

AN EARLY BRAHMANICAL SCULPTURE AT SONĀHLĀ

by

Stanley J. O'Connor Jr.,
Cornell University

There are a number of objects on display at the small museum maintained by the monks at Wat Majjhimāwās in SonĀhlā that deserve publication and study. They present an unusual variety, ranging in time and intention from recent Buddhist sculptures in the Theravāda tradition, to bronze images whose iconographic and stylistic affinities relate to the period of Srivijayan hegemony over Peninsular Siam which terminated in the thirteenth century. In addition, there are *līnga* bases (*yoni*) and several sculptures in stone clearly related to Hinduism.¹

While these objects encompass a wide field of time and a diversity of doctrine, they are all said to have been found at the same location, that is the area around the modern village of Satippra. This small and relatively isolated coastal hamlet, approximately 31 miles north of SonĀhlā, may, in the distant past, have been a center of some importance, judging from the material apparently disgorge from the earth in its neighborhood.

In the few studies devoted to the art and archaeology of Peninsular Siam, those by Lajonquière,² Claeys,³ Dupont,⁴ Griswold,⁵ Wales,⁶ and most recently, Lamb,⁷ there is no mention of

1 These objects have been photographed and catalogued by M.C. Subhadradis Diskul, Chief Curator of the National Museum, Bangkok. It was at his suggestion that I visited Wat Majjhimāwās.

2 Commandant L. de Lajonquière, "Le domaine archéologique du Siam", *Bulletin de la Commission Archéologique de Indochine. BCAIC*, 1909.—"Essai d'inventaire archéologique du Siam", *BCAIC*, 1912.

3 J. Y. Claeys, "L'archéologie du Siam", *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient*, BEFEO, Vol. XXXI, 1931.

4 P. Dupont, "Vishnu mitrés de l'Indochine occidentale", *BEFEO*, Vol. XLI, 1941, "Le Buddha de Grahi et l'école de Chaiya", *BEFEO*, XLII, 1942.

5 A. B. Griswold and Luang Boribab Buribhand, "Sculptures of Peninsular Siam in the Ayuthya Period," *Journal of the Siam Society*, Vol. XXXVIII, 1950.

6 H.G.Q. Wales, "A Newly Explored Route of Ancient Indian Cultural Expansion", *Indian Art and Letters*, Vol. IX, 1935. "Recent Malayan Excavations," *Journal of The Royal Asiatic Society*, 1946. "Culture Change in Greater India", *Journal of The Royal Asiatic Society*, 1948. *The Making of Greater India*, London, 1961 (2nd Edition, revised).

7 A. Lamb, "Miscellaneous Papers on Early Hindu and Buddhist Settlement in Northern Malaya and Southern Thailand", *Federation Museums Journal. FMJ*, Vol. VI, 1961.

either Satiṅpra, or the material collected at Wat Majjhimāwās'. This merely underscores the fragmentary nature of our knowledge of the early art of the Peninsula. That we have any knowledge at all of the existence of objects of certain antiquity from Satiṅpra is due almost entirely to the great foresight and energies of the Abbot of Wat Majjhimāwās', the Reverend P̄ra Bhadrasilasanyara. He is a native of Satiṅpra and his reputation for learning and his interest in antiquities has served to induce many of his former neighbors to place their chance finds in his keeping. It is highly improbable, however, that all discoveries have been reported to the Abbot and their disposition is likely to have been made under less favorable circumstances.

There is one image, a broken stone torso (Fig. 2), on display at the Wat which, I believe, has strong affinities with a group of sculptures, the Mitered Vishnus, which has already been the subject of careful study by Pierre Dupont⁸ and Jean Boisselier.⁹ It is hoped that by an examination of this sculpture, one may be able to establish some correspondences with a group of rather well-charted images and thus establish one point in the flux of time that can be associated with some surety to the previously unstudied site of Satiṅpra. There is, of course, the reservation that one is dealing with a floating object, that is, one without archaeological context. But, whatever concern one has on that point is somewhat assuaged by the knowledge that this stone sculpture, if complete with base, head, arms and attributes, would probably weigh some three or four hundred pounds and it is therefore unlikely to have done much casual journeying since leaving the workshop where it was made.

The sculpture is headless, armless, without feet, its attributes are missing. What remains today are two pieces of shaped stone rejoined after being fractured at the waist. Its height is twenty-four inches. Its upper torso is nude. The lower limbs are only partially concealed by a long, tightly fitting robe or *dhoti* which falls to the level of the ankles. Around the hips is a scarf plastically rendered

8 P. Dupont, "Vishnus mitrés de l'Indochine occidentale", *BEFEO*, Vol. XLI, 1941. *La Statuaire pré-angkorienne*. Switzerland, 1955.

9 J. Boisselier, "Le Vishnu de Tjibuaaja (Java occidental) et la Statuaire de Sud-Est Asiatique," *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. XXII, 1959.



Figure 1. Vishnu from Surāstra-dhānī, National Museum, Bangkok.



Figure 2. Stone torso from Chatinpra, Wat Majjhimawās, Songkhla.

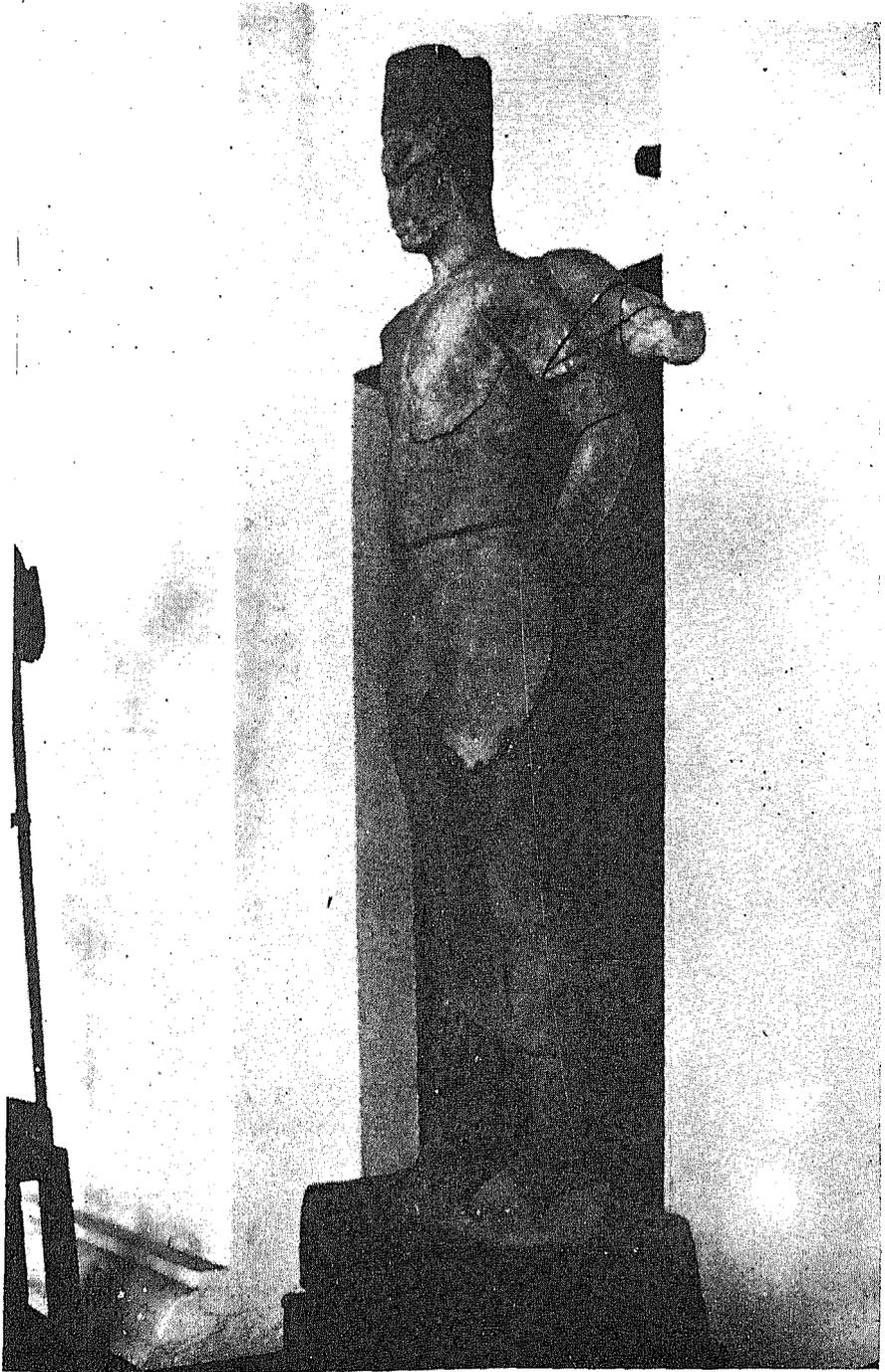


Figure 3. Vishnu from Takuapa, National Museum, Bangkok.



by two raised bands of stone which completely circle the body. It is knotted in the front in a bow forming a figure eight. The free ends of the bow fall in a slow arc to the outer contour of the hip.

In addition to the hip sash, the image displays a thin, cord-like, ridge of stone around the waist. This is the upper hem of the skirt. It is fastened by being twisted on itself two or three times. What appears to be a buckle of elliptical shape is the twist covered by a thickness of cloth.

The only other detail of clothing on the image is a raised fold of cloth, the free hem of the skirt that has been pulled up at the waist from where it falls between the legs to a point at which it would certainly have joined the base. It passes under the hip-sash, gaining in mass and projection as it descends. The function of this drapery fold as one of five points of support for a group of long-robed, free standing statues found in Siam and Cambodia was first studied and used diagnostically by Pierre Dupont.¹⁰ The other four points of support are provided by the two feet, and, in the case of Vishnu images, the club or *gadā*; the final support is provided by a column of stone, either disguised as the free-hanging ends of a hip-sash, as in the figure from Surāstra-dhānī (Fig. 1) or undisguised and unattached to the body as is considered to be the case with the Vishnu of Takuapā (Fig. 3).

Altogether, six long-robed, mitered Vishnu figures have been found in Peninsular Siam. There are two from Vieng Sra, and one each from Surastra-dhānī, Takuapā, Jaiyā and Nakhon Sridhammaraj.¹¹ The last two images are a special case, closely related to each other but having little in common with the other four images. They are different in proportions and details of dress, especially the shape of the miter, from the larger group but, even more striking are the

10 P. Dupont, "La statue en ronde-bosse dans l'Asie du Sud-Est", *Revue Des Arts Asiatiques*, Vol. X, No. II, June 1936.

11 The first four images are all reproduced in Dupont, *BEFEO*, Vol. XLI, 1941. The Chaiya Vishnu is Fig. 48 in Reginald Le May, *The Culture of Southeast Asia*, London, 1956 (2nd Edition). The Nakhon Sridhammaraj image is Fig. 114 in A. Lamb, "Miscellaneous Papers On Early Hindu and Buddhist Settlement in Northern Malaya and Southern Thailand", *Federation Museums Journal*, Vol. VI, 1961.

differences in technique. The Jaiyā and Nakhon Sridhammaraj figures are conceived in an extremely archaic manner, as a series of discrete, two-dimensional patterns imposed on a block of stone and cut away at the contours. Their harsh contours and board-like surfaces betray a different level of technique than the more flowing contours and rounded surfaces of the other four Vishnus. Equally, it can be said that the Songkhla image has little in common with the Jaiyā and Nakhon Sridhammaraj images.

The remaining four Vishnus have sufficient gross correspondences of costume and style to be considered as a group. At the same time they exhibit enough differences in construction, detail of dress and handling to indicate both differences in chronology and workshop. The Songkhla torso would appear to fit into this series without difficulty. It shares a number of features with all these images including four arms, as indicated by its double shoulder, the long unpleated robe, the central drapery fold falling between the knees to the base, its nude unadorned torso, and the absence in any of them of the *śrīvatsa* mark, an insignia usually associated with Vishnu in medieval Indian sculpture but lacking in most representations of the Gupta period.¹²

It is with the Takuapā Vishnu, which is now believed to date as early as the sixth century,¹³ that the Songkhla torso has the closest affinities. Neither image has any vestige of its hands or supporting structure affixed to its body. Indeed, if one follows Lajonquière's reconstruction,¹⁴ the Takuapā Vishnu would have both the lower arms well away from the body. Whatever might have been the exact configuration of its arms, the Songkhla torso clearly was carved in the round with no attachment at the hip, and in this way it shares with the Takuapā Vishnu a technical charac-

12 C. Sivaramamurti, "Geographic and Chronological Factors In Indian Iconography", *Ancient India*, No. 6, January 1950.

13 This is close to the date originally proposed by H.G.Q. Wales who recognized its affinities with Indian Gupta Art. *Indian Art and Letters*, Vol. IX, No. 1, p. 9, Pierre Dupont originally appeared to lean towards a later date, *BEFEO*, XLI, 1941, p. 248; however, in a subsequent work, *La Statuaire Pré-angkorienne*, p. 128, he revised his opinion and placed the image as a contemporary of the most ancient of the images in the Funan style of Phnomhda.

14 L. Lajonquière, *BCAIC*, 1909, p. 233, Fig. 25.

teristic manifested by no other long-robed, stone Brahmanical image so far discovered in Peninsular Siam.

It is, however, in the construction of the body according to a schema that emphasizes the musculature, albeit subordinated to an over-all interest in a harmony of abstract volumetric shapes, that the correspondences between the Takuapā and the Soṅkhlā images is most striking. While this limited naturalism is most remarkable in the powerfully modelled forms of the Takuapā sculpture, it is also evident in the heavily accentuated deltoid and pectoral muscles of the Soṅkhlā torso. In both images the robe serves to display rather than conceal the swelling contours of the flank and leg, although on the Takuapā image the leg is treated in the round while the rear part of the Soṅkhlā image is handled as an abstract shape. Thus the similarities are relative and are meaningful only in terms of the Vishnus from Peninsular Siam. Considered in this context, the sculptor of the Soṅkhlā torso appears to have been relatively more concerned with emphasizing the musculature of the body than those artisans who made the Vieng Sra, and Surāstra-dhānī images and somewhat less so than the sculptor of the Takuapā image.

We are left with very little in the way of iconographic clues. Because of its apparent close relationship to the Takuapā, Surāstra, and Vieng Sra images, it is probable that the image is one of the twenty-four *sthānaka-mūrti* of Vishnu.¹⁵ A tentative reconstruction then, would endow the Soṅkhlā torso with a high crown or miter of cylindrical shape and in its four hands it would carry the conch shell, club, lotus and discus. The disposition of the four attributes would determine the identification of the specific *mūrti*. However, even if all attributes were present, the early date of the image and the conflicts in the later texts would make a decisive identification most difficult.¹⁶

If the proposed identification of the Soṅkhlā image is accepted, then one is led to several interesting conclusions. First, is the new

15 T.A. Gopinatha Rao, *Elements of Hindu Iconography*, Vol. 1, Part 1, Madras, 1914, pp. 227-244.

16 J.N. Banerjea, *The Development of Hindu Iconography*, Calcutta, 1956 (2nd Edition, revised), pp. 410-411.

evidence that very sophisticated sculpture was being created on the Peninsula at an early date. The arched back and swollen abdomen of the Soṅkhlā image, while indicating fidelity to the Indian Yogic concept of inner breath or *prāṇa*, illustrate also the depth to which the sculptor has worked his block of stone. His assured handling and composition in subtly modulated convex planes mark him as a thoroughly skilled artisan. Previously, the Takuapā Vishnu had stood somewhat apart in the production of the Peninsula both for the relative naturalism of its bodily forms and for the controlled vigor of its modelling. The Soṅkhlā image shares with it these qualities, as well as its, so far, unique disposition of supporting structure. Yet, it seems unlikely that both images were made in the same workshop, not only because of the distance between their two find-sites, but because they are each made from different stone.

This brings us to some speculation about its find-site. According to the Abbot of Wat Majjhimāwāsī, the image now in Soṅkhlā was brought to the monastery some thirty years ago after having been discovered in the vicinity of the modern village of Satiṅpra. This is regrettably inexact, and since in any event, the image apparently cannot be associated with any structural remains, we must be content with the intriguing fact that a statue that appears to be a local inflection of the Indian Gupta idiom, and probably dating from the sixth or seventh century, has been found at a site that deserves further study, and possibly, excavation. That much may be learned at Satiṅpra, is indicated by the fact that many of the objects said to come from its environs appear to be considerably later in date than the stone torso, and yet they would fall within the limits of the Srivijaya period. This, of course, suggests that the site may have some light to shed on a considerable range of the early history of Peninsular Siam.

Recently Dr. Alastair Lamb observed that the absence of recorded sites in the region lying between Takuapā, Nakhon Sridhammaraj and Kedah represented a curious feature in the existing picture of early Indianized settlement.¹⁷ The evidence of settle-

¹⁷ A. Lamb, *FMJ*, Vol. VI, 1961, p. 76.

ment at Satippra would appear to fill in one of the blank spaces. It may indeed be significant, that there is a five-chambered stone deposit box on display at Wat Majjhimāwāsī, that, while much cruder, and with five rather than nine chambers, appears to have affinities with the boxes which he excavated *in situ* at the Kedah site of Chandi Bukit Batu Pahat.¹⁸

18 A. Lamb, *Chandi Bukit Batu Pahat*, Singapore 1960; also *FMJ*, Vol. VI, 1961, pp. 6–9. See also, Georges Coëdes, “La destination funéraire des grands monuments Khmèrs”, *BEFEO*, Vol. XL, 1940. “Un Yantra récemment découvert à Angkor”, *Journal Asiatique*, 1952, No. 4,

