

MÜANG BON, A TOWN OF NORTHERN DVĀRAVATĪ

by

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In a previous article in this journal¹ I called attention to the correct location of Williams-Hunt's supposed most easterly "metropolis", which is really situated near Ban Bon, on the left bank of the Menam Chao Phya, some twenty miles south of Nakhon Sawan (Paknambo). Further work with modern maps enabled me to plot its position more exactly, as shown on the accompanying sketch-map (Fig. 1). It lies about three miles south of P'yuhagiri, the main north-south highway running alongside the other rampart. Consequently it proved to be easily accessible. It is rather surprising that it should have remained so long unknown, except of course to the Ban Bon villagers, some of whom realized that the earthworks were the ramparts of an ancient town.

Müang Bon (Fig. 2), as the site may be called, has town status by reason of its extensive outer enclosure, though it is smaller than I had originally judged from the air photograph. The internal diameter of the circular inner enclosure is only about 300 yards, that of an average circular site on the Korat plateau, the total length of the outer enclosure being about 1000 yards. Each enclosure has a single moat, now dry, averaging some 35 yards wide, and in the case of the outer one often obliterated by agriculture. A small tributary of the Menam running west of the outer rampart would have provided a good water supply, and may have communicated with the moat. It would seem that multiple moats and ramparts were not needed even in the smaller settlements of central Siam, as they were on the Korat plateau where the people must have been much more exposed to the danger of attack.

It was during the first week of February 1964 that my wife and I were enabled by the kind co-operation of Khun Dhanit Yupho, Director-General of the Fine Arts Department, to visit this site and

¹H.G. Quaritch Wales, "An Early Buddhist Civilization in Eastern Siam", *J.S.S.*, Vol. XLV, 1957, p. 56.

carry out some trial excavations. In this undertaking we were aided by two members of the Department, Khun Mali Kōksanfia and Khun Raphisak Jaiwāl, who proved most helpful.

The inner enclosure has a rampart outside the moat (Fig. 3); but not one inside it, as appeared from the air photograph, this appearance having been given by a ring of vegetation. The rampart, some 20 yards broad at the base, stands at present about six feet higher than the level of the ground in the enclosure. Traces of bricks were seen at several places on the earth rampart when we walked round, and at one point on the south they seemed to be of some depth, a trench revealing laid bricks in two or three courses. I am unable to say what was the purpose of this brickwork. Gaps indicated the positions of former gateways at the cardinal points. The one on the south showed earth abutments, jutting out from each bank of the moat, which would have supported a bridge.

The interior of the inner enclosure was bare, except for occasional trees and patches of scrub, most of it having been under bean cultivation. Potsherds were frequently to be seen on the surface, and were particularly abundant in the south-eastern part. So it was here that I made arrangements with the owner of the land to make trial excavations quite near to the moat, while about ten Ban Bon villagers were engaged to work for us. Meanwhile we were shown a more or less surface find, which had come to light when the ground was being tilled in this area, and it certainly excited my interest. This was a rather unusual terracotta votive tablet, a little over two inches high, embossed on one side with a representation of the *abiṣekha* of Śrī (Fig. 4 A), a well-known Buddhist motif, which is found for example on a Wheel of the Law from Nakhon Pathom. On the reverse of the tablet (Fig. 4 B) there is a figure seated in the attitude of royal ease which, despite its weathering, seems to show a laudable freedom and mastery of design.

The owner of the land where we were to dig mentioned that "enough beads to make a necklace" had been found after rain, but he had given them to children who had lost them. From his descrip-

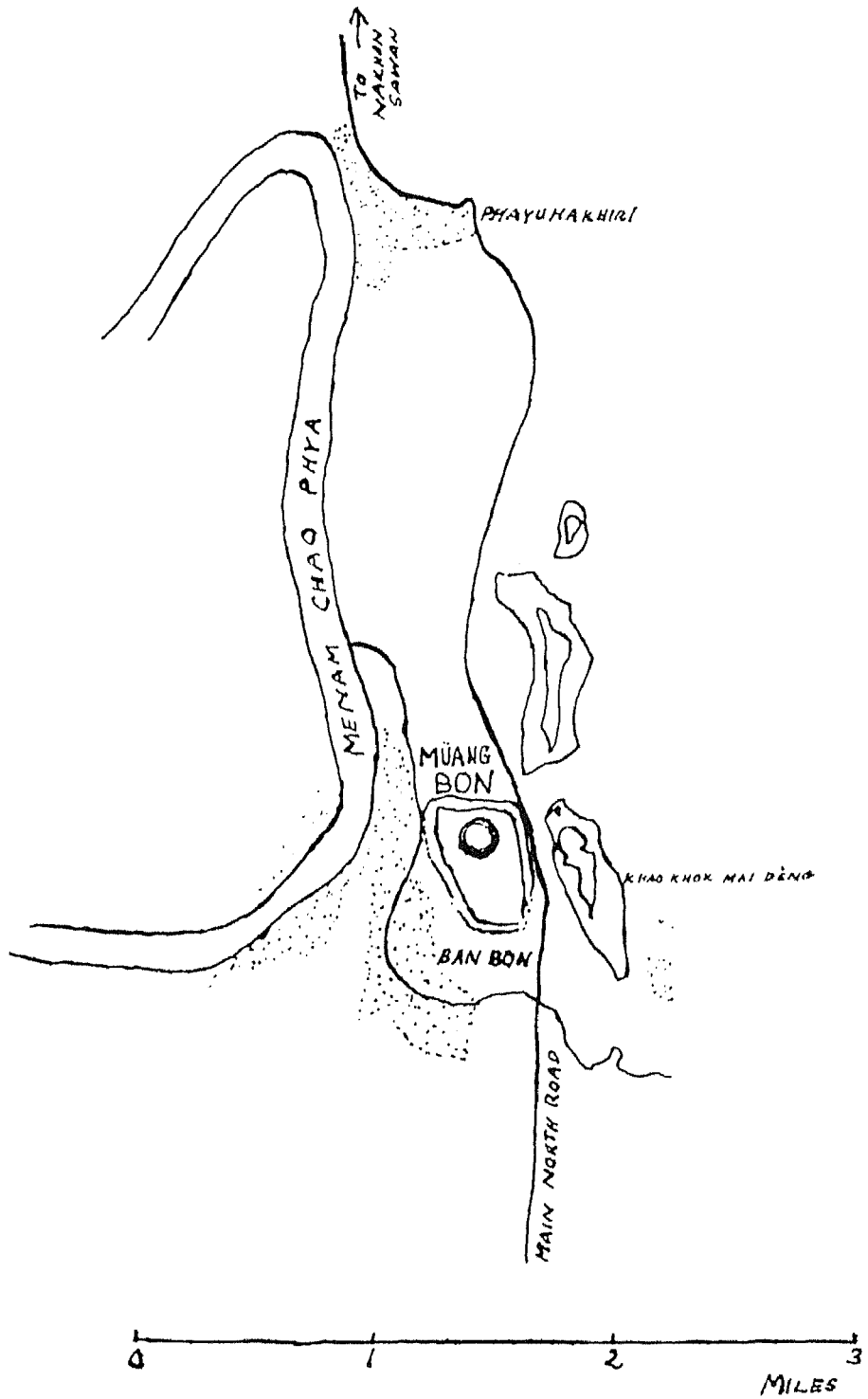


Fig. 1. Sketch-map showing position of Miang Bon.

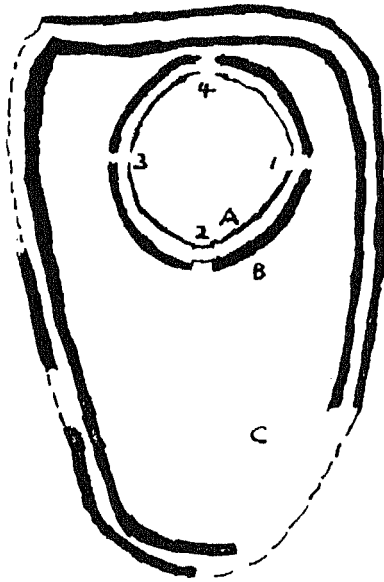
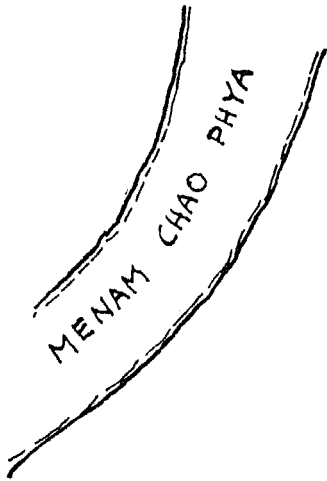


Fig. 2. Outline of Müang Bon (based on an air photograph at the Pitt-Rivers Museum, Oxford.) 1-4 positions of gateways; A, inner enclosure excavation; B, outer enclosure excavations; C, inscribed stone found here; D, approximate position of *stūpas*.

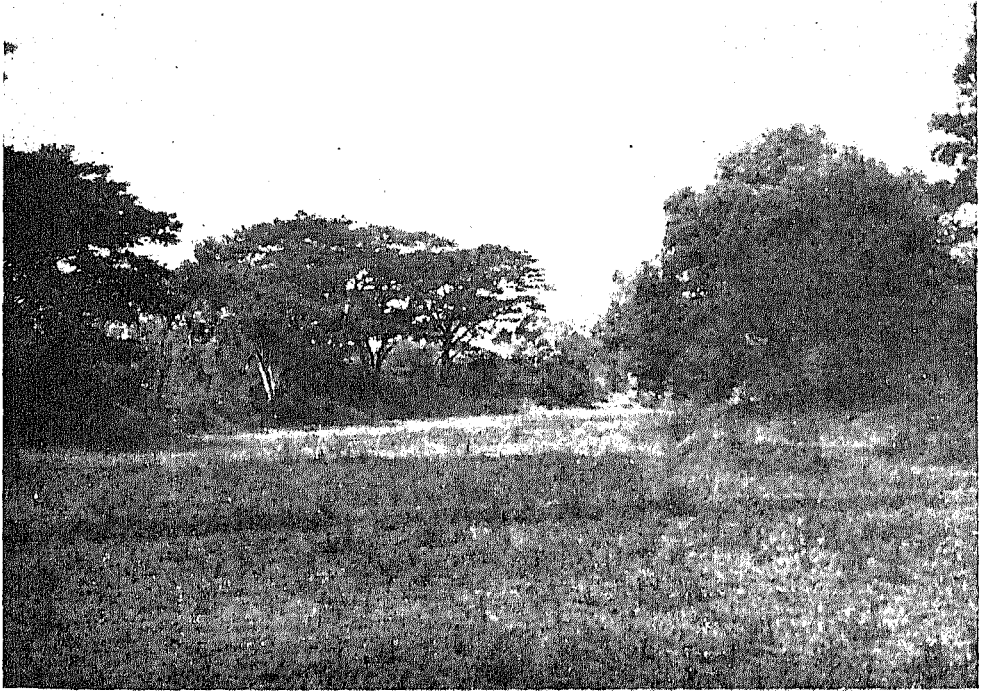


Fig. 3. Müang Bon : rampart and moat of inner enclosure. (Author's photograph)

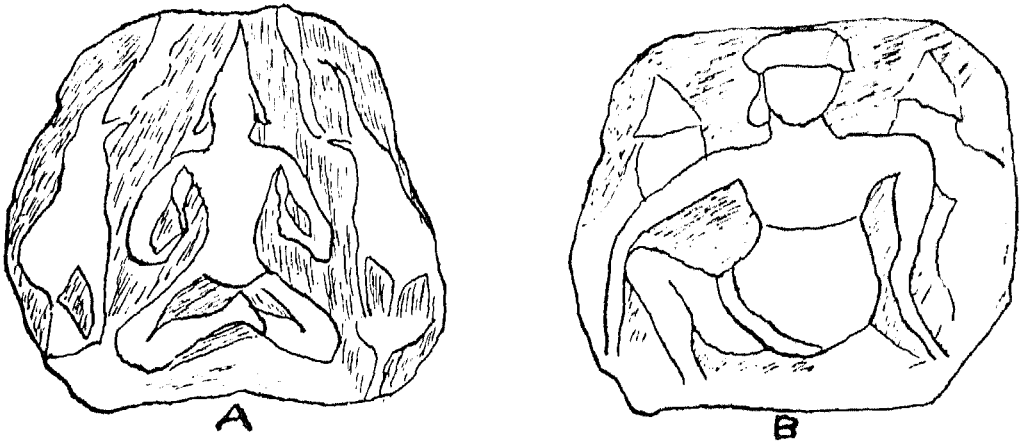


Fig. 4. Votive tablet from inner enclosure of Müang Bon. (From sketches made by Khun Raphisak).



Fig. 5. Müang Bon : inner enclosure trial excavation. (Author's photograph)

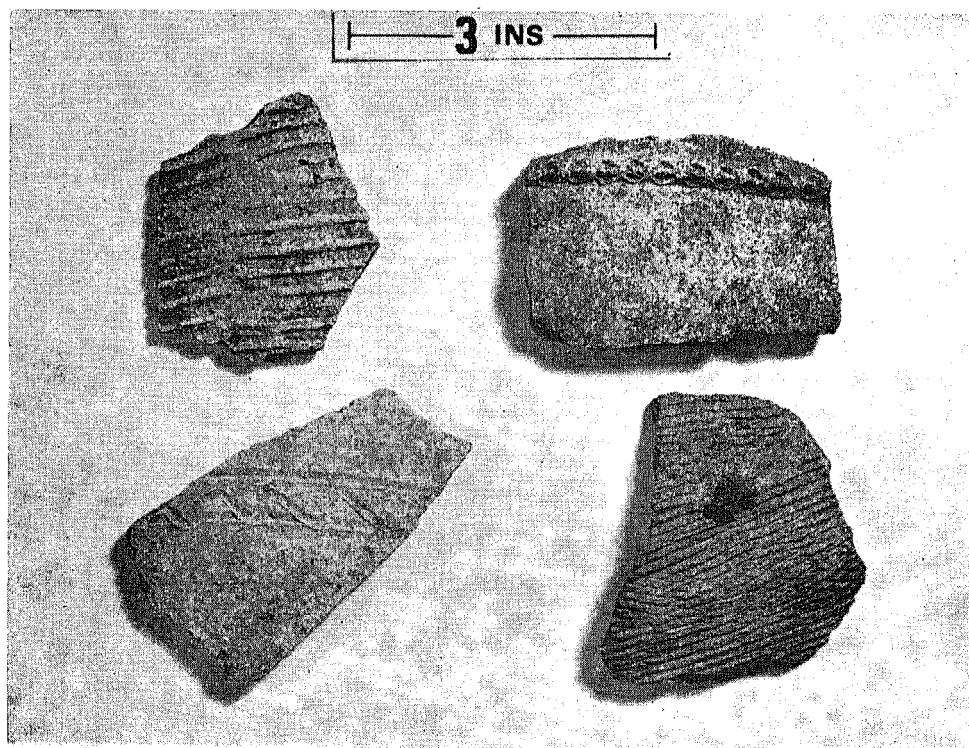


Fig. 6. Examples of sherds. (Author's photograph)

tion I should think they were common Kuala Selinsing types, such as have also been found at U T'ong.²

A trial trench 23 feet long was dug at right angles to the moat, and ending 15 feet from it. Later this trench was extended right to the moat and the pottery deposits were found to continue to within six feet of the sloping edge of the moat. The upper six inches in the trench consisted of soil disturbed by agriculture, with few sherds. Below this was a layer of about 18 inches of undisturbed soil, with potsherds, animal bones etc; that is to say the bottom of the habitation level was about two feet beneath present ground level. A second trench was then dug parallel to the first, about nine feet from it. Then the intervening block (Fig. 5) was carefully cleared down to natural soil, first the six inches of disturbed soil, then the 18 inches with undisturbed deposits, which showed no stratification.

The sherds were of coarse reddish and greyish wares, some with simple impressed ornament (Figs. 6, 7, 8), while only a very small proportion was cord-marked. The sherds were on the whole very different from those previously found at the circular sites on the Korat plateau.³ The site was probably not inhabited much after the Xth century A.D., since no glazed pottery or porcelain was found. It is important to place these sherds on record against the time when documented material may be obtained from many other Dvāravatī sites. Only then will it be possible to see what conclusions may emerge from their comparative study. Besides the sherds there were also occasional pot-lid knobs, spouts and pottery counters. An iron knife blade was found at a depth of 14 in., and another at 15 in. At 11 in. was found a small tin ring, probably from a fishing net, and at 18 in. were found two broken portions of stone saddle-querns and a rubber, similar to others that have been found at Dvāravatī sites.

Potsherds were also seen on the surface in many parts of the outer enclosure. I decided to dig a trial trench (about 10 ft. long) at a convenient spot some thirty yards south-east of the inner enclo-

² It may here be mentioned that at another Dvāravatī site, Kū Bua, Rathuri, a collection of such glass beads, plus a few carnelian and other stone barrel beads, all found locally, are now preserved at Wat Khon (Site 18), Kū Bua.

³ *J.S.S.* loc. cit., Figs. 4, 5.

sure rampart. The object was to see how the deposits compared with those in the inner enclosure. We found a layer of similar sherds extending from a depth of 6 in. beneath the surface down to $21\frac{1}{2}$ in., but within this layer the concentration of sherds was less than in the inner town. From this one might be safe in drawing the conclusion that, while the outer enclosure was added not long after the founding of the original settlement, it was less densely populated.

At the bottom of the habitation level in this trench we were fortunate in making a find such as is usually not to be expected in a trial trench. This was the front half of an earthenware Roman style lamp, the extant portion measuring $6\frac{1}{2}$ in. long, $2\frac{1}{2}$ in. high, the mouth still showing traces of blackening from a wick (Fig. 9). Apart from the well-known bronze Roman lamp found at P'ong T'ük, there is a complete earthenware one resembling the present one which came from Nakhon Pathom, and is exhibited in the National Museum. Unfortunately such lamps cannot provide us with a date. Although Roman prototypes in Italy may date from the first or second century A.D., this type of lamp evidently became popular when introduced to Dvarāvati and may have been copied for centuries.

We were informed that lying by the border of a padi field in the south-eastern part of the outer enclosure there was an inscribed stone. We went to see this, and the owner of the field said that formerly there had been two such stones, but the other one had been destroyed. This one was about two feet high, roughly pointed at one end (Fig. 10). It had evidently been a stele from which most of the surface had flaked off, and only three or four isolated letters could be distinguished. After it had been transported to the Bangkok Museum, a rubbing was made which I subsequently sent to Monsieur Coedès. He informs me that the style of the letters seems to indicate that they date from about the VIIIth century A.D.

One day Khun Mali told me that he had heard of the existence of six old *stūpa*-mounds, outside the town enclosure to the south-east, and near to a modern *wat*. We went to inspect these and saw that they were fairly large, the largest perhaps some forty feet in diameter, and partly overgrown with vegetation (Fig. 11). The thorough in-

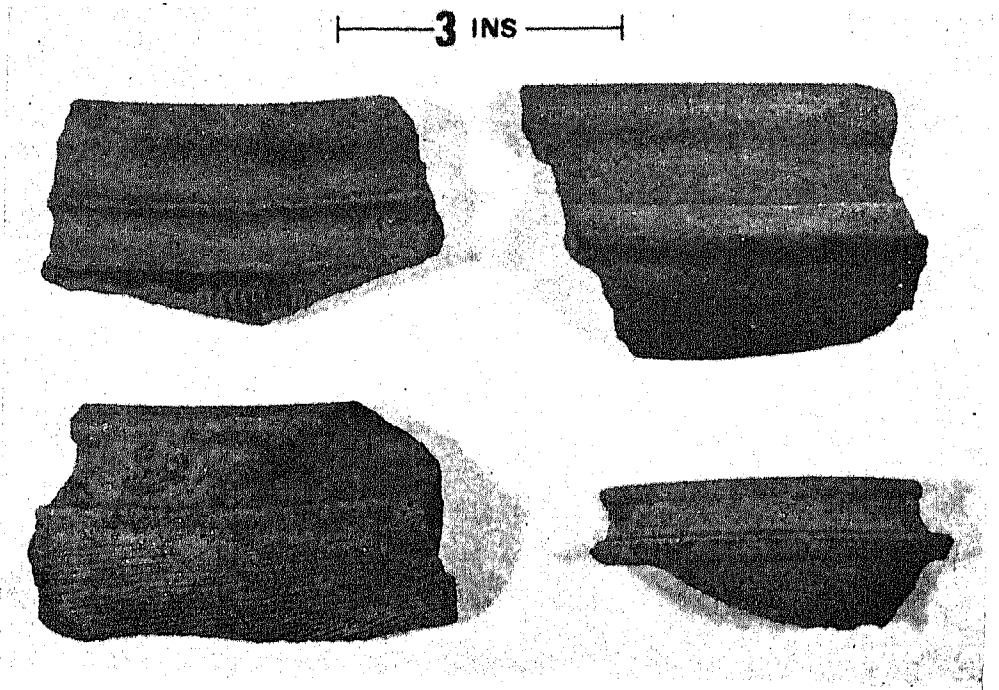


Fig. 7. Pot-rims 1, 2 (above), 3, 4 (below) (Author's photograph)

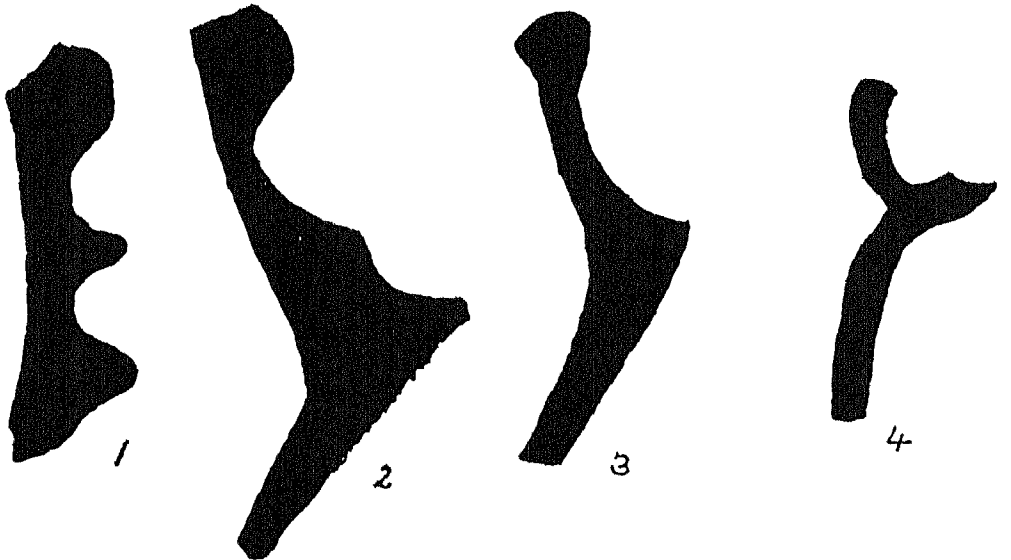


Fig. 8. Sections of pot-rims shown in Fig. 7.

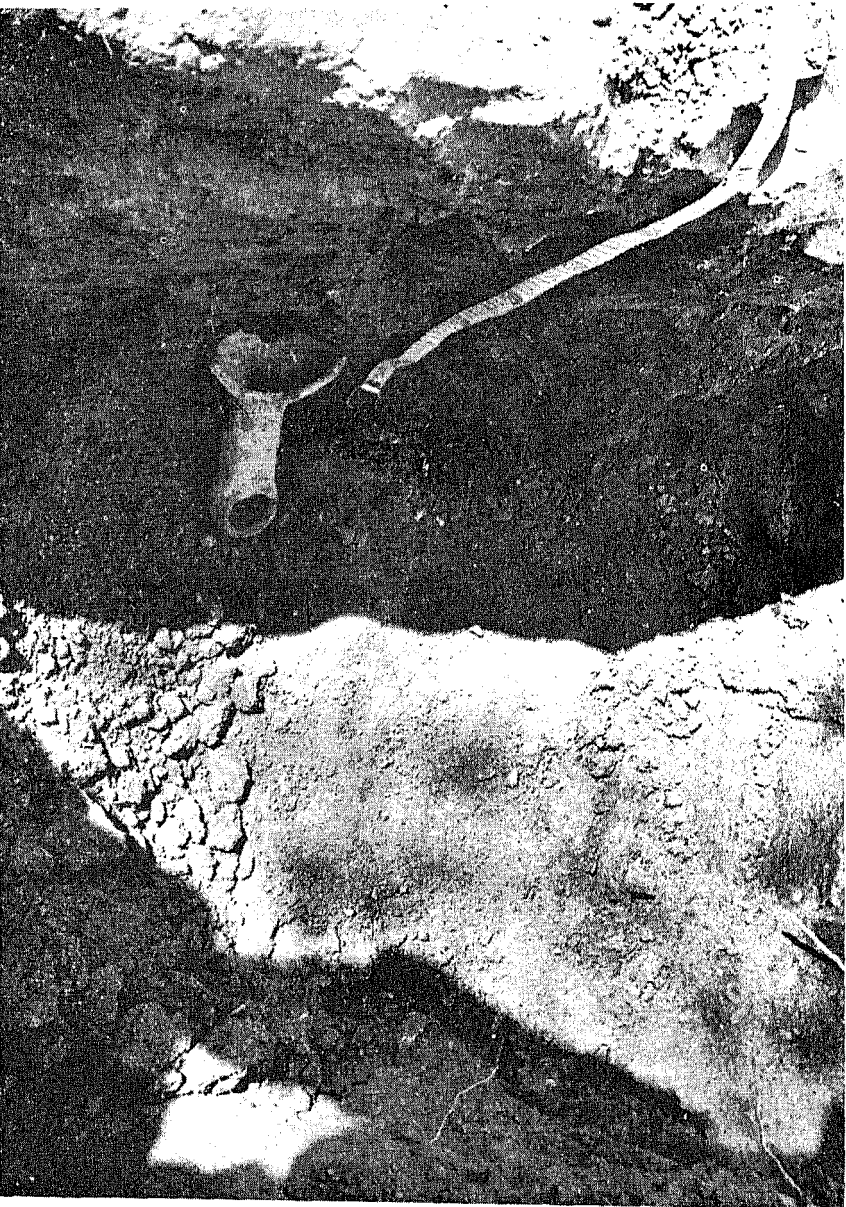


Fig. 9. Front part of Roman style lamp *in situ*. (Author's photograph)



Fig. 10. The inscribed stone. (Author's photograph)



Fig. 11. Müang Bon : one of the *stūpa* - mounds. (Author's photograph)

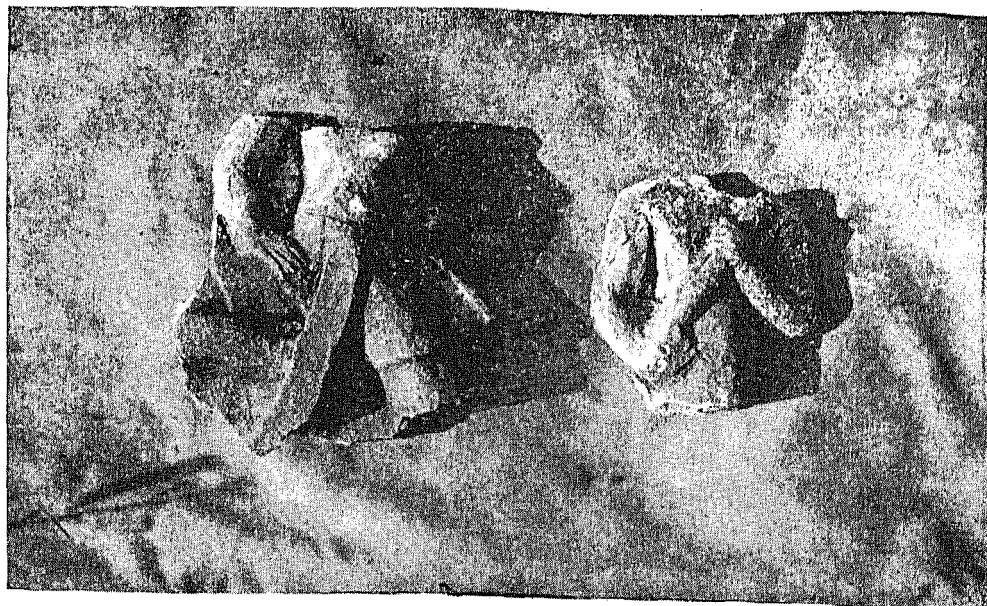


Fig. 12. Stucco figures from a Müang Bon *stūpa*. (Author's photograph)

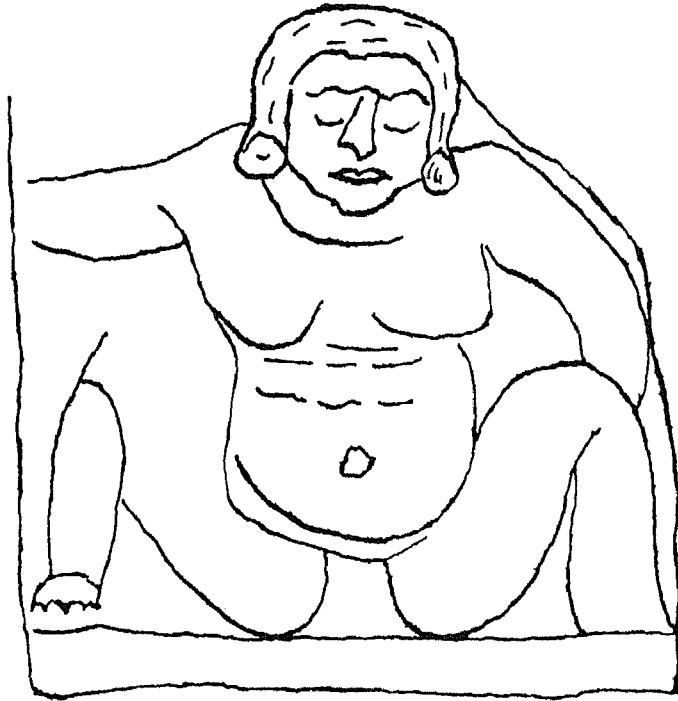


Fig. 13. Stucco dwarf caryatid from Müang Bon *stūpa*.
(From a sketch by Khun Raphisak)

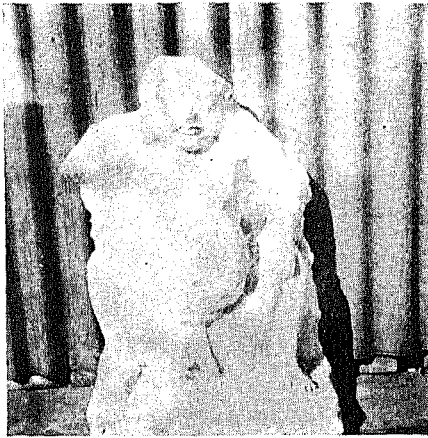


Fig. 14. Dwarf caryatid from a Müang Bon *stūpa*. (Photo: Khun Raphisak)

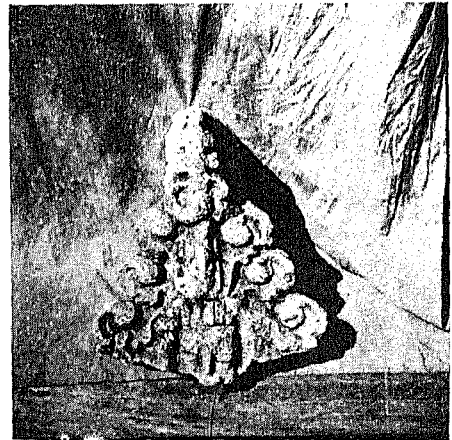


Fig. 15. Stucco head from a Müang Bon *stūpa*. (Photo: Khun Raphisak)

vestigation of these would have entailed a larger task than I had envisaged; but I was later assured by the Director-General that their excavation would be undertaken by the Fine Arts Department. For the moment I was satisfied by the information I derived from the fact that one of the *stūpas* had obviously been broken into, and some of the objects that had been extracted were found to be in the possession of another modern *wat*, situated not far away. These consisted of two headless stucco figures of dancers or musicians, height $6\frac{1}{2}$ in. and $5\frac{1}{2}$ in., (Fig. 12) two stucco dwarf caryatids, height 2 ft., (Figs. 13, 14), and a stucco head with foliage head-dress, height 14 in. (Fig. 15). All these are unmistakably characteristic of Dvāravatī art; but, on this restricted amount of material, I should hesitate to ascribe objects which may be rather provincial to a particular phase of it. However the last mentioned object appears less stylized than rather similar stucco pieces from P'ong T'ük.⁴ What appears to be certain is that the *stūpas* (five of them intact) are contemporary to Müang Bon, and their full investigation may provide a wider range of material of great interest.

Near the modern *wat* by the *stūpa*-mounds there was a rough rectangular stone base measuring 41 in. by 21 in. Of a piece with it were two stone feet, each 21 in. long, with sockets at the heels, on which must have formerly stood a large image (Fig. 16). There were several ancient bricks about, one measuring 10 in. \times $2\frac{3}{4}$ in. \times 7 in.

Here I will make mention of another circular village site, Ban Thap Chumphon, situated about three miles north of Nakhon Sawan, measuring under 300 yards in diameter and with moat and rampart. I made only a superficial inspection of this place, and was shown the spot where in 1961, in what appeared to be the remains of a brick *stūpa*, a number of Dvāravatī style votive tablets had been found, and also some small votive *stūpas*, at least three of which were inscribed with Buddhist credos. M. Coedès tells me that he has seen the rubbings of the inscriptions and that they date from the VIIth or VIIIth century A.D. This evidence (had it been published) might already have been taken as sufficient to establish the northward extension of Dvāravatī to this area; or again it might have been doubted, on the

⁴Cf. P. Dupont, *L'Archéologie Mône de Dvāravatī*, Paris, 1959, page 113.

grounds that the Dvāravatī objects could have merely been a hoard placed there at some later time. Now, in view of the finds from Müang Bon, the material from Thap Chumphon certainly acquires greater evidential value: indeed the two sites supplement each other. It is not likely that Bon, which developed into a town, would be situated right on the frontier. The stele we found there, probably of the VIIIth century, was lying in the *outer* enclosure. Consequently it seems likely that both Bon and Thap Chumphon were founded by the end of the VIIth century. How much further north the authority of Dvāravatī extended it is not at present possible to say; but that that distance was considerable is suggested by the legend that queen Chammadevi from Lopburi evidently had to go as far afield as Lamphun to establish a new kingdom in the VIIIth century.

The archaeological and epigraphic discoveries made in recent years both in central Siam and on the Korat plateau now give the impression that the kingdom of Dvāravatī, or at least its culture, was virtually co-extensive with the subsequent kingdom of Siam, exclusive of the Lao and Malay states. It seems to have controlled the Korat plateau much longer than I thought when I wrote my previous article.⁵ In this connection, I must, however, mention the apparently conflicting deduction which M. Coedès draws from his study of two inscriptions that were recently found at Śī T'ep. He has very kindly sent me a proof of the section dealing with these two inscriptions, which will appear in the seventh volume of his *Inscriptions du Cambodge*.

One of the new inscriptions (K. 978) is a Sanskrit text of the VIth-VIIIth century A.D., mentioning a King Bhavavarman, who appears to be the well-known Bhavavarman I of Chen-la. From this inscription we learn that he had enough authority in the Nam Sak valley to set up Śiva images on the occasion of his accession to sovereignty. Incidentally this represents an abrupt change from the religion of the former rulers of Śī T'ep, who were Vaiṣṇavas. That Bhavavarman I might well have made a raid, or temporarily extended his power, into the Nam Sak valley in the disturbed times following the break-up of Fu-nan is understandable enough. Briggs⁶ has simi-

⁵ *J.S.S.*, loc. cit., p. 59.

⁶ I. P. Briggs, *The Ancient Khmer Empire*, Philadelphia, 1951, p. 45.

larly taken the same king's comparable Tham Pet Thong inscription in the upper Mun valley as indicating nothing more than the commemoration of a successful raid. Indeed Bhavavarman could well have been the destroyer of old Śī T'ep. For the next three centuries I know of no evidence concerning Śī T'ep, unless we can take the recent finding of some large stone Dvāravatī statues in a cave in a mountain near Śī T'ep as possibly significant. But Coedès concludes with regard to this new Bhavavarman inscription as follows: "L'implantation de la puissance du Tchen-la, premier royaume khmèr, au moins à partir de cette époque [early VIIth century A.D.], y est d'ailleurs confirmée, d'une part par le fragment d'inscription K. 979 qui est en Khmèr, et de l'autre par l'existence des nombreux vestiges khmères signalés par H.G. Quaritch Wales."

Now I did not record the finding of any Khmer remains at Śī T'ep which in my opinion were older than the XIth or XIIth century A.D. The Khmer inscription K. 979, the second newly found one, in script of the Xth century, can do no more than indicate the presence of Khmer influence some time in the Xth century. Coedès has himself recognized⁷ the existence in the Korat region of a kingdom still independent of the Khmer empire in the middle of the Xth century, even if it employed the Khmer language in inscriptions as early as the IXth. And he says of these Korat plateau inscriptions: "Ces divers documents épigraphiques assez disparates ont pour caractère commun d'être étrangers au Cambodge, même s'ils emploient la langue khmère. Certains d'entre eux émanent peut-être de pays ayant fait partie, ou ayant reconnu la suzeraineté, du royaume de Dvāravatī."⁸ For the Khmers to have occupied the Nam Sak valley, while Dvāravatī dominated the Korat plateau and the Menam valley, would seem to me to be a geographical and strategic impossibility.

⁷ G. Coedès, "Nouvelles données épigraphiques sur l'histoire de l'Indochine centrale", *Journal Asiatique*, 1958, p. 127.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 128.

