

AN EARLY KHMER SCULPTURE FROM SOUTHERN LAOS

by

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An early Khmer stone sculpture, here referred to as the Champassak statue (figs. 1-3), was discovered over 60 years ago; but it was little known and hence was not mentioned in the standard works on Khmer sculptures. In 1972 it was published in locally produced volumes, and illustrated in the French journal *L'oeil*.¹ In view of its artistic excellence it merits a detailed analysis, which may throw light on the earliest period of Khmer art.

The statue was found by the villagers of Ban Muang on the east bank of the Mekong River opposite Ban P'apin, which is four kilometres north of Champassak, and was given to *Chao* Ratsdanay Nhouy, the titular ruler of the province of Champassak. After his death, it came into the possession of his son and successor, *Chao* Boun Oum.

The statue is stylistically related to the earliest group of statues found in southeastern Kampuchea on the Phnom Da Hill near Angkor Borei, from which derived the art historical term, the Phnom Da style.²

The Phnom Da style is divided into two phases: phase A and phase B. To phase A are assigned most of the sculptures found at Angkor Borei and at Phnom Da. These are believed to have been made during the reign of Rudravarman of Funan (A.D. 514- c. 539). To phase B, which is the stylistic continuation of the previous phase, are assigned the statues found elsewhere in southern Kampuchea and which are dated to the second half of the sixth and the beginning of the seventh century A.D.

The Champassak statue is exceptional, for while it is stylistically related to the sculptures in the Phnom Da style A, it was not found in southern Kampuchea but in southern Laos. It is thus the only major work of art of the period to have been found so far north. It adds a little flesh to the skeleton of history of the region around Champassak, whose testimony consists mostly of dynastic chronicles and a few inscriptions.

The early history of the region is still dimly known. However, an inscription found near Wat Phu and dated paleographically to the second half of the fifth century A.D. reveals that Mahārājādhirāja Śrīmāñ Śrīdevānika came from far away to set up a *liṅga*, which had been worshipped since antiquity, on the mountain of Wat Phu.³ Coedès, who trans-

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1. Published in Pierre Lintings, *Les rois de Champassak* (Pakse, 1972), fig. 10; also reproduced on the back cover of *Bulletin des amis du Royaume Lao*, No. 7-8 (1972). Photograph published in Doan na Champassak, "Un ensemble khmer inconnu: Vat Phu", *L'oeil*, Nos. 212-213 (août-septembre, 1972), pl. 2.

2. P. Dupont, *La statuaire pré-angkorienne* (Ascona, 1955), chaps. II and III.

3. G. Coedès, "Nouvelles données sur les origines du Royaume Khmer: la stèle de Vat Luong Kau près de Vat Phu", *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d' Extrême-Orient*, 48 (1956), pp. 209-220.

lated this inscription, seems to have been confused on the matter. He postulated that Devāṅka could have been the same as the Cham king known in Chinese transliteration as Fan Chen-ch'eng who sent embassies to China in A.D. 456, 458 and 472. He therefore thought that Champassak had come under the suzerainty of Champa. Yet it was not Devāṅka who installed the cult of Bhadreśvara, the national cult of Champa, on the mountain of Wat Phu, but Khmer conquerors of the Chams, Śrutavarman and Śreṣṭhavarman, in order to commemorate their victory over them.

According to the Khmer dynastic chronicles preserved in the inscription of Baksei Chamkrong of A.D. 948, the first kings of Kampuchea were Śrutavarman and his son Śreṣṭhavarman, after whom the city of Śreṣṭhapura was named.⁴ These kings broke the chain of tribute from an unspecified country and gained independence for the Khmers. Śreṣṭhapura remains the name of a district near Champassak; recent excavations have placed the city between the mountain of Wat Phu and the Mekong River.⁵ Thus, from Khmer dynastic record, it appears that the earliest city founded by the Khmers was Śreṣṭhapura, but the date of its founding remains unknown.

There is no certainty that Devāṅka of the inscription was a Cham king. He could have come from the region of the Khorat Plateau in the west as easily as from Champa in the east. Moreover, the practice of setting up *liṅga* on the top of the mountain was not unique to the Bhadreśvara cult of Champa, but was a general practice in relation to the worship of Śiva.⁶ The inscription of Devāṅka simply testifies to the existence of a Śaiva cult at Wat Phu in the second half of the fifth century A.D.

Although the rulers worshipped Śiva in the form of a *liṅga*, the phallic emblem of the god, they were thought to be terrestrial representations of the god Viṣṇu, or as one of his *avatāra*. For the god in his various *avatāra* (descents) helped mankind against the forces of evil and, as the supreme ruler and protector of the universe, Viṣṇu was analogous to a king who was the protector of the people. Thus Viṣṇuism flourished in symbiotic relationship with the monarchy and received support from the courts.

Since the Champassak statue is a stone sculpture in the round, it is unlikely to have been a part of architectural decoration. It can be assumed to have been made as an object of worship. Through comparison with the statues in the Phnom Da A group, it can be inferred that it probably represents an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu. Also inscriptions from the end of the fifth and the beginning of the sixth century A.D. attest to the popularity of the god in southern Kampuchea.⁷

Because of its broken arms, there is no way of knowing which *avatāra* of Viṣṇu the Champassak statue represents. Each *avatāra* can only be identified by the objects carried by

4. G. Coedès, "Inscription de Baksei Čamkrōn", *Inscriptions du Cambodge*, IV (Paris, 1952), pp. 88-101; see also Dupont, pp. 72-74.

5. Excavation conducted by Georges Pfeiffer of the Ministry of Culture, Laos, December 1971-January 1972.

6. H. Kulke, "The Devarāja cult, a reassessment of the evidence", *Proceedings: Seventh IAHA Conference* 2 vols. (Bangkok, 1979), vol. II, pp. 1371-1384.

7. Dupont, p. 15.



Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.

the god in his hands. The one other clue, that is the hair tied up in a knot on top of the head which is a characteristic of Balarāma, Kṛiṣṇa's elder brother,⁸ is not much of a help; because hair, or wigs, arranged in overlapping ringlets with a single topknot, were worn by men of fashion all over the 'Indianized' world around the year A.D. 500.⁹

The emphasis on the navel, here marked by a triangular groove, may also be a sign of Vaiṣṇava inspiration. Out of Viṣṇu's navel Brahma the creator was born, and hence the god's navel is considered to be the centre of the universe, the source of all existence.¹⁰

Broadly speaking, the Champassak statue can be classified as belonging to the earliest group of southeast Asian sculptures influenced by the Indian Gupta style, among which are the statues in the Phnom Da A group. However, on close analysis there are many points of dissimilarity between them. Closest stylistically to the Champassak statue among those in the Phnom Da group are the figures of Paraśurāma, the sixth *avatāra* of Viṣṇu; Rāma, the seventh *avatāra*; and Balarāma, the brother of Kṛiṣṇa, the eighth *avatāra*.¹¹ These are stylistically homogeneous; they all have a stocky physique and supple modelling. The faces are avoid in shape and the hair, arranged in ringlets with a topknot, is worn close to the head, while the ears are shown in their entirety. They all stand with a slight *tribhaṅga*. Their loincloth is tucked in front below the navel, forming a notch.

The Champassak statue, by comparison, is assertive in its stance and uncompromising in its frontality. It has a square face with cleft chin, and the features are clearly defined. The hair, or wig, is worn covering the upper part of the ears, exposing the ear lobes. The loincloth is folded in front, forming a vertical panel, and is tucked in below the navel. The notch is indicated by incisions; similarly with the pleats, each on one side of the central fold. With its taunt muscularity, it contrasts sharply with the rounded, swelling contours of the statues in the Phnom Da A group. While the latter embody the ripened fullness of maturity, the Champassak statue exudes the budding vitality of youth.

There can be no doubt that the type of hairstyle arranged in overlapping ringlets and worn covering the upper part of the ears is closer to the Indian prototype than is the type worn by the statues in the Phnom Da A group. The ear lobes also are depicted more naturalistically than those of the latter, since the holes are rendered as if they had been enlarged through the habitual wearing of circular ear-disks. The modelling of the compact body, moreover, appears to have been based on natural observation rather than on the idealized elegance of the Phnom Da A group. As the latter is dated to the first half of the sixth century A.D.¹², it is not unreasonable to assign the Champassak statue to around the year A.D. 500.

8. Gopinatha Rao, *Elements of Hindu Iconography*, 2 vols. (Madras, 1914-16), vol. I, p. 201.

9. For comparison, see H. Zimmer, *The Arts of Indian Asia*, 2 vols. (New York, 1955), vol. 2, pl. 177, for the hairstyle worn by an attendant in Ajanta Cave No. 17.

10. J. Gonda, *Aspects of Early Viṣṇuism* (Delhi, 1969), pp. 84-89.

11. Illustrated in Dupont, pls. I b, VI b, and V b, respectively.

12. Although J. Boisselier has in his Paris lectures shifted the Phnom Da style from the sixth to the eighth century A.D., this writer prefers the earlier chronology as proposed by Dupont. For Boisselier's dating, see H.W. Woodward, "History of art: accomplishments and opportunities, hopes and fears", *The Study of Thailand: Analysis of Knowledge, Approaches, and Prospects in Anthropology, Art History, Economics, History and Political Science*, ed. Eliezer B. Ayal (Athens, Ohio, 1978), p. 82, no. 9.

The discovery of the statue in the vicinity of the ancient city of Śreṣṭhapura substantiates the hypothesis that the city was founded in the second half of the fifth century A.D. Hence, it can be assumed that by the end of that century the Khmer people had established themselves in the Champassak region with a capital at Śreṣṭhapura, and had developed an art form paralleling that of the Phnom Da A group at Funan.