

NOTES

NOTES ON RECENT EXCAVATIONS AT PRASAT MUANG SINGH

by

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The Fine Arts Department of the Royal Thai Government has since 1974 been conducting archeological excavations of the *prasat* or temple at Muang Singh, an ancient town situated on the Kwae Noi river in Kanchanaburi Province, lying about 120 kilometres west of Bangkok. The project to restore Prasat Muang Singh is scheduled to be completed in 1980. In the notes which follow some of the findings of the excavations are presented with illustrative examples, together with brief background notes on the history of Muang Singh and historical inferences drawn from the findings.

The northern and principal portion of Muang Singh town is rectangular, 880 x 1,400 metres (m), while the southern portion extends following the course of the river (see figures 1, 2). The walls of the town, 5m high, are constructed of laterite and built on an earthen rampart, which was surrounded by rings of moats and earthen mounds for protection. Two additional earthen ramparts, which protected the sanctuary of Prasat Muang Singh to the north and the east, remain within the town. Inside the town are six ponds, with potsherds scattered nearby.

Located in the center of the town, Prasat Muang Singh is the westernmost Khmer temple in Thailand, and has been registered as a national monument by the Fine Arts Department since 1935. It is surrounded by rectangular laterite walls 81.5 x 104m. A passage paved with laterite joins the eastern *gopura* (gate) of the galleries with the eastern wall (fig. 3). The *gopura* and the eastern galleries are about 25m long, provided with a staircase 1.9m wide. The northern *gopura* and the galleries on that side, which are rather well preserved, are 34.8m long (fig. 4). The single main shrine faces east, the eastern porch being more important than those on the other sides (fig. 5). The galleries around the main shrine are pierced by four gates and have small edifices, 4.5m wide, at the four corners (fig. 6). The whole structure was built of laterite, with stucco decorations and a few sandstone slabs (fig. 7). The laterite quarry is not very far from the monument on the east. A small *vihāra*, also in laterite, stands in the courtyard at the southeastern corner, facing west. The southern gallery may not have been finished, as very few laterite blocks have been found on that side. Terracotta tiles have also been discovered, which suggest that some wooden structures may have existed in the courtyard (fig. 8). Wood was also used for the construction beams. A few pieces of brick have been discovered, and 'I' or 'T' forms of iron and lead were cast in order to hold the laterite blocks together.

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The date of Prasat Muang Singh may be deduced from stone statues unearthed from the monument during the excavations. Numerous stone statues of the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition, e.g. the Buddha protected by the *nāga* (figs. 9, 10), figures of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (figs. 11, 12), including one of the 'irradiant' type (fig. 13), of Prajñāpāramitā (figs. 14, 15), and the head of a door-guardian figure (fig. 16), have been discovered. All those statues show influences from the Khmer Bayon style of King Jayavarman VII (late twelfth to early thirteenth century A.D.), but they may still be divided into two groups. The first group is of bluish-grey sandstone, and embodies strong Khmer Bayon influences. These may have been carved in Cambodia or at Lop Buri, which was an important Khmer town during that period. The second group is of rather reddish sandstone and was presumably carved in Thailand by local craftsmen because it shows certain characteristics different from the Bayon style prototype (figs. 16-18b).

Stucco decorations may be divided into three groups. The first indicates Dvāravatī artistic influence, a type of art form which existed in central Thailand before Khmer art forms penetrated the area (figs. 19, 20). The second group shows the Khmer Bayon influence (fig. 21). The third displays such characteristics as the oval face, which later became typical of Thai art (figs. 22 a, b). They are now all preserved in the Bangkok National Museum.

As all the important stone cult images discovered to date display the Khmer Bayon style, one may assume that Prasat Muang Singh was constructed during the time of King Jayavarman VII (1181-c. 1218), and consecrated in the Mahāyāna tradition. Concomitantly, another problem arises concerning the Prah Khan inscription in Cambodia, which was engraved at the command of King Jayavarman VII. That inscription states that the King erected Buddha images, the Jayabuddhamahānātha, in 23 towns in his empire. Among those towns were Lavodayapura, Suvarṇapura, Śambūkapaṭṭana, Jayarājapurī, Śrījayasinghapurī and Śrījayavajrapurī, believed to have been situated more or less in the central part of Thailand. It has been thought that Lavodayapura corresponds to the present town of Lop Buri, or Lavo, because of the monuments of the Khmer Bayon style such as the Pra Prang Sam Yod, and that Suvarṇapura corresponds to Suphan Buri. Although no monuments of the Khmer Bayon style have been found there, some statues of the Buddha protected by the *nāga* of the Lop Buri style have been brought to light. The location of Śambūkapaṭṭana is not known for sure, though some scholars have suggested the site at Kosinarai pond in Amphoe Ban Pong, Ratchaburi, where the figure of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva of the irradiant type was unearthed. Jayarājapurī is probably present-day Ratchaburi, considering that the Buddha images in meditation under niches on the stone coping of the laterite walls at Wat Pra Si Ratana Mahathat of that town resemble strongly those of the Khmer Bayon style in Cambodia. Śrījayasinghapurī is probably the present town of Muang Singh in Kanchanaburi Province. The town of Śrījayavajrapurī presumably corresponds to Petchaburi; at Wat Kampaeng Laeng in that town there exist four Khmer monuments in laterite, while the *gopura* on the east is provided with laterite false windows partly obstructed by blinds of the same material, in the typical Khmer Bayon style.

The Jayabuddhamahānātha erected at Prasat Muang Singh is probably the red sandstone Buddha with *nāga* found in the sanctuary (figs. 9, 10) which was evidently carved at Muang Singh. Another carving, an unfinished red sandstone figurine of a standing female (figs. 18 a, b)



Figure 1. Aerial photograph of the town of Muang Singh.

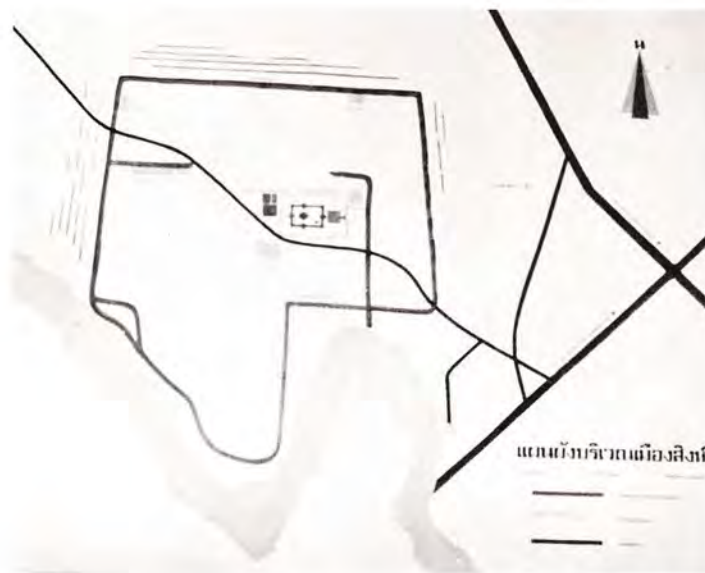


Figure 2. Plan of the town of Muang Singh.



Figure 3. A laterite terrace on the east of Prasat Muang Singh.



Figure 4. Northern gallery around Prasat Muang Singh, with wooden support installed by the Thai Fine Arts Department.



Figure 5. Prasat Muang Singh and the surrounding gallery.



Figure 6. Western gate, with surrounding gallery.



Figure 7. Base of Prasat Muang Singh, showing stucco on laterite.



Figure 11. The Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara :
bluish-grey sandstone, height 78 cm.



Figure 12. The Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara: bluish-grey sandstone.



Figure 13. The 'Irradiant' Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara:
bluish-grey sandstone, height 161 cm.



Figure 14. Bluish-grey sandstone figure of Prajñāpāramitā: height 98 cm.



Figure 15. Bluish-grey sandstone torso of Prajñāpāramitā.



Figure 16. Head of a door-guardian (?) in red sandstone: height 47 cm.



Figure 17. Head of an Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva in red sandstone.



Figure 18a. Profile of an unfinished female torso, red sandstone.



Figure 18b. Back view of unfinished female torso, red sandstone.



Figure 19. Stucco head of a divinity (?) showing a lingering Dvāravatī influence.



Figure 20. Stucco head of a demon (?) showing a lingering Dvāravatī influence.



Figures 22a & b. Stucco heads evincing Thai (local) workmanship.



Figure 21. Stucco head with mixed Khmer and Dvāravatī influences.

also appears to be the product of local craftsmanship. Sculptural fragments (figs. 9, 10, 16-18b) attest to the existence of production *in situ* of cult images as well as sculptural and decorative forms. The important images, of course, i.e. the statues of Avalokiteśvara (figs. 11-13) and Prajñāpāramitā (figs. 14-15) of bluish-grey sandstone, all show strong Khmer Bayon influence, and were probably imported from Cambodia or Lop Buri. Close examination of the Prah Khan inscription, however, reveals the reference to King Jayavarman VII having "erected" (*atiṣṭhipat*) the Jayabuddhamahānātha images to the towns listed earlier, not having actually sent images of Cambodian manufacture. These further considerations do not negate the possibility that the Śrī Jayasimhapuri of the Prah Khan inscription was indeed the town of Muang Singh.

The evidence indicates that King Jayavarman VII's power probably extended to the central part of present-day Thailand. Muang Singh, which was built by the Khmer during the late twelfth to early thirteenth centuries A.D., was probably the stronghold protecting the western frontier of the Khmer empire.

Muang Singh was probably abandoned after the Khmer lost their power. During the reign of King Rama I of Bangkok (r. 1782-1809), it was re-established as a small town, but was reduced to District level during the reign of King Rama V (Chulalongkorn, r. 1868-1910).

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