

ARCHITECTURE AND SYMBOLISM

The historical and religious context for Borobudur help us to understand its symbolism, but its importance as a religious site for pilgrims remains in the realm of conjecture. Perhaps we will never know what really happened to the gigantic monastery at the foot of the monument where one finds today the remnants of the foundations of buildings, ruins of statues, ceramic fragments and small votive tablets and pottery. We may never even know whether the place of the forefathers, Kamulan, ever existed. In all probability, so BERNET KEMPERS suspects, this sacred place was the location for processions and rituals and embodies the relation between human existence and the cosmic pre-existence as a spiritual or tantric event. The French scholar Paul MUS saw “un monde symbolique complet”: made up of a superficial unity or reality, “un monde matériel”, and an inner, secret and partly metaphorical realm, “un monde idéal” which overlap.

Restoration

When van ERP started with the restorations in 1907, most of the relief depictions had not yet been interpreted. The 22 cm high square stones, hewn from volcanic andesit (augit-andesit) whose quarries have never been discovered, are laid without mortar and, because of their high porosity, retain the humidity and favour the growth of mosses, lichens, algae and ferns. Acids produced by decomposition accelerated the erosion, while seeping water from the hill vaporized on the wall by the warmth of the sun, and that left residues of lime and silicate on the reliefs. Though the earth may have offered a certain protection before the façade was exposed, the growth of roots in some places drove centimetre wide holes in the stone.

