 10th to the 12th century. Temple B1 was built in 1275 and was the largest at My Son; it has, however, been largely destroyed by bombing. Of especial beauty is temple B5, an auxiliary structure used for housing offerings.

There are two main temples in Group E, one from the 7th century and the other from the 11th century. The earlier of these, E1, can be seen to have contained a great deal of wood in its original construction. It is noteworthy for the sophistication and variety of its carved decoration.

Group F has only two temples. Temple F2 has some decorative features which, together with its overall architectural style in the Hoa Lai style, suggest an early 9th century date.

Jaya Harivarman I built the five temples that comprise Group G on a hill between Groups A and E in the 12th century. One was used for the worship of the monarch’s parents and the other was dedicated to his guardian angel. There is extensive use of terra cotta, characteristic of Cham art in the 12th and 13th centuries.

Group H, to the west of the others, consists of four temples from the late 12th and early 13th centuries, among the latest to be built at My Son. Only the main temple H1 has survived wartime bombing.

In addition to these groups, there are three small isolated tower temples (K, L, and M), but all have deteriorated to a considerable extent.

Management and Protection

Legal status

The My Son sanctuary, covering an area of 310ha, was registered as a National Monument in 1979. In 1989 the People’s Committee of the former Province of Quang Nam - Da Nang issued Decision No 1484/QD-UB “Regarding the prohibited enclosure for protecting the Hon Den - My Son cultural and historical monuments zone.” This defines an area of 1062ha within which settlement, grazing, logging, and other activities deleterious to the preservation of the site and its monuments are prohibited. It also assigns responsibilities for the enforcement of this decree.

Management

Overall responsibility for the protection of the property rests with the Ministry of Culture and Information, operating through its Department of Preservation and Museology. This is devolved to the Quang Nam Provincial Department of Culture and Information, which collaborates closely with the People’s Committee and the Division of Culture and Information of Duy Xuyen District, which has established a Committee of Management of the My Son Monuments.

Account is taken of the special needs of the historic heritage in the National Plan for the Development of Tourism in Vietnam and in the General Plan for the Socio-Economic Development of Duy Xuyen District.

A Master Plan for the Strengthening, Preservation, and Exploitation of the My Son Monuments Zone has been completed by the Quang Nam Provincial Department of Culture and Information. Following an evaluation of the current state of conservation of the monuments, it defines and prioritizes objectives for infrastructure development, conservation, and promotion and tourism development. There are two implementation phases (1999-2005 and 2005-2010), for which detailed budgets have been prepared. Responsibility for preservation and conservation is allocated to the Department of Preservation and Museology of the Ministry of Culture, whilst the Province and District authorities will be responsible for maintenance, presentation, and tourist promotion. At the time of the ICOMOS expert mission (see below), this was awaiting official approval.

There is no human settlement in the nominated area or the buffer zone, and none is permissible under the protective legislation. The Quang Nam Socio-Economic Master Plan provides for rehabilitation of the forested area surrounding the site in order to improve the ecological environment and local climatic conditions.

The staffing of the property consists at the present time of six graduate conservators and administrators, two conservation and museology students, one graduate accountant, and eight guards. Maintenance workers are provided by the District.

Annual visitor numbers have risen steadily from 3570 in 1990 to 12,500 in 1997. The national tourism plan foresees very substantial increases in visitor numbers in the coming decade.
Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

Following the survey and inventory work of Parmentier in the earlier 20th century, restoration work was carried out at My Son by the École Française de l'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) in 1938-44. This included the construction in 1939-41 of a dam on the stream which passes through the site, following a disastrous flood, but this was swept away by further flooding in 1946.

With the start of hostilities in 1965 My Son became a guerrilla base and the whole region was the target for American bombing and minelaying. In August 1969 the sanctuary itself was heavily bombed, causing great destruction. After the war the area was progressively cleared of mines and unexploded bombs and shells.

In 1980 a Polish expert delegation from PKZ worked with specialists from the Vietnamese Ministry of Culture and Information to study Champa remains in central Vietnam. A joint Committee for the Restoration of Champa Remains was set up and work was carried out on the documentation and consolidation of temples in Groups A-D and general clearance of the site. Between 1990 and 1996 work was concentrated on the removal of vegetation from the structures and on the consolidation of the bases of temples in Groups E-H.

Current conservation work is restricted to further removal of vegetation and soil from structures. There is a regular monitoring system for the My Son monuments, for which the Management Board and the Quang Nam Provincial Museum are responsible. Reports are submitted to the Provincial Department of Culture and Information and the Department of Preservation and Museology of the Ministry of Culture and Information.

The Italian Fondazione Lerici prepared a project for a computer-based archaeological map of the My Son area in 1998. This would involve photo-interpretation using satellite imaging and aerial photography, archaeological and topographical reconnaissance, geomorphological and hydrogeological reconnaissance, geophysical exploration, a survey of the state of degradation of the monuments, trial excavations, the creation of a Geographic Information System (GIS) database, and training courses. It would last three years. (No reference is made to this project in the nomination dossier, although the project document is included in the annex to the nomination, and so its current status is uncertain.)

Authenticity

The authenticity of My Son in terms of design, materials, workmanship, and setting is high. Conservation interventions under French and Polish expert guidance have been relatively minor and do not affect the overall level of authenticity, although some are not in conformity with contemporary conservation principles.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS


Qualities

The My Son Sanctuary is a remarkable architectural ensemble that developed over a period of ten centuries. It presents a vivid picture of spiritual and political life in an important phase of the history of South-East Asia.

Comparative analysis

The Champa Kingdom exhibits a number of qualities that make it unique among the major historic kingdoms of South-East Asia. Of especial importance is the association with the Hindu religion, imported from India, which stubbornly persisted here in the face of Buddhist competition for many centuries. Comparisons may be made with more spectacular sites, such as Angkor (Cambodia), Pagan (Myanmar), or Sukhothai (Thailand), but these represent cultures that are complementary to that of My Son rather than competitive in cultural and spiritual terms.

ICOMOS recommendations for future action

It is essential that the management plan should be implemented without delay. Despite the wholly admirable efforts of the State Party, the state of conservation of many of the individual monuments is very poor, and there is a need for urgent action.

The proposed Italian project is commendable, since it is designed to increased understanding of the entire complex, and also includes an important training element. It is hoped that funding can be secured for the implementation of this project as soon as possible.

Brief description

During the 4th to 13th centuries there was a unique culture on the coast of contemporary Vietnam, owing its spiritual origins to the Hinduism of India. This is graphically illustrated by the remains of a series of impressive tower temples in a dramatic site that was the religious and political capital of the Champa Kingdom for most of its existence.

Recommendation

The Bureau referred this nomination back to the State Party, requesting information on the implementation of the management plan for the property and assurances that the necessary funding will be forthcoming. requested to reflect upon the natural and historical links between this property and Hoi An, reflected in the close association of both with the same river. If the information requested is made available before the 23rd Extraordinary Session of the Bureau of the World Heritage Committee in November 1999, ICOMOS recommends that this property should be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of criteria ii and iii.

Criterion ii The My Son Sanctuary is an exceptional example of cultural interchange, with the introduction the Hindu architecture of the Indian sub-continent into South-East Asia.

Criterion iii The Champa Kingdom was an important phenomenon in the political and cultural history of South-East Asia, vividly illustrated by the ruins of My Son.

ICOMOS, September 1999