

SOME EARLY SIVA *LĪNGAS* IN NAKHON SI THAMMARAT, PENINSULAR THAILAND

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The *līṅga* is the aniconic representation of the Hindu God Śiva. It is the most frequently encountered symbol of Śiva. It seems to have drawn its form from the phallus since, initially at least, the *līṅga* was rather faithfully modelled on its natural prototype. Its meaning, however, is polyvalent, the radiant sign of divine presence. In Śaiva temples, the *līṅga* is the central focus of devotion, the primal and undifferentiated representation of the God and even those images of Śiva in anthropomorphic form are frequently relegated to a position in the temple that is subsidiary to the *līṅga*.¹

Despite its centrality to Śaivite cult practice, art historians writing about ancient Hindu sculpture have tended to focus on anthropomorphic representations of that deity. The reasons are obvious given the difficulty of drawing stylistic, or even typological, inference from such a relatively undifferentiated column of stone. It might be expected that the monolithic character of the *līṅga* would, combined with the conservatism of religious symbols, make it especially resistant to developmental change with the result that assigning dates to *līṅgas* is scarcely an exact science.

One of the immediate consequences of relegating *līṅgas* to a kind of cult furniture at the margins of art historical attention is that the worship of Viṣṇu and other Hindu gods tends to assume disproportionate attention in discussions of ancient sculpture. If, for example, the actual number of extant *līṅgas* found in Peninsular Thailand were totaled, it would be seen that devotion to Śiva was a powerful force in the early city-states that flourished in the first millenium A.D. Not only would this rectify an imbalance in the religious history of the region, but it would also tend to enrich our mental image of its cultural and economic vitality. This is because almost all the *līṅgas* available for study are monumental in scale and were not intended for domestic altars but were usually housed in a temple. Thus the presence of a *līṅga* almost necessarily entails an architectural enframement with all that is implied in the way of resource allocation, specialized craft skill, and the general level of economic development.

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1. Frederick Asher, "Pañcāyatana Śiva Līṅgas: Sources and Meanings" in Joanna Williams, *Kalādarśana* (New Delhi, 1981), p. 3.

Radiating from a *liṅga*, when set in the field of its dynamic relationships, were the religious specialists who presided over the daily and seasonal calendar of religious practices, and the villagers whose duty it was to maintain and support the temple. We should see too the intricate web of well-worn foot paths leading to the temple hub from remote hamlets, neighboring villages, and adjacent towns for the daily honoring of the *liṅga*. Each of the ancient carved stones was daily wreathed with incense and flowers. They were fitfully and mysteriously lit by light from oil lamps waved by priestly attendants. They were worn smooth by lavings of water and milk and the innumerable touches of loving hands. Add to this the flux, commotion and social contagion of crowded festival days with music, bells, entertainments and gorgeous costumes and we have some echo, however faint, of the vibrant religious enthusiasm which a *liṅga* once focussed.²

An example of the relative neglect of the *liṅga* as an important resource for study is the fact that there are several *liṅgas* in the Ho Pra Narai in Nakhon Si Thammarat that have not been made available for study in adequate photographs in the eighty years since they were first described by M.L. de Lajonquière in 1912.³ When he visited the shrine there were five *liṅgas*. One, described as standing outside the remains of an ancient brick shrine sheltered by the new hall, was in three sections carved of rough granite and standing 0.75 meter in height. This is almost certainly our figure #1 which fits the description quite easily since it is granite and its measurements are roughly similar.

The other *liṅgas*, as Lajonquière found them, were inside the shrine. Three of them were of the same form as the previously described *liṅga*. One (fig. 2) was made of granite, the other (fig. 3) was carved from a schistose stone. The third *liṅga* was broken. There are presently two broken *liṅgas* in the shrine, but since the clear implication of Lajonquière's text is that it was similar in form to the previously described emblems, that is with a cubic base, an octagonal mid-section and a rounded top, it must be the *liṅga* illustrated in (fig. 4). Although badly damaged, it retains indications of an octagonal mid-section as well as a cylindrical top with gland and frenum clearly outlined as in all of the preceding *liṅgas*. The other broken *liṅga* now in the shrine (fig. 5) is too crude to be considered similar in form to the *liṅgas* illustrated in figs. 1-4.

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2. For a discussion of Hindu devotional practice see Diana L. Eck, *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image* (Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, 1981).
 3. M.L. de Lajonquière, "Essai d'inventaire archéologique du Siam", *Bulletin de la Commission Archéologique de l' Indo-Chine* (1912-1913). pp. 159-161, figs. 37 and 38. Illustrations of one of the *liṅgas* has already been published, see: A. Lamb, "Kedah and Takuapa", *Federation Museums Journal*, Vol. VI (1961) pp. 113, and S.J. O'Connor, *Hindu Gods of Peninsular Siam*, (Ascona, 1972), fig. 5.

Finally, Lajonquière gave a sketch in his text (fig. 38) of a *liṅga* which he described as a simple cylinder with a rounded head carved from the same block as its square basin. This is, of course, our fig. 6.

Lajonquière apparently had no information on the provenance of these *liṅgas*. Some eighty years later there seems little likelihood that their find-sites will be recovered. One has had the impression that such objects tended to stay close to the places where they once embedded in local life. For example, in 1966 there were five *liṅgas* at Na Khom Village, Amphoe Si Chon, some 38 miles north of Nakhon Sri Thammarat.⁴ There apparently was no disposition locally to transfer them to Nakhon Si Thammarat. However, the force of this argument is diminished by the fact that one of the Wat Nakhom *liṅgas* has recently been transported to Pak Pahnang, near Nakhon Si Thammarat where its cylindrical top and frenum have been painted a vivid red.⁵

Dating the *liṅgas* is obviously fraught with difficulty, but Professor Piriya Kririksh has recently provided an advance in our knowledge that will prove helpful here. He restudied the *liṅga* with a single face which was found at Nongwai station, Chaiya district, Surat Thani Province (fig. 7). It had previously been recognized that it was clearly related to Indian *mukhalingas* of the Gupta period.⁶ He was able, however, to draw precise analogies with an Indian *liṅga* of the 6th century and he makes a convincing case for dating the Chaiya emblem to that century instead of the 7th or 8th as I had proposed in an earlier study.⁷ I think he is probably right and, if he is, it should lead to some greater precision in dating *liṅgas*. Previously, dating was based on analogy with Cambodian and Cham examples and, or, relative degrees of naturalism or abstraction, the presumption being that those phallic emblems closest in anatomical fidelity to the natural prototype were earliest. In the earliest *liṅgas* the rounded head section is given especial emphasis, its proportions being greater than those of the shaft and the base, or, in some cases, one of the lower sections may be suppressed entirely. A number of *liṅgas* of this type have been found in the Transbassac region of what is now southern Vietnam where the early state of Funan is thought to have been centered. These realistic *liṅgas* have been dated by L. Malleret to the last period of Funanese art from the end of the fifth to the beginning of the sixth centuries.⁷

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4. S.J. O'Connor, "Si Chon: An Early Settlement in Peninsular Thailand," *Journal of the Siam Society*, Vol. LVI, Pt. 1 (January 1968), pp. 12-14 and figs. 6 and 7. I understand that the small glass *liṅga* illustrated in fig. 8 is no longer in Si Chon and its present location is unknown.
 5. Piriya Kririksh, *Art in Peninsular Thailand Prior to the Fourteenth Century A.D.* (Fine Arts Department, Bangkok, 1981), p. 30 and Plate IV.
 6. *Ibid.* p. 29 and Plate 14.
 7. L. Malleret, *L'Archéologie du delta du Mekong*, Vol. 1 (Paris, 1959), pp. 379-80. For examples of the earliest type see plates 80a and d. Also H. Parmentier, "Relevé Archéologique de la Province de Tay Ninh (Cochin-china)," *Bulletin de la Commission Archéologique de l'Indo-Chine*, 1910-11 p. 71, fig. 2L.

In the same general area there are several *liṅgas* whose realism, although still quite marked, is somewhat attenuated. There is a general proportional similarity between the base, shaft and head. In Malleret's phrase these are "conventional emblems." Several of them are *ekamukhaliṅgas*. One is from Oc-Eo.⁸ The other is from Vat Sak Sampou.⁹ They are notable for the fact that the faces are very small in proportion to the overall scale of the *liṅga*. In this they differ both from the Chaiya emblem and those examples of Indian *liṅgas* of the Gupta period with which I am familiar. In fact the presentation is at striking odds with the search for a formal unity that characterizes classical Gupta art. In the case of the *ekamukhaliṅga*, this led to a reconciliation of the form of the face with the overall form of the *liṅga*.¹⁰

The examples from Vietnam are also considerably more realistic than the Chaiya example because they exhibit an accentuated gland and frenum on a swelling, distended ovoid top. They are in general configuration quite similar, however, to our Nakhon Si Thammarat example (fig. 1). Both the Oc-Eo and the Vat Sak Sampou *liṅgas* were thought to date to the end of Funanese art or the beginning of the art of Chen-la in the late sixth or early seventh century but this date would appear too late if we accept a sixth century date for the Chaiya *ekamukhaliṅga*. Perhaps a date in the 5th century or earlier would now be in order. It follows that our (fig. 1) would date also from the 5th century or earlier, while the *liṅgas* illustrated in (figs., 2 and 3) could, because of their diminished degree of realism, be assigned dates in the late 5th or early 6th centuries.

The *liṅga* with the traces of an octagonal section below the cylindrical tops (fig. 4) is so fragmentary that it resists dating. Its frenum is presented in high relief so it might very well be an early example. Similarly (fig. 5) is too damaged to allow

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8. Illustrated in Malleret, *op. cit.* p. 383, no. 107, pl. 81.
 9. Illustrated in H. Parmentier, "L'Art présumé du Fou-nan, *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient*, Vol. 32, Pt. 1 (1932) plate 14A.
 10. See, for example, the *liṅga* from Khoh dated ca. 500 A.D. for a mature Gupta example. It is plate 171 in J. G. Williams, *The Art of Gupta India*, (Princeton, 1982). Note especially her remarks, pp. 114-115 on the differences between this example and an earlier *liṅga* from Udayagiri Cave 4. The latter is illustrated as plate 113.

Another *ekamukhaliṅga* that is closely similar to the Udayagiri example is in the Avery Brundage Collection, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. It is illustrated in plate 6 in P. Pal, *The Ideal Image: The Gupta Sculptural Tradition and Its Influence* (New York, 1978). Note the proportional dissimilarity between the cylindrical top and the two lower sections.

For another *ekamukhaliṅga* that would appear to be an early Gupta example see P. Pal, *The Divine Presence* (Los Angeles, 1978), plate 8.

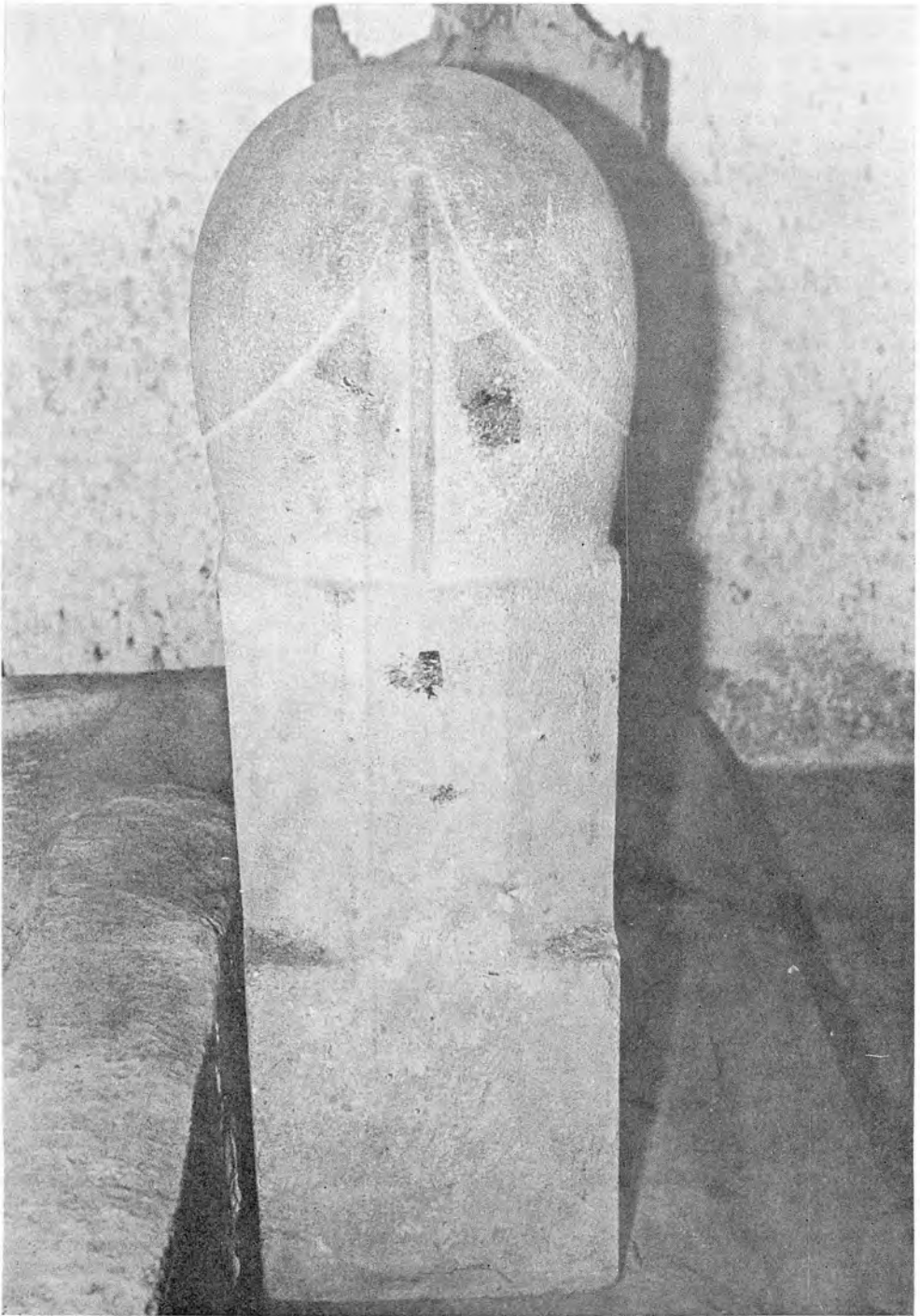


Fig. 1 *Linga*. Granite. 23'' high. Ho Pra Narai, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Thailand.



Fig. 2 *Linga*. Granite. 37" high. Ho Pra Narai, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Thailand.



Fig. 3 *Linga*. Schistose Stone. 21" high. Ho Pra Narai, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Thailand.

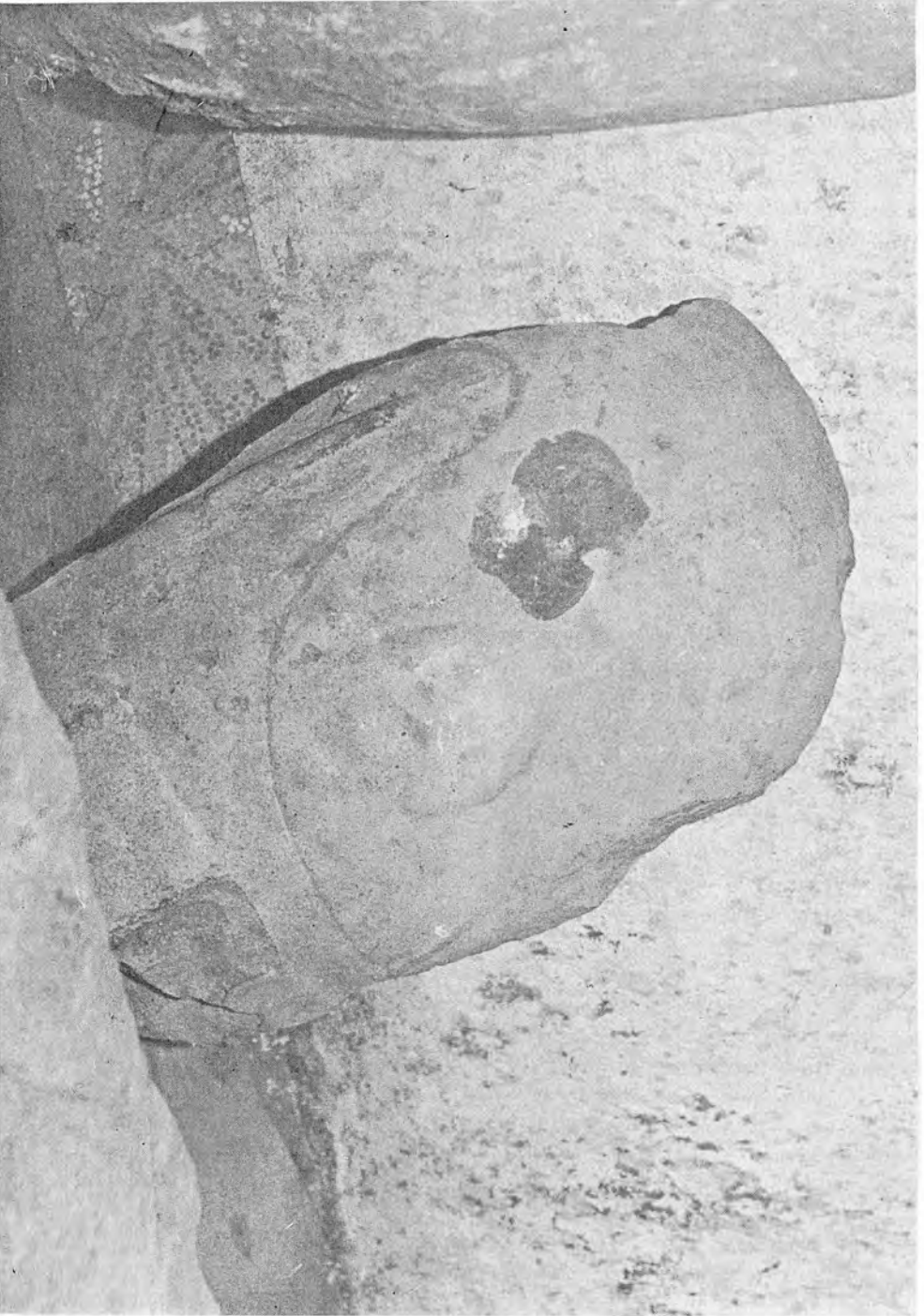


Fig. 4 *Linga*. Stone. Broken. Remaining portion 11" high. Ho Pra Narai, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Thailand.



Fig. 5 *Linga*. Stone. Broken. Remaining portion, 18" high. Ho Pra Narai, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Thailand.

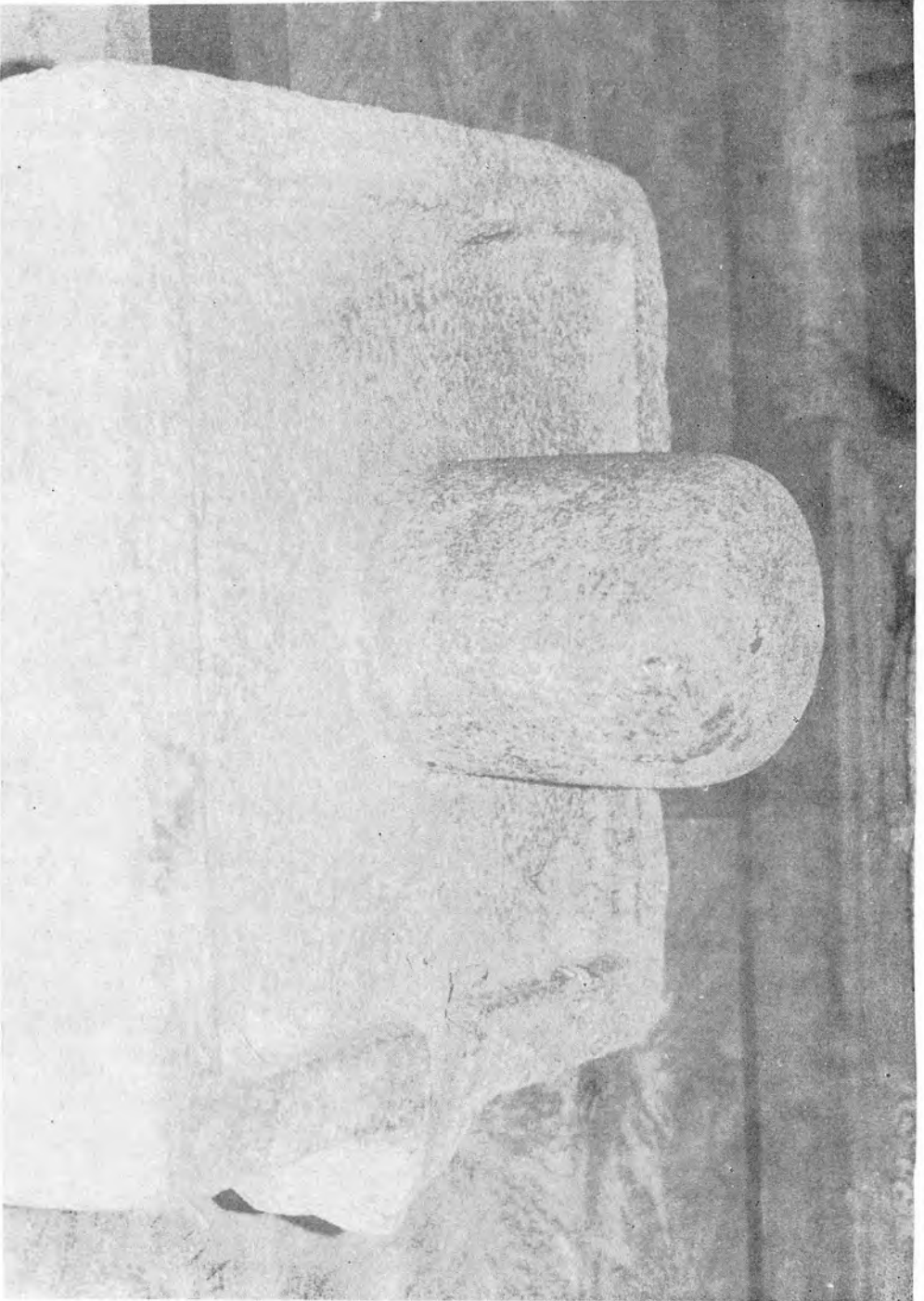


Fig. 6 *Linga*. Granite. Cylindrical Shaft. 6" high. Ho Pra Narai, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Thailand.



Fig. 7 *Liṅga. Ekamukhaliṅga.* Stone. Discovered at Chaiya. Entire *Liṅga* 42" high. National Museum, Bangkok.

for dating. Finally, (fig. 6) is clearly so conventionalized, so far removed from the realism of the other *lingas*, that it must be a considerably later type but I am not able to assign a date to it.

What this canvass of these neglected objects may usefully add to our knowledge of the past is scarcely an unshakeable conviction that we have got the dates fixed precisely right but simply that Śiva worship played a prominent role in the cultural life of the isthmus at what appears now to be a very early date. There is nothing in this that would sit uncomfortably with intelligence gathered by Chinese envoys and travellers in the accounts of isthmian states like P'an-p'an and Tan-tan that leave their press in records of the early centuries A.D.¹¹ But the present town of Nakhon Si Thammarat does not itself apparently date from that period. In fact it may have been established only in the 11th century so the *lingas* must have been brought there from more ancient sites presumably in the vicinity.¹² The *lingas* thus add the weight of their testimony to the very early Hindu sculptures of Viṣṇu found in the vicinity of Nakhon Si Thammarat to suggest that an important early site remains to be discovered.

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11. Chinese accounts of the historical geography of the isthmus in the early centuries of the Christian era are reviewed and analyzed in Paul Wheatley, *The Golden Khersonese* (Kuala Lumpur, 1961), especially Chapter V.
 12. H.G. Quaritch Wales, *The Malay Peninsula in Hindu Times* (London, 1976), p. 154 and Nikhom Suthiragsa, "The Archaeological Story of Phra Wieng City," *Silpakon* Vol. 15, No. 4 (1971). See also, David Wyatt, *The Crystal Sands, The Chronicles of Nagara Sri Dharmaraja*, Data Paper : No. 98. Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University (Ithaca, 1975).