

“The Birth of the Buddha” at Angkor

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ABSTRACT—A rare stele depicting the birth of the Buddha, taken from Angkor Wat in 1899 and now housed in the Bangkok National Museum, raises issues central to the Buddhist art and civilization of Angkor. Stemming from the late 13th or the early 14th century, it draws its inspiration primarily from North Indian Sanskrit textual sources, thereby providing further evidence of the continuing dominance of that tradition in Cambodia and mainland Southeast Asia, prior to the more recent and final onset of Pali-based Buddhism (i.e. Theravāda or Theravāṃsa).

Introduction

This article examines in detail a carved stele in sandstone illustrating a momentous event in the life of the Buddha—his birth—discovered at Angkor Wat, and now located in the Bangkok National Museum. This birth-scene is in fact part of a group of approximately twenty panels, each depicting a different episode of the life of the Buddha, that were seemingly produced around the same time and place in the Angkor region.¹

First, I will discuss the peregrinations of this unique relief from Cambodia to Thailand, when it was taken from Angkor to Bangkok, by whom, and under which circumstances (see also Appendix). Second, I offer a reading of the object’s two inscriptions, and interpret the style and iconography of the sculpture. By comparing this inscribed stele with other artistic representations of the birth of the Buddha—technically still a *Bodhisattva*—from India and Burma (Myanmar), and various textual and epigraphic sources in Pali and Sanskrit, this study aims to better date the object as well as understand the advent and uniqueness of Khmer Buddhism at Angkor—centering on the life of the Buddha—in the context of the Buddhist transformation of Angkor Wat, also known as *Brah̄ Bisṅulok* in premodern inscriptions, and initially dedicated to *Viṣṇu* in the 12th century.

¹ This corpus of reliefs is the subject of a more comprehensive research project that I am conducting on the “Life of the Buddha at Angkor,” partially funded by the Centre of Khmer Studies.

Presentation of the stele

Provenance: From Angkor to Bangkok

An old unpublished and undated photograph from a French mission to Angkor clearly reveals that this unique high-relief of the birth of the Buddha was originally located at Angkor Wat in the late 19th century in the gallery of the “Thousand Buddhas” or Preah Pean (Figure 1).² At the time, Angkor was situated in Siamese territory, just north of the French protectorate of Cambodia. Along with many other Buddhist sculptures of various periods, including later Thai and Lao statues, the stele may have been conveyed there from elsewhere in the Angkor region, perhaps Angkor Thom, at an earlier time during the post-Angkor period and deposited in the “Thousand Buddhas gallery” (Fournereau 1890: pls. 76–77, 100; Polkinghorne forthcoming). We know from inscriptions that Angkor Wat had become a hub of “international” Buddhist pilgrimage since at least the 16th century (Thompson 2004).³

Another stele depicting “Buddha’s Victory over Māra” was also documented there (Cœdès 1916). These two Buddhist steles were first illustrated as drawings in the personal notebook prepared by Louis Delaporte⁴ for Lucien Fournereau who was to visit Angkor in 1887–88 (Baptiste and Zéphir 2013: 138, cat. 84) (Figure 2). These two steles share stylistic affinities and are of the same dimensions, strongly suggesting that the two once belonged to the same set, produced at the same time and probably in the same workshop in Angkor or its environs.

Fournereau published photos of these two Buddhist steles found at Angkor Wat, but only as chapter frontispieces in his *Les ruines d’Angkor*, and did not discuss them in the main text (Fournereau and Porcher 1890: Figures 36–37, 167, 179). The early French documentation and archives, however, clearly attest to the presence of the two steles still in situ at Angkor Wat at the time. This material was produced just years before the stele of the birth was removed by Siamese authorities and transported to Bangkok in 1899, while the second, the Buddha’s Victory over Māra, was left behind and is now at the Conservation d’Angkor in Siem Reap.

We learn of the removal of the first stele from a dated Siamese inscription found around its upper rim (see below). The birth stele was subsequently kept in the royal Siamese collection of Wat Phra Sri Rattana Satsadaram, more commonly known as Wat Phra Kaeo or the Emerald Buddha Temple at the Grand Palace in Bangkok (Lunet de Lajonquière 1907: 317, no. 5). This Chakri dynasty collection at Wat Phra Kaeo also contained other sculptures and stone fragments of recent foreign provenance, such as those from Borobudur and other Central Javanese monuments given to King Chulalongkorn

² I am grateful to Olivier Cunin for drawing my attention to this photographic archive from the Musée Guimet.

³ In the famous Japanese plan of Angkor Wat produced in the early 17th century, Angkor Wat is labeled “Jetavana,” that is the Indian monastery in ancient Magādhā where the historical Buddha is believed to have resided for many years. See Ishizawa 2015.

⁴ Louis Marie Joseph Delaporte (1842–1925), a naval captain, architect by training, was also a participant in the pioneer French Mekong expedition of 1866–68. On Delaporte and his missions, see most recently Baptiste and Zéphir 2013.



Figure 1. The birth stele as found in situ at Angkor Wat in the late 19th century. Photograph possibly taken during the Mission Fournereau at Angkor in 1887–88. (Photograph courtesy of the Musée Guimet, inv. no. AP9703)



Figure 2. Drawings of Buddhist steles observed at Angkor Wat by Louis Delaporte in the 1870–80s, and their labels. Notebook of instructions to Lucien Fournereau, p. 6, 1887. (Private collection, Paris)



Figure 3. The birth of the Buddha, sandstone, 13th–14th century. Found at Angkor Wat, Bangkok National Museum, inv. no. LB 5, H: 77cm, W: 63cm, D: 22cm. (Photograph by the author)

in 1896 as diplomatic gifts (Cœdès 1928: 8–9; Bloembergen and Eickhoff 2013). Later, the birth stele was transferred to the newly opened Bangkok National Museum in 1926 (Figure 3).

By comparing old and more recent photographs (Figures 1 and 3), we can observe that the stele of the birth has suffered modern damage, especially on the lower part of the base. This mutilation probably occurred during the transfer to Bangkok or when molds, for reproductions in plaster casts, were made at Angkor in the late 19th century (see Appendix and Table 1). The precise reason for its removal by Siamese authorities from Angkor Wat to Bangkok remains uncertain, but Delaporte had already cast his eyes on the stele and reported it to be a “curieuse pièce archéologique” in his private instructions to Fourmureau (Figure 2). Additionally, it would also augment the royal Siamese collection when “antiquarianism” and, eventually “archeology,” gradually emerged as disciplines in the Kingdom of Siam at the turn of the 20th century (Peleggi 2017: 65ff).

This incipient royal interest in antiquities and archeology was partly the result of a shift in the Siamese elite’s worldview, with the coming of a new geography and Western mapping (Thongchai 1994), as well as a direct response to French colonial knowledge projects in the region (Peleggi 2017: 74ff). In this endeavor, the role and efforts of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab (1862–1943), half-brother of King Chulalongkorn and then Minister of the Interior, cannot be underestimated. He became the celebrated “Father of Siamese history,” and along with George Cœdès (1886–1969), the renowned French expert, was one of the architects of Siam’s periodization of art styles, later adopted by the Bangkok National Museum in its classification of its archeological collection. In addition, Prince Damrong himself was a collector of fine Khmer art bronzes and objects (Peleggi 2017: 90, n. 20). This led Cœdès (1928: 26) to comment in his catalogue of the newly opened National Museum that “it is in Bangkok that one should go to study Khmer bronze art.”⁵

Siamese inscription

The birth stele has an unpublished inscription in modern Thai characters that reads from left to right across the thick upper edge of the panel. This inscription provides information on the individual who commissioned the removal of the stele from Angkor Wat to Bangkok and when this removal took place (Figures 4a–d).

The epigraph reads as follows:

- (left) พระยาศรีสหเทพ(เส็ง)นำมาจากพระนครวัด
Phraya Sisathap (Seng) brought [this stele] from Angkor Wat,
- (right) แขวงเมืองเสียมราฐ เมื่อวันที่ ๒๔ มีนาคม ร.ศ. ๑๑๗
district of Mueang Siamrat, on 24 March, R.S. 117 [=1899 CE]

The name “Phraya Sisathap” is a rank of nobility (Phraya) and a title (Sisathap) conferred in the past on high officials of the Kingdom of Siam. Only two “Phraya

⁵ Here and after, all translations of French, Thai, and Pali sources are mine unless otherwise stated.



Figures 4a–d. The birth stele with modern Siamese inscription. Bangkok National Museum, inv. no. LB 5. (Photographs by the author)

Sisahathep” are known during the Rattanakosin or Bangkok era. The first, known colloquially as Thong Pheng (ทองเพ็ง, 1792–1844), served under King Rama III (r. 1824–51). However, this is Seng Wiriyasiri (เส็ง or แสง วิริยศิริ, 1865–1956),⁶ who served mostly under King Rama V (r. 1868–1910) and King Rama VI (r. 1910–25) (Figure 5). He was a topographer, previously known as Luang Thesachitwihan (ennobled on 4 August 1890), working in the Survey Department (Krom Phaenthi), before his transfer to the new Ministry of the Interior (Krasuang Mahatthai). Seng became Phraya Sisahathep on 10 September 1898, acting from that time onwards as a direct assistant of Prince Damrong, the first Minister of the Interior of the Kingdom of Siam from 1894 to 1915. Seng was the first Permanent Secretary of State from 9 March 1898 to 12 April 1913, and could thus furnish Prince Damrong with first-hand geographic and cartographic information (Tej 1977: 94). His rank and title were later changed to Phraya Maha Amatyathibodi on 23 November 1911.⁷ Tej Bunnag (1977: 1, 94) states that Seng was “one of the ablest officials” in the history of the modern Siamese Ministry of the Interior.

In the inscription, “Mueang Siamrat” corresponds to the province of Siem Reap at the border of French Cambodia, where the temples of Angkor are located. This province was then under total Siamese control.⁸ Following the Treaty of 11 August 1863 concerning the French-Cambodian protectorate and the subsequent French-Siamese

⁶ Siamese surnames became legally required under the Surname Act of 1913. Prior to this, most people as well as civil servants were known by their first or given names and/or titles. See Loos 2006: 133–34, n. 10. King Rama VI conferred the last name of Wiriyasiri on Seng’s family on 13 July 1913.

⁷ I thank H.E. Tej Bunnag for these biographical details (private communication).

⁸ A mild and symbolic reminder of that Siamese control over the temples of Angkor in the second half of the 19th century is the scale model of Angkor Wat ordered by King Mongkut (i.e. Rama IV, r. 1851–68) and installed inside the compound of the Emerald Buddha Temple in Bangkok. The original royal command was, however, for Siamese emissaries to dismantle and relocate a temple from Angkor to Bangkok. This order resulted in around 300 Cambodians ambushing the conscripted laborers and stabbing the Siamese officials in charge of the project. See Flood 1965: I, 222–23, 226–28; II, 376–80; also Peleggi 2017: 74.



Figure 5. Phraya Sisahathep (Seng Wiriyasiri, 1865–1956). National Archives of Thailand, inv. no. ก.พวญ.7/45, date ca 1907.

Treaty of 15 July 1867, both Siem Reap⁹ and Battambang provinces were ceded to the Kingdom of Siam and became part of the new eastern administrative circle or Monthon Burapha. In return Siam renounced its suzerainty over the remainder of Cambodia (Pensri 1962: 15–61).

In the inscription, R.S. 117 uses the Rattanakosin Sok or Bangkok era, which started on 6 April 1782, and is equivalent to 1899 CE,¹⁰ only one year after Phraya Sisahathep took office at the Ministry of the Interior, and just weeks after he visited Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) to meet Paul Doumer, the Governor-General of French Indochina, on a special diplomatic mission (Pensri 1962: 204). Another relief of the “Nine Planets” (*navagraha*) at the Bangkok National Museum, dated to around the 10th century, bears a similar Siamese

inscription by “Phraya Sisahathep (Seng)” who brought this stele from Prasat Lolei in Roluos, near Angkor, on 25 March 1899.¹¹ These two sculptures were removed from Angkor by Phraya Sisahathep at a time when he was on a tour in the outer provinces of Siam (Battambang and Siem Reap) to help introduce a “commutation tax,” or *kha ratchakan*, into Monthon Burapha (Tej 1977: 142).¹²

Old Khmer inscription (K. 976)

Of great importance for the study of the birth stele in Bangkok is an ancient inscription in Old Khmer (K. 976) found on its reverse. The faded inscription runs to several lines, but is scarcely legible in the present state of conservation.¹³ Only a few words and *akṣaras* can be deciphered (Figures 6a–b). An undated rubbing exists in the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris (Figure 7a). Some annotated remarks, written

⁹ The Siamese variously called the province “Mueang Siamrap,” “Mueang Siamriap,” and eventually “Mueang (Nakhon) Siamrat,” simply meaning “Siamese town” (Santi 2019).

¹⁰ Traditionally, the Siamese New Year started on 1 April. The Year R.S. 118 thus started on 1 April 1899 and ended on 31 March 1900 CE.

¹¹ Lunet de Lajonquière (1907: 316, no. 1) says that this piece was brought to Bangkok in 1894, an obvious error of calculation.

¹² While Prince Damrong tried to tour as many Siamese provinces as possible during his official tenure, he apparently never visited the eastern outer provinces of Monthon Burapha (and Angkor), perhaps in fear of antagonizing their French neighbor (Tej 1977: 230).

¹³ Boeles (1960: 74, n. 14) affirmed that “the reading ... is not yet quite clear.” The inscription is labeled K. 976 in the “Corpus des inscriptions khmères” (Cœdès 1937–66: VIII, 222–23).

in Thai on the margin of the rubbing, show a first tentative reading of this inscription by an anonymous Thai scholar¹⁴ as follows (Figure 7b):

1. ... *vrah kanloñ*
2. ... *vrah kamrateñ añ śrī nṛ(pati)* ...
3.
4. ... 8 5

According to this hesitant reading, the first line would give *vrah kanloñ*, a honorific or sacred term in Old Khmer for “the mother” (Pou 2004: 78–79), perhaps here “of the Buddha-to-be.”¹⁵ The second line may refer to an unknown local ruler or his consort.¹⁶

The inscription’s third line is illegible. The fourth line in the Thai annotations provides two digits, 8 and 5, which have been reconstructed as a possible fragmentary date ranging anywhere between 850 and 859 of the *śaka* era, equivalent to 928–937 CE during the reign of Jayavarman IV (921–941 CE) of Chok Gargyar (Koh Ker). However, these interpretations are highly speculative. Moreover, for stylistic and paleographic reasons, as noted below, this tentative attribution to the 10th century is far too early for this inscribed stele, which ought to belong to the late Angkor period.

Professor Kangvol Khatshima of the Department of Oriental Languages at Silpakorn University in Bangkok, after several careful inspections of the original inscription in situ, while able neither to confirm nor improve on the reading of the first, third, and fourth lines, offered in a private communication the following more satisfactory rendering of the second line:

2. ... *vrah kamrateñ añ śrī śrīndra* ...

If this reading is correct, the line begins with the title *vrah kamrateñ añ* (V.K.A.), “Our Lord” (Pou 2004: 462), followed by the unusual repetition of the royal epithet *śrī śrī*,¹⁷ and then the appellation of a Khmer ruler beginning with “Indra.” In the late Angkor or post-Bayon period, there are three known candidates:¹⁸

¹⁴ Possibly the late Thai specialist of Khmer epigraphy Prof. Uraisi Warasarin (1939–2002) of Silpakorn University (Hunter Watson, private communication).

¹⁵ *Kanloñ* can also mean “palace or royal residence” (Soutif 2009: 244–45, n. 13), and “deceased, departed, or dead” in certain contexts, thus *vrai kanloñ* could refer to the “forest of the dead” (Pou 2004: 466). This inscription may then refer to the divinized name of the statue of the deceased mother of the king, as in K. 293 (l. 1–2), where the statue of Jayavarman VII’s mother is called *kanloñ* K.A. *śrī jayamañgalārthacūdāmani* (Cœdès 1937–66: III, 196).

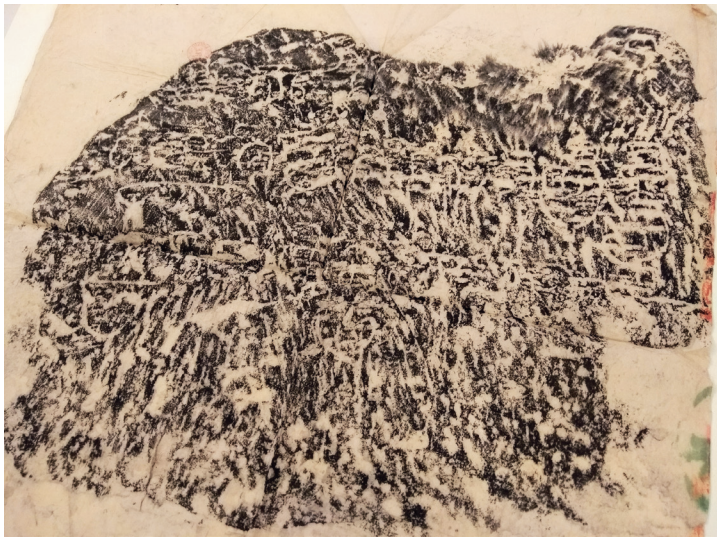
¹⁶ For example, in K. 124 (l. 5), a royal princess from the 9th century is known as *kanloñ* (?) *añ śrī nṛpendradevī* (Cœdès 1937–66: III, 171), while in K. 330a (l. 19–20), the chief queen of Indravarman I (r. 877–89 CE) and defunct-mother to Yaśovarman I (r. 889–910 CE) is labeled *vrah ājñā kanloñ* K.A. *śrī indradevī* (Pou 2001: II, 78).

¹⁷ The reading of the double *śrī* is clear in the inscription (Figure 6b). This reduplication is common during the late Angkor period.

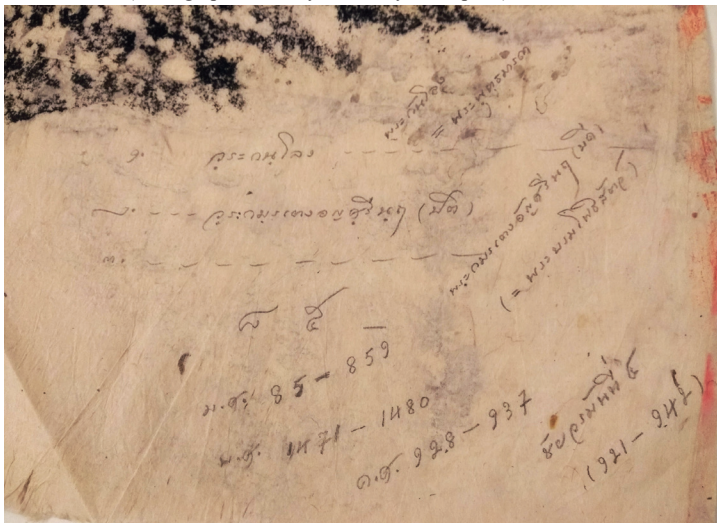
¹⁸ Indravarman I who ruled in the late 9th century at Hariharālaya (Roluos) is deliberately excluded from this list. In K. 325 (Face A, l. 4–5), a reference is made to Śiva as V.K.A. *śrī śrīndravarmmeśvara*. This stele was erected by Yaśovarman I at Lolei for his father Indravarman I (Pou 2001: II, 67–68).



Figures 6a–b. Reverse of the stele (left) with detail (right) of the Old Khmer inscription (K. 976). Bangkok National Museum, inv. no. LB 5. (Photographs by the author)



Figures 7a–b. Rubbing of the inscription K. 976 in Old Khmer (above) with Thai annotations in the margin (below). Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, inv. no. BnF 1190, 95. (Photographs courtesy of Ashley Thompson)



1. Indravarman II (r. ca 1218–70),¹⁹ presumed son of Jayavarman VII (r. ca 1181–1218).
2. Indravarman III (r. ca 1295–1308), son-in-law of Jayavarman VIII (r. ca 1270–95).
3. Indrajayavarman (r. ca 1308–27), successor of Indravarman III.

It would be appealing to identify this donor with either Indravarman II or III, the latter more commonly known as King Śrīndra[-varman], “Glorious Indra.”²⁰ Following the reign of the great King Jayavarman VII, both of these monarchs were apparently Buddhists. While we know very little about the political and religious career of Indravarman II, he must have continued the “grand œuvre” of his zealous predecessor, adhering mostly to Mahāyānist and tantric Buddhist principles, before his successor Jayavarman VIII reverted to Śaivism and initiated the so-called “iconoclastic reaction” against the Buddhist religion (Jacques 2007: 41).

Conversely, Indravarman III, who rose to power after the abdication of his father-in-law, was possibly a follower of Theravāda Buddhism. This we infer from K. 754, a long bilingual Pali-Khmer inscription dated 1230 *śaka* = 1308 CE,²¹ which was erected not only to announce his renunciation of the throne but also to mark the “official” advent of the new Theravāda religion at Angkor (Cœdès 1936: 14–21).²² In that inscription (Face A, l. 3; B, l. 2), as well as in K. 569 (l. 1, 24–25), the king is called V.P.K.A.²³ *śrī śrīndravarmmadeva* in Sanskritized Old Khmer, and *sirisirindavamma* in Pali (Cœdès 1936: 15–17; Pou 2001: II, 167). We could also speculate that K. 976 makes a reference to his first queen, if not already defunct wife, known in K. 569 (l. 1, 25) by the name of K.A. *śrī śrīndrabhūpeśvaracūdā* (Pou 2001: II, 167). Indravarman III had earlier married this princess who was also the eldest daughter of Jayavarman VIII. Alternatively, we could attempt to reconstruct the reading of the full name in line 2 of K. 976 as V.K.A. *śrī śrīndra[sugata]*, “[the Blessed One of] the Glorious Śrīndra [-varman],” found for instance in K. 930 (l. 1–3) and also likely dated from the late 13th to the early 14th century (Cœdès 1937–66: V, 315). In this case a more direct reference to the Buddha²⁴ and Indravarman III would have to be sought. As it happens, K.754 (Face B, l. 8) actually refers to “the [statue of the] Buddha, the great deity of Śrīndra [-varman]” (*vraḥ vuddha* K.A. *śrī śrīndramahādeva*), so that this possibility is not totally unfounded (Cœdès 1936: 17). Finally, Indravarman III’s immediate successor,

¹⁹ The reign of this king is now accepted as much longer than originally thought (Jacques 2007: 41, n. 41).

²⁰ K. 754 (Face B, l. 6, 13) mentions *sruk śrī śrīndraratnagrām*, “the precious village of Śrīndra [-varman]” (Cœdès 1936: 17), while K. 569 (l. 2) speaks of *vraḥ sruk śrī śrīndrarājapura*, “the royal city of Śrīndra[-varman]” (Pou 2001: II, 167). It is clear from these two epigraphic examples that a shorter form of the king’s name was also used and that the second honorific “Śrī” was seen as an integral part of the designation.

²¹ K. 754, once presented as the oldest Pali inscription from Cambodia, is actually now superseded by K. 501 (dated 1074 CE) from the Angkor region as well as K. 1355, a Pre-Angkorian inscription in Pali from Angkor Borei (Skilling 2002: 158–67; see also in this volume). In Thailand, several bilingual Pali-Khmer inscriptions are dated to the 11th–12th century such as K. 966 and K. 997 (Cœdès 1937–66: VIII, 220–21, 224–25).

²² Other inscriptions, however, such as K. 568, celebrate the king as a devout Śaiva (Jacques 2007: 42, n. 45).

²³ Here we notice the addition of *pāda* in *vraḥ pāda kamrateṇ aṅ*.

²⁴ *Sugata*, “Well-Gone,” is another epithet of the Buddha.

Indrajayavarman, is another candidate who could have commissioned, if not directly, the erection of this Buddhist stele.²⁵

In summary, applying the principle of Ockham’s Razor, and assuming that the inscription on the reverse is more or less contemporary with the carved relief on the front, we are in a good position to date the stele and its Old Khmer epigraph to the late 13th or the early 14th century, to the reigns of Indravarman III (Śrīndravarman) or his successor (Indrajayavarman) at Angkor in the post-Bayon period. A stylistic analysis of the birth scene on the stele confirms this dating.

Style and iconography of the stele

Description

Unraveling the iconographic sources for Khmer imagery has been the task of art historians since the late 19th century, but many unanswered questions remain. On what textual sources, if any, did sculptors and patrons base their compositions? Presumably the ateliers of sculptors, painters, and metal-image makers for Hindu art were guided, to some extent, by Sanskrit sources derived ultimately from India, including *śilpaśāstras* or “iconographic treatises” (Chedha 2559/2016). With Buddhist art, however, Sanskrit sources are usually connected to North India and the Mahāyāna, while Pali sources are strongly linked to South India, Sri Lanka and the Theravāda or Theravaṃsa, that circulated in Cambodia, Burma and Thailand from at least the mid-to-late first millennium CE onwards. In any case, it is still unclear what sources exactly guided the sculptors of these reliefs at Angkor.

The birth stele depicts the Buddha Śākyamuni emerging from the right side of his standing mother, Queen Māyā, in the Lumbinī grove. Perhaps the artists portrayed the Buddha figure in movement to suggest what he did after his birth—take seven steps, raise his hand, and point to the sky. On the lower left, a multi-headed, four-armed kneeling deity, surely representing the God Brahmā, receives the Buddha with his two cupped hands. Unfortunately, his legs are now worn away. Three other gods, all single-headed, stand just behind Brahmā. Perhaps these represent the Four Lokapālas, Regents of the Four Quarters, as acknowledged in the early Pali scriptures, even though one would be missing here. More likely, they represent a generic multitude of gods who appear in various other accounts of the birth of the Buddha, often originally composed in Sanskrit (Bureau 1974: 205–09; Foucher 1993: 42–49; Pal 1984: 80–81, cat. 23; Strong 2001: 38–40).

In the center, Queen Māyā stands grasping the branch of a tree with her right hand, a customary pose for these nativity scenes since the beginning of Indian Buddhist art.²⁶ Her left hand rests on the shoulder of a female attendant.²⁷ To her right is a damaged

²⁵ In K. 144 (l. 1), a Buddhist foundation by his guru, the king is identified as *śrī śrīndrajayabarmm* (Cœdès 1937–66: VII, 34).

²⁶ This is the typical pose of a Yakṣinī (female tree spirit) in early Indian art and thus possibly connects Queen Māyā to some fertility rituals (Bureau 1974: 205–06; Bautze-Picron 2010: 194–209, figs. 1–6).

²⁷ This female attendant is unidentified in either Pali or Sanskrit original sources. Only later Burmese

image of a kneeling servant. The female attendant supporting Māyā links the Angkor sculpture almost directly to Pagan (Bagan) prototypes.

Both Māyā and her attendant are topless and wear a sampot or long tunic wrapping their hips and legs. The queen is also adorned with a necklace, anklets, and large garland headdress with a diadem. The short fishtail-stylized pleat in front of the queen's sampot decorated with rosettes, her facial features, braided hair, chignon in the shape of a lotus bud, and the diadems, jewels, and ornaments worn by the queen, female attendants, and other deities, signify a style quite distinct from that of Angkor Wat (ca 1100–75 CE), studied in detail by Sapho Marchal (1997) on female *devatās*. This assertion differs from a recent Thai publication by Amara Srisuchat (2017: cat. A.21, 102–05), who links the birth stele to the Angkor Wat style. In my opinion, the stele cannot reasonably be placed any earlier than the Bayon style (ca 1177–1230 CE), as meticulously described by Philippe Stern (1965: 15ff), and quite likely would even post-date it by a few decades, that is, somewhere in the late 13th or the early 14th century. It also seems likely that the Buddhist stele, though found in the precincts of Angkor Wat, was originally associated with Angkor Thom and even the Bayon temple itself. Several other steles of the same type and style, but depicting other episodes of the life of the Buddha, have been found in situ inside the Bayon towers. The depiction of the birth of the Buddha, however, is extremely rare in Cambodia and the rest of mainland Southeast Asia prior to this period, with the major exception of Pagan (see below).²⁸

Textual sources

The scene of the birth of the Buddha is described in numerous texts, each with minor or major variations. A selection of four popular accounts found in South and Southeast Asia, two in Sanskrit and two in Pali, are listed below. These four are usually cited by scholars as likely sources for South and Southeast Asian imagery. For each, I analyze and compare in further detail the key passage describing the moment of delivery:

1. *Buddhacarita*, Canto 1.10:²⁹

krameṇa garbhāḍ abhiniṣṛtaḥ san babhau cyutaḥ khād iva yony|ajjātaḥ ||

... in due course **he** [the Buddha] emerged from the womb, but **did not emerge through the birth canal** (ed. and trans. Olivelle 2008: 4–5; my emphasis).³⁰

interpretation identifies her as Pajāpati, sister of Queen Māyā and the Buddha's foster mother (Bigandet 1866: 35; Galloway 2005: 161).

²⁸ Boeles (1960: 74–76, figs. 4–5) discusses a 12th-century relief from the Hindu temple at Phanom Rung, Northeast Thailand, which he takes as a representation of the birth. I am skeptical about this identification.

²⁹ This verse text was originally composed in Sanskrit and is usually dated to the 1st or the 2nd century CE.

³⁰ On this point, the Chinese version further adds that “the Bodhisattva was born from her right side” (1.9), and just as “King Aurva was born from the thigh...” (1.10), “the Bodhisattva was just like that, born from the right side” (1.11). See trans. Willemsen 2009: 3–4.

2. *Lalitavistara*, Chapter 7:³¹

atha sa plakṣavyrkṣo bodhisattvasya tejonubhāvenāvanamya praṇamati sma | atha māyādevī gaganatalagateva vidyut dṛṣṭim dakṣiṇam bāhuṃ prasārya plakṣasākhām gṛhītvā salīlam gaganatalaṃ prekṣamānā vijṛmbhamānā sthitābhūt | atha tasmin samaye śaṣṭyapsaraḥśatasahasrāṇi kāmāvacaradevbhya upasaṃkramya māyādevyā upasthāne paricaryām kurvanti sma ||

evaṃrūpeṇa khalu puna ṛddhiprātihāryeṇa samanvāgato bodhisattvo mātuh kuṣṭigato'sthāt | sa paripūrṇānām daśānām māsānāmatyayena māturdakṣiṇapārśvānniṣkramati sma smṛtaḥ saṃprajānannanupalipto garbhamalairyathā nānyaḥ kaściducyate'nyeṣāṃ garbhamala iti ||

tasmin khalu punarbhikṣavaḥ samaye śakro devānāmindro brahmā ca saḥapatih purataḥ sthitāvabhūtām | yau bodhisattvaṃ paramagauravajātau divyakāśikavastrāntaritaṃ sarvāṅgapratyaṅgaiḥ smṛtau saṃprajāṇau pratigṛhṇāte sma || (ed. Vaidya 1958)

Then that *plakṣa* tree, bent by Bodhisattva's glory, bowed down. **Then Māyādevī stretched out her right arm** like the lightning in the sky, **held a branch of the *plakṣa***, and, looking playfully at the sky, stood there yawning. At that moment, sixty hundred thousand divine nymphs along with the Kāmāvacara gods, approached and attended on Māyādevī.

Magically arriving in this fashion, Bodhisattva remained in his mother's womb. At the completion of ten months, **he issued forth from the right side of his mother**, remembering tradition, not smeared by the uterine dirt, in case some other said that he was the uterine dirt of another.

At that same time, O Bhikṣus, **Śakra** the King of gods, **and Brahmā** the Lord of Sahā, **stood before him**, and the two of them, greatly honoured, received Bodhisattva entirely covered with a piece of celestial silk, remembering tradition (trans. Goswami 2001: 84; my emphasis).

3. *Nidānakathā* or “Introduction” to the *Jātaka* Commentary (Ja I 52f):³²

sā maṅgalasālamūlaṃ gantvā sālasākhāyaṃ gaṇhitukāmā ahoṣi ... || sā hattham pasāretvā sākhām aggaheṣi || tāvad eva c'assā kammajavātā calimsu ... || sālasākhām gahetvā tiṭṭhamānāya eva c'assā gabbhavuṭṭhānam ahoṣi || tam khaṇam yeva cattāro pi suddhacittā mahābrahmāno suvaṇṇajālaṃ ādāya sampattā tena suvaṇṇajālena bodhisattam sampatiṇṇhitvā mātu purato ṭhapetvā ... || bodhisatto pana dhammāsanato otaranto dhammakathiko viya nisseṇito otaranto puriso viya ca dve ca hatthe dve ca pāde pasāretvā ṭhitako

³¹ Several versions, editions, and early translations of this text exist in Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan with some slight variations. The translated excerpt quoted here is drawn from a Sanskrit version which may ultimately be traced back to the mid-to-late first millennium CE.

³² This commentary was composed in Pali around the 5th century CE. An earlier canonical account is given in almost a similar fashion in the *Acchariyabbhutadhammasutta* (M III 122–23).

mātukucchisambhavena kenaci asucinā amakkhito suddho visado kāsikavatthe nikkhittamaṇiratanam viya jotanto mātukucchito nikkhami || (PTS ed.).

Having walked up to the foot of the hallowed Sāla tree she wished to take hold of a branch **She stretched out her hand and held it.** At that very instant labour pains seized her **As she stood there clinging to the branch of the Sāla-tree she was delivered of her Child.**

Almost immediately **the four Great Brahmās** of pure mind **drew near with a golden net and received the Bodhisatta in this net;** and placing the Child in front of the mother ..., **the Bodhisatta left his mother’s womb** like a preacher descending from his pulpit or a man descending from a stairway, **stretching out his hands and feet, in an erect posture,** unsmearred with any impurity arising from the mother’s womb, pure and clear and shining like a precious gem placed on a silken cloth (trans. Jayawickrama 1990: 69–70; my emphasis).

4. *Paṭhamasambodhi*, Chapter 2:³³

yadā bodhisatto mātukucchimhā nikkhamati yonimaggena alaganto amakkhito semhena amakkhito rudhirena ... | atha nikkhanta mattaṇ ca pathavīyama asampattam eva pathamaṃ cattāro suddhāvāsamahābrahmāno suvannajālena patigahetvā deviyā purato thapetvā || (ed. Cœdès 2003: 17–18).

When the Bodhisatta emerged from his mother’s womb, not being trapped by the vaginal tract, unsmearred by mucus, unsmearred by blood As soon as he emerged without making contact with the ground, immediately before, firstly, **the four great Brahmās of the Pure abode received [him] with a golden net** placed in front of the queen (my translation and emphasis).

As we can see from the foregoing, some major differences appear between the first two Sanskrit texts and the last two Pali accounts of the birth of the Buddha. Sanskrit texts unanimously state that he “did not emerge through the birth canal” (*Buddhacarita*), but issued forth “from the right side of his mother” (*Lalitavistara*).³⁴ This latter example further asserts that he was received by God Brahmā, Indra (Śakra), and other gods. Conversely, the Pali texts imply that the infant Gotama emerged more naturally from “his mother’s womb” (Introduction to the *Jātaka* Commentary) and, even more specifically, through “the vaginal tract” (*Paṭhamasambodhi*). In both Pali examples, as soon as he

³³ This post-canonical biography of the Buddha was first compiled and composed in so-called “Indochinese Pali,” possibly in northern Thailand around the 15th–16th centuries CE (Cœdès 1968, 2003; Anant 2003). The later expanded Thai version of the *Paṭhamasambodhi* narrative, interspersed with commentaries (trans. Phra Paramanujitjinoros 2016: 70–72), differs substantially from the Pali.

³⁴ The *Mahāvastu* composed in Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit around the early centuries CE also says that the Buddha issued forth from his mother’s right flank without doing her any harm: “For the Supreme of Men are born from their mother’s right side; it is here that all the valiant men abide when in their mother’s womb” (Mvu II 20; trans. Jones 1952: 18).

emerged from his mother’s womb, he was first received by the Four Great Brahmās in a golden net, absent in our stele, then received from their hands by the Four Great Kings or Lokapālas in a cloth of black antelope hides, also absent. Only after release from the Four Great Kings’ hands did he finally become established on the earth and took seven steps proclaiming: “I am the chief of the world” (Jayawickrama 1990: 71).

These examples clearly show that the stele depiction of the birth from Angkor does not generally follow the description of events as drawn from the Pali accounts. In fact, the stele seems to be closer to the Sanskrit tradition. To be more precise, the stele appears to be more in accord with such texts as the *Lalitavistara*. This biography of the Buddha was often the conventional source in Indian post-Gupta and Pāla art, and perhaps exerted a significant visual impact as far as Pagan in Burma in the 12th–13th centuries.

The birth of the Buddha in Indian art

Early depictions of the birth cycle of the Buddha are numerous in India.³⁵ The first representations in Buddhist art, however, never directly portray the infant. The newborn prince Siddhārtha is only manifested by a series of footprints, signifying his presence and also his legendary seven strides. This miracle immediately following the birth is shown, for example, on the long piece of swaddling cloth held by the four turbaned Lokapālas on a relief from Nagarjunakonda in Andhra Pradesh (Figure 8).³⁶ This artistic convention in which the Four Great Kings take pride of place over Brahmā and Indra seems popular in South India, perhaps in closer agreement to the Pali scriptures such as the “Introduction to the *Jātaka* Commentary” (see above).

In the North Indian artistic tradition, closer to the Sanskrit textual sources, the infant Gautama always emerges from the right side of his mother.³⁷ One early example from Gandhāra is kept at the British Museum (Zwalf 1996: cat. 151), and another at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (Figure 9).³⁸ A later well-known example dated to the late Gupta period comes from Sarnath, Uttar Pradesh (Figure 10).³⁹

By the Pāla-Sena period (8th–12th centuries), the scene becomes ubiquitous in Bihar and Bengal and is included in the set of the “Eight Great Miracles” (*aṣṭamahāprātihārya*).

³⁵ See Bautze-Picron 2010 for a recent iconological survey of a “woman standing below the tree” in Indian art. At times, Queen Māyā grasps the branch of the tree with her left hand (e.g. fig. 10).

³⁶ For other South Indian examples from Amaravati, Phanigiri, and Kanagahalli, see Knox 1992: fig. 41, 61, Skilling 2009: 34–36, fig. 11, and Rhie Quintanilla 2017: 124ff, figs. 17–18.

³⁷ Foucher (1993: 43) analyzed this prodigious delivery of the Buddha through his mother’s right flank, while she was standing, unlike other human beings, and linked it to the superhuman and mythical birth of Lord Indra, King of Gods, as described in the *Ṛg-Veda*. In Book IV, Hymn 18, the Vedic god decided he should not come forth the usual painful way mortal children normally emerge through their mother’s vaginal tract, but would rather come out through his mother’s side, creating a way for himself, because “this is the old and well-known path by which all the gods were born” (Verse 1, cited in Perry 1885: 127). Conversely, Stoye (2008: 8–13) sees the Greco-Roman art tradition and the miraculous birth of little Dionysos from the right thigh of his father, Zeus, as the possible source of inspiration for the Gandhāran version of the supernatural birth of the Buddha.

³⁸ For other examples from ancient Gandhāra, see Stoye 2008.

³⁹ More examples from Mathura and Sarnath can be seen in Bautze-Picron 2010: 215, figs. 12–14.



Figure 8. The birth cycle of the Buddha, limestone, 3rd century CE. Nagarjunakonda, Andhra Pradesh, National Museum of India, New Delhi, acc. no. 50.17, H: 176cm, W: 89cm. (Photograph by the author)



Figure 9. The birth cycle of the Buddha, schist stone, 2nd–3rd century CE. From ancient Gandhāra, Pakistan, Victoria & Albert Museum, London, acc. no. IM.109-1927, H: 24cm, W: 38cm, D: 7cm. (Photograph by the author)

Rarely does the birth episode appear alone, but in one small bronze from Nalanda, Indra appears to receive the Buddha (Figure 11).⁴⁰ The birth is also often reproduced in dated manuscripts and book covers of the 11th–12th centuries from Northeast India illustrating the life of the Buddha (Bautze-Picron 2010: 219, n. 75, figs. 22, 24).

⁴⁰ For two rare stone examples, one from Kurkihar and the other from Nalanda, see Bautze-Picron 2010: 218, figs. 15, 18.



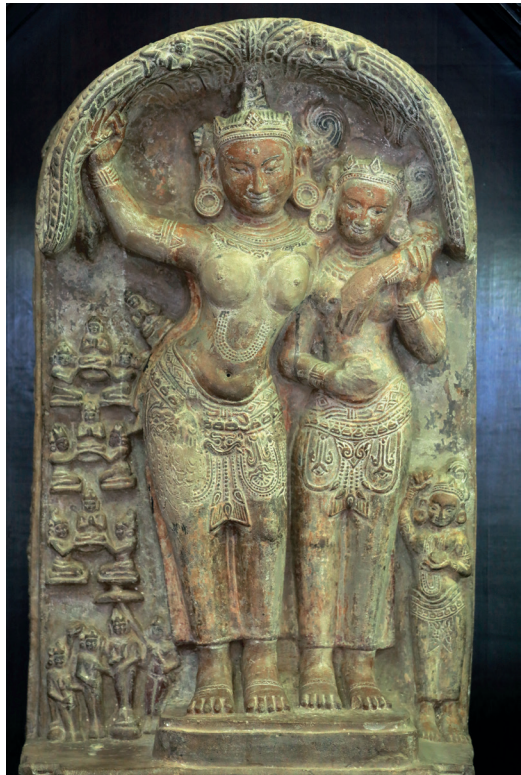
Figure 10. The conception and birth of the Buddha, high-relief, sandstone, 5th–6th century CE. Found at Sarnath, Uttar Pradesh, National Museum of India, New Delhi, acc. no. 49.114, H: 105cm, W: 49cm. (Photograph by the author)



Figure 11. The birth of the Buddha, bronze, 9th–10th century CE. Nalanda, Bihar, National Museum of India, New Delhi, acc. no. 47.49, H: 20cm, W: 11cm (Photograph by the author)



Figure 12. The birth of the Buddha, mural painting, early 12th century CE. Lokahteikpan temple, Pagan. (Photograph courtesy of Joachim K. Bautze)



Figures 13a–b. The birth of the Buddha, sandstone, 12th century. Left, found at Ananda temple (in situ) and, right, found at Kubyaukng temple, Pagan, Bagan Archaeological Museum, inv. no. 966/97, H: 111cm, W: 65cm, D: 39cm. (Photographs courtesy of Michael Freeman, left, and Ko Than Zaw, right)

The birth of the Buddha in the art of Pagan

In mainland Southeast Asia, some of the earliest representations of the birth of the Buddha appear at Pagan in Burma, in painted and sculpted images of the 12th–13th centuries.⁴¹ Examples at Pagan are known from the Ananda, Kubyaukng, Lokahteikpan, Nandamaya or Pathodhammya temples and monuments 820 and 1077, as well as other sites such as temple 36 near Sale (Luce and Ba Shin 1969–70: 157–59, pls. 280d, 301, 353c; Bautze-Picron 2003: 33–34, figs. 29–30; Galloway 2005; Fraser-Lu and Stadtner 2015: 120–21, cat. 16; Samerchai 2015: 154, fig. 9). Again, conforming more or less to the same pattern observed in earlier Pāla art from which Pagan heavily drew its artistic inspiration, Pagan scenes of the birth may be depicted independently or as part of the Eight Great Miracles. At any rate, the Buddha is nearly always shown emerging cross-legged from the right hip of his mother (Figures 12–13).

As already mentioned, the emergence of the Buddha from his mother’s right side is found only in the Sanskrit tradition of the Buddha’s narrative, such as in the *Lalitavistara*, not in the Pali scriptures. Nevertheless, most Burmese scholars insist that this artistic production at Pagan was predominantly done in an emerging Theravāda milieu (Handlin 2012: 170, 199, n. 45). For example, while Donald Stadtner (2005: 108–10) asserts that the eighty stone sculptures narrating the life of the Buddha found inside the famous Ananda temple closely follow the “Introduction to the *Jātaka* Commentary,” an early canonical biography written in Pali, this clearly does not hold true for the scene of the birth depicted there (Figure 13a). The Pali text says nothing about the Buddha having emerged fully formed from his mother’s right side,⁴² but simply states that “people drew a curtain round her” upon delivering the child (Jayawickrama 1990: 70), a detail that we never see depicted in Pagan art. Conversely, Charlotte Galloway (2005: 161–62) tries to make connections with the *Lalitavistara* and sees a direct reference to the Sanskrit narrative in the case of the birth scene at Pagan. Both Pali and Sanskrit were probably in use during this transitional period in 12th century-Burma (Luce and Ba Shin 1969–70: 96). It is doubtful, however, that the *Lalitavistara* was present at Pagan, thus inspiring directly the artistic production of the birth. A more nuanced correlation between texts and images should be sought. All kinds of textual, oral, and artistic traditions were present in Pagan. Though much has since disappeared, occasionally there are echoes of this variety.

Samerchai Poolsuwan (2017) has argued that Pagan murals on the Buddha’s life are more closely connected with later Burmese texts such as the *Malālamkāravatthu*

⁴¹ As far as I am aware, the scene of the birth is not depicted in early Buddhist Mon, Pyu, or Khmer art. The only possible earlier precedent may be seen on two pedestals of the temple of Đổng Dương in Central Vietnam (9th century), depicting various episodes of the life of the Buddha from Conception to Enlightenment, but the exact deciphering of the scenes remains problematic. See Trần Kỳ Phương et al. 2018: cats. 14–15, 158, fig. 5, 164, fig. 3b.

⁴² There is a late “Pyu” stone image of the birth from Śrīkṣetra, approximately dated to the 11th–12th century, that seems to follow the Pali pattern and is now kept in the Bagan Archaeological Museum. Another stucco image comes from monument 820 (ca late 11th century) but is no longer on display. When this temple was uncovered, scenes of the life of the Buddha were clearly visible; these were unfortunately substituted by four modern cement replacements. The original sculptures represented two women without heads, presumably Māyā and her attendant, with no trace or sign that anything was ever attached on the mother’s right hip (Lilian Handlin, private communication).

and the *Tathāgataudanadīpanī*, rather than with canonical Pali sources. However, this does not tally with the tradition of the *Paṭhamasambodhi*, another local text probably composed in northern Thailand where the oldest extant manuscript in Pali is dated to 1477 (Anant 2003: 15). At any rate, as far as the episode of the birth is concerned, the *Malālamkāravatthu* and the *Tathāgataudanadīpanī* are silent on the manner in which the Buddha was “purely” delivered by his mother (Bennett 1853: 10; Bigandet 1866: 32ff). We cannot therefore conclude that both canonical and post-canonical Pali and vernacular sources inspired the mass production of birth scenes at Pagan until the 13th century, as was the case in later periods where the newborn baby no longer appears on his mother’s right hip (e.g. Munier-Gaillard and Kirichenko 2017: 26–29). On the contrary, we have seen above that the presence of the newly born prince on his mother’s right hip at Pagan clearly follows an older idiomatic style from Indian Pāla art. It is thus another case where an earlier artistic convention inherited from Northeast India is used by contemporaries at Pagan, even if they were aware that it did not exactly match the Pali texts at their disposal.

Summary and provisional conclusions

On stylistic and epigraphic grounds, the production of this unique stele of the birth of the Buddha, today kept at the Bangkok National Museum, most probably dates to the late 13th–early 14th century. While the ultimate provenance is unknown, the stele was recovered at Angkor Wat in the late 19th century and was conveyed to Bangkok in 1899 at a time when Siem Reap was still under Siamese control. As the Buddha is shown emerging from his mother’s right side at the moment of delivery, the iconographic and narrative content seems closer to the Sanskrit textual tradition—still in full vigor in 14th century-Cambodia (Skilling 2018)—and does not follow the Pali texts, even those elaborated later in mainland Southeast Asia such as the *Paṭhamasambodhi*. Despite this Sanskritic element, the stele was most likely produced in the fast growing Pali-Theravāda milieu at Angkor during the late or post-Bayon period (Tun 2015), a phase of religious transition noticed by the Chinese emissary Zhou Daguan who visited Angkor and the royal court in 1296–97 (trans. Harris 2007: 52–53, 104–05).

Some artistic production may not have followed the prevalent textual religious environment. Ancient Pagan may provide an excellent example. Since this emblematic Buddhist site was strongly Theravāda, the preservation of some Mahāyāna-related iconographic patterns in the illustration of the Buddha’s life—originally derived from the Sanskrit-based Pāla prototype—could be considered as a “residual artifact,” that is a kind of leftover “behavior” which was no longer directly associated with its Mahāyānist origin. This provisional conclusion also leads to a necessary reassessment of the straightforward relationship between texts and images in Buddhist art. Further exploration and discussion is needed to decipher the varying inputs and continuities in Khmer artistic production.

Appendix

Modern replicas in Cambodia and France

There are two modern cast replicas of the birth stele from Angkor which must have been produced before the removal of the original sculpture to Bangkok by the Siamese in March 1899 (see above).⁴³ The first replica has been, since at least the early 20th century, located in Phnom Penh at Wat Phnom. This plaster cast was spotted and photographed there by Pierre Dieulefils⁴⁴ during his visit to Cambodia in 1905 (Figure 14).⁴⁵ A second plaster copy was produced after the Raffegaud molding mission to Angkor in 1890–91; it is now kept in an external store of the Musée Guimet at Morangis in France (Figure 15).⁴⁶ Hypothetically, the first replica could have been executed from the same mold as the second while the Raffegaud mission was transiting Phnom Penh on its return from Angkor to France. Or it could have been produced from a different mold completed during one of the additional French plaster cast missions instigated by Delaporte in Cambodia in the 1880s–90s.⁴⁷ The dimensions of both replicas are the same as the original, albeit in a better state of preservation than the stele now in Bangkok (see Table 1). Indeed, extensive and irretrievable damage to the original sculptures or surfaces of temples were sometimes caused during the molding process, executed with cement (Falser 2013a: 68, n. 18).

Other modern moldings were made of *apsara* reliefs depicted on the outer gates of Angkor Wat, as well as plaster casts of some low-reliefs from the inner gallery with famous mythological scenes. These casts were made in this age of early French explorative missions and for universal exhibitions held in Paris in 1867, 1878, 1889, and 1900 (Falser 2013a–d; Flour 2014). For instance, the Parisian Khmer Pavilion for the Universal Exhibition of 1900 attempted to copy the main hill-temple of Wat Phnom at the center of the new Khmer capital, Phnom Penh (Charles-Roux 1902: 120–24; Baptiste and Zéphir 2013: 170). It is thus possible that the model cast of the birth stele

⁴³ The technique of “plaster casts” involved making negative molds of original surfaces on site, often transporting these lightweight molds over long distances, and finally recasting them into three-dimensional exact plaster copies at the destination sites. For a recent analysis of the plaster casts from Angkor as art and cultural objects of colonial appropriation within the French, German, and British imperial contexts and their interrelated political rivalries, see Falser 2013a–d; also Flour 2014.

⁴⁴ On Pierre-Marie Alexis Dieulefils (1862–1937), see Vincent 1997. Dieulefils’ photo album and text composed by Louis Finot on Khmer ruins (2001[1909]: 114–15, pl. 49c) confuses the original stele found at Angkor Wat with the cast replica located in Phnom Penh. The original stele had already been transferred to Bangkok by Siamese authorities by the time this cast was photographed.

⁴⁵ A local catalogue erroneously gives the date of 1900 for the photograph taken in 1905 by Dieulefils (Groslier 1924: 239, cat. 45). An undated and anonymous photograph of this replica, kept in the École française d’Extrême-Orient (EFEO) archives (inv. no. CAM16076), probably predates 1905, when the replica was still freestanding before it was cemented into the wall of Wat Phnom.

⁴⁶ I am grateful to Pierre Baptiste, chief curator of Southeast Asian collections at the Musée national des arts asiatiques-Guimet, for this information and for providing a photograph of this cast.

⁴⁷ After his last personal mission to Cambodia in 1881–82, Delaporte, in France, meticulously planned and commissioned three other plaster cast campaigns at Angkor. The first was led by Lucien Fournereau in 1887–88, the second by Sylvain Raffegaud in 1890–91, and the third by Urbain Basset in 1896–97, each time following Delaporte’s detailed instructions focusing on temple moldings from Angkor Wat and the Bayon (Baptiste and Zéphir 2013: 61, n. 10).



Figure 14. The birth of the Buddha, plaster cast, Wat Phnom, Phnom Penh. (Photographed by P. Dieulefils, inv. no. D.45, box no. 85.5, dated 1905)



Figure 15. The birth of the Buddha, plaster cast made by the Mission Raffégaud at Angkor in 1890–91, Musée Guimet, inv. no. MO 3C/81, storage, Morangis, France. (Courtesy of the Musée Guimet)



Figure 16. The birth of the Buddha, modern replica, with other plaster casts of Angkor Wat reliefs mounted behind. Wat Phnom, Phnom Penh. (Photograph by the author)

Figure 17. The birth of the Buddha, modern and miniature replica. From Prince Boun Oum's collection, Wat Phu Site Museum, Champasak, Laos, inv. no. VP I 202, H: 49cm, W: 41cm, D: 7cm. (Photograph courtesy of Christine Hawixbrock)



was already present in Phnom Penh at the temple summit, where it today is still fully integrated inside the back wall of the main ascending stairway on the eastern entrance. The format of this plaster cast is the same as the original stele in Bangkok, save for an additional round post emerging from the top of the arch. Similar plaster casts from Angkor Wat remain on display today at Wat Phnom, behind the replica of the birth stele (Figure 16). All of this plaster cast production by the French at Angkor took place when the local and suspicious Siamese authorities strongly forbade any removal of original sculptures and reliefs from the temples by foreigners⁴⁸ and before Siam’s retrocession of Siem Reap to French-Indochina in 1907. As Michael Falser (2013a–d) recently demonstrated, this modern enterprise of “cultural translation” via plaster cast copies, on the one hand, highlighted the French strategy to virtually bypass Siamese property rights on the site of Angkor, and, on the other, gradually reinforced their colonial claims over the province of Siem Reap.

A modern replica in Laos

Seng Wiriyasiri (see above) also published a historical sketch of Champasak in today’s southern Laos (Phraya Maha Amatayathibodi 2484/1941). Champasak or Bassac (1713–1946) was a Siamese-Lao principality located on the eastern or left bank of the Mekong River, south of the right bank principality of Khong Chiam where the Mun River joins the Mekong. During most of the 19th century, the Champasak principality was a tributary to Bangkok, but was not an integral part of the Kingdom of Siam (Archaimbault 1961). Following the French-Siamese Treaty of 3 October 1893, the left bank fell under French rule, while the Siamese dependencies on the right bank were gradually absorbed into the Siamese northeastern administrative circle or Monthon Isan (Pensri 1962: 143ff, 283–85).

The Na Champasak family ruled the former principality of Champasak, with territories including both banks of the Mekong River. The last prominent member was Prince Boun Oum Na Champasak (1911–81), son of Prince Raxadanai, Champasak’s last ruler. Prince Boun Oum became Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Laos for a brief period before being forced to flee the country to Thailand in 1975, and eventually to France in 1976 where he later passed away (Baird 2018). Today a miniature copy of the birth stele, previously belonging to the private collection of Prince Boun Oum, is in the custody of the Wat Phu Site Museum in Mueang Champasak, in their storage collection (Figure 17). One wonders how this replica came to be in the possession of the last Champasak prince and whether he, his father, or ancestors received it officially or personally through his possible acquaintance with Seng Wiriyasiri. It is highly likely that the inspiration for this miniature copy of the birth stele in Champasak came from the original stele in Bangkok collected earlier by the Siamese official.

⁴⁸ Delaporte’s reports (cited in Falser 2013a: 64–68) state that his staff silently removed a few original statues or fragments from isolated sites at Angkor despite declaring to Siamese officials and local monks that they were only making molds and plaster cast copies during their missions. Delaporte also subversively reported his strategy of bribing the “Siamese mandarins” through gifts to buy their silence.

Table 1. Steles of the birth of the Buddha (original and copies)

Stele no.	Material	Dating	Provenance	Current Location	Measurements
1 (Original)	Sandstone	13th–14th c.	Angkor Wat	Bangkok National Museum, Thailand (inv. no. LB 5)	H: 77cm W: 63cm D: 22cm
2 (Replica)	Plaster cast	1890–91 (Mission Raffegaud)	Siem Reap	Musée Guimet, Morangis, France (inv. no. MO 3C/81)	H: 75cm W: 63cm D: ?
3 (Replica)	Plaster cast	Late 19th c. (?)	Siem Reap (?)	Wat Phnom, Phnom Penh, Cambodia	H: 76cm W: 63cm D: ?
4 (Miniature)	Cement (?)	20th c. (?)	Prince Boun Oum's collection	Wat Phu Site Museum, Champasak, Laos (inv. no. VPI 202)	H: 49cm W: 41cm D: 7cm

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