

Nāga-Buddha Images of the Dvāravatī Period: A Possible Link between Dvāravatī and Angkor

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The iconography of Buddha images known as the Dvāravatī Nāga-Buddha is analyzed. The origin and evolution of the Nāga-Buddha in India are reviewed. Differences in the iconography of *nāga*-hooded figures are elucidated and examined. The evolution of the iconography in Sri Lanka, Thailand (Dvāravatī and Angkorian periods) and Cambodia is surveyed. Possible transmission routes between India, Sri Lanka and Dvāravatī are considered. The possibility that the Dvāravatī Nāga-Buddha was the origin of the Angkorian Nāga-Buddha is examined. Clues to the significance of the Bāyon Nāga-Buddha in that context are explored.

The iconography of the Nāga-Buddha typically refers to the episode of the Buddha's life when the *nāga* Mucalinda arises to protect the Buddha Śākyamuni against heavy rainfall during the sixth week of his meditation following enlightenment. However, the use of the different designations for this iconography in both the English and French literature—*nāga-protected Buddha*, *Buddha protégé par le nāga*, *Buddha assis sur/sous le nāga* and *Mucalinda-Buddha*, among others—reveals uncertainty among scholars about the real meaning of those images. The Nāga-Buddha is typically depicted with the Buddha seated upon the coils of the *nāga*, which form a pedestal or throne; however, the episode of Mucalinda¹ in the Buddhist texts instead has the Buddha wound up in the *nāga* coils, indicating either a deviation from the text or some alternative or additional meaning. The Nāga-Buddha appears for the first time late in the 2nd century AD in South Indian art on bas-reliefs decorating *stūpa* elements, but is seldom seen as sculpture in the round in India. Free-standing images of the Nāga-Buddha appear in Sri Lankan art in the late Anurādhapura period (7th to 8th century AD), in Dvāravatī art (7th to 10th), and in Khmer art (10th to 13th).

Sixty years ago P. Dupont² comprehensively studied a small number of Nāga-Buddha images found in Thailand and dated to the Dvāravatī period, after

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¹ A rare, modern sculpture of the *nāga* Mucalinda that shows the coils of the *nāga* winding around the Buddha can be seen in the Vihāra of Wat Suthatthephawararam in Bangkok. It dates from the Ratanakosin period, late in the 19th century.

² Dupont 1959, 251–265

having studied the evolution of the Khmer Nāga-Buddha.³ Since then, other images of the Dvāravatī Nāga-Buddha has come to light, including later images from northeastern Thailand that may be Dupont's "missing link"⁴ between the Dvāravatī Nāga-Buddha and the first Khmer images which appeared in the second half of the 10th century. Such a link has also been considered by H. Woodward⁵ and others.⁶ However, the association of the Khmer Nāga-Buddha with a tantric form of Mahāyāna Buddhism,⁷ while Dvāravatī Buddhism was supposedly Theravāda, remains unaccounted for. The Nāga-Buddha, the preferred representation of the Buddha in Khmer art during the Angkor period, became the central deity of the empire during the reign of Jayavarman VII (Bāyon period), who converted the state religion from Śaivism to Vajrayāna Buddhism. Despite the abundant literature on Jayavarman VII's Buddhism, the origin or identification of this deity has not been satisfactorily explained since it is not evidenced in other Vajrayāna traditions. The following pages discuss the origin and the evolution of the Nāga-Buddha image. The discussion examines the possibility that the proposed Dvāravatī origin of the Khmer Nāga-Buddha could help explain why the Nāga-Buddha was adopted as central deity of the Khmer empire, or at least shed some light on its advent.

Nāga-protected figures. The iconographical device of a polycephalous *nāga* hood over a deity's head, halo-like, is common to Hindu, Jain and Buddhist art.⁸ In Hindu art, Viṣṇu is often represented with a polycephalous *nāga* hood above his head, in reference to the creation of a new universe by Viṣṇu-Ananataśāyin. In Jain art, Jina or Tīrthaṅkara images are represented by standing or sitting human figures protected by the polycephalous hood of a *nāga*, whose undulating coils appear on both sides. The mythical life story of the 23rd Tīrthaṅkara Parśvanātha⁹ tells of two *nāga* that arose during a hurricane-like rainstorm to protect Parśvanātha during his meditation that led to his enlightenment. This legend could be at the origin of the Mucalinda episode, as both the Buddhist and Jain traditions have borrowed from one another and many episodes are common to the Buddha's life and Tīrthaṅkara's lives.

³ Dupont 1950, 39–61.

⁴ "Le hiatus" (Dupont 1959, 261, 264).

⁵ Woodward 1997, 72.

⁶ Sen 2007, 67–68.

⁷ Evidence provided in studies by Prapandvipa (1990), Woodward (1981, 2003 and 2007), Lobo (1997c), and Sharrock (2006).

⁸ The most ancient example of these images is a sculpture in the round of a seven-headed *nāga* hood found in Rajgir, in the Nālandā district of Bihar, India, and now in the Indian Museum, Kolkata. A tenon on its base suggests that it was placed above the head of an image of worship of an unknown religious denomination. It has been dated by S. P. Gupta to the Maurya period (3rd–2nd century BC) on the evidence of stylistic analogies with the *nāgapuṣpa* motif of the Aśoka Pillars (*The Roots of Indian Art*, Delhi 1980, pp. 324, 335; as quoted in Misra 1982, 299 note 43).

⁹ Eilenberg 1996, 52.

Nāgarāja in Buddhist Indian and Sri Lankan art

In Buddhism, the *nāga* or *nāgarāja*, after their conversion to the Buddha's doctrine, become the natural protectors of the Buddha's relics and sacred places. The first Buddhist *nāga* images appear during the Śuṅga period (2nd century BC), both in theriomorphic¹⁰ and semi-anthropomorphic forms, on the bas-reliefs decorating the posts of the stone railings (*vedikā*) that surround the *stūpa*. There they are represented as guardians of those sacred places¹¹ like other protective mythological beings such as *yakṣa* and *yakṣiṇī*. The anthropomorphic *nāgarāja* are depicted as standing human figures, their regal status denoted by a turban and their head protected by a polycephalous *nāga* hood that reveals their divine nature.¹²

The Mucalinda episode. The legend of Mucalinda is related in several Pāli and Sanskrit textual sources¹³ that differ in only a few details. They tell of a tree spirit, the *nāgarāja* named Mucalinda (or Mucilinda), who resides among the roots of the tree and who appeared during the sixth week¹⁴ of the meditation of the Buddha Śākyamuni following his enlightenment on the banks of the Narañjanā river at Uruvela, near Bodhgāya. The name Mucalinda or Mucilinda also designates the tree under which the Buddha was meditating, from the root word *muc* meaning liberation. Following that sixth week of meditation after his enlightenment, the Buddha endured tempests and heavy rains for seven days, with the *nāga* Mucalinda protecting the Buddha by winding itself around the Buddha's body in seven coils¹⁵ — a possible allusion to the number of days — and erecting its hood above the Buddha's head to protect him from the rain. At the end of the seventh day, the rain stopped and the *nāga* took a human form to listen to the first sermon of the Buddha. The Pāli sources speak of an enlarged or inflated *nāga* head, but Xuán Zàng relates that Mucalinda grew seven heads — the better to protect the Buddha. Other texts mention

¹⁰ For example in Sāñcī, but also later in Amāravatī art and in Sri Lañka during the early Anurādhapura period.

¹¹ The role of relic protector is suggested in bas-reliefs on a *stūpa* slab from Amāravatī where polycephalous, theriomorphic *nāga* are encircling a *stūpa* and other anthropomorphic *nāga* are worshipping in different postures; ill. in Bachhofer 1959, pl. 129.

¹² One of the most famous is on a pillar of Bhārhut (the south corner jamb), ca. 100–80 BC, now in the Indian Museum, Kolkata; ill. in Huntington 1985, 67, fig. 5.12.

¹³ The Pāli sources include the *Mahāvagga* (part of the *Vinaya piṭaka* of the Pāli Canon [1st century BC]), *Mucalinda suttam* from the *Udāna* (*Sutta piṭaka* [1st BC]), and the *Nidānakathā* or life of the Buddha introducing the *jāṭaka* tales and probably more ancient than them. The Sanskrit sources include the *Lalitavistara* (Sanskrit + prakrit [1st AD]) and the *Mahāvastu* (hybrid Sanskrit [2nd–4th AD]).

¹⁴ Or fifth week (pañchame saptāhe), according to the *Lalitarā* version.

¹⁵ “sattakhattum bhogehi”; “saptakṛdbhogaiḥ pariveṣṭyā” (*Lalitavistara*). The seven coils are also quoted from Tibetan sources by W. W. Rockhill (*Life of the Buddha*, 1972 [repr.; orig. 1884], p. 35; as quoted in Misra 1982, 294 and note 4).

seven heads that were not specially produced for the occasion.¹⁶ The mention of seven heads in those recensions, which are from a later period, may have been inspired by images of *nāga* depicted with seven heads perhaps in substitution of seven coils that were not represented.

Aniconic illustrations of the Mucalinda episode

Two very ancient images—a roundel on a post of *vedikā* from Bhārhut¹⁷ (today in the Allahabad Museum) and a later bas-relief on a post from Pauni¹⁸—illustrate the Mucalinda episode in aniconic art. They both depict a theriomorphic, five-hooded *nāga*, its coils encircling a cubic stone (an altar or a throne, perhaps the *vajrāsana* or adamant throne of the Buddhas) with footprints under a *bodhi* tree, all obvious symbols of the Buddha. In both cases the association with the Mucalinda episode is confirmed by inscriptions in Brahmi script datable to the 2nd century BC.¹⁹

Later reliefs in aniconic art from Sāñcī dated to the Sātavāhana period (20 to 40 AD)²⁰ represent a five-hooded, anthropomorphic *nāgarāja* holding a lotus in its right hand and sitting in the posture of royal ease or *mahārājalilāsana*, under a potted *bodhi* tree and an umbrella or *chatra*. Such a collection of symbols indicates the presence of the Buddha and is possibly a reference to the Mucalinda episode, although no inscription is available to confirm the meaning of the scene.

In a frieze relief from Amarāvātī,²¹ several anthropomorphic *nāgarāja* are adoring the Buddha in the aniconic form of his footprints placed on a lotus that is protected by a theriomorphic, five-hooded *nāga*. Interestingly, this same frieze presents both theriomorphic and anthropomorphic *nāgarāja* as well as the Buddha in both aniconic and iconic forms.

Similar scenes in South Indian art appear on bas-reliefs decorating elements of *stūpa* enclosures and *stūpa* face plates. One of them, from Amarāvātī, represents a seven-hooded anthropomorphic *nāgarāja* performing the *añjali* or gesture

¹⁶ Watters 1904, vol. II, 128–129.

¹⁷ Ill. in Chandra 1970, pl. IX, fig. 21.

¹⁸ Near Nagpur, Mahārāṣṭra, site excavated in 1969–70; ill. in Tokyo National Museum 2002, pl. 2.

¹⁹ “Mucilindo Nāgarāja Tiṣṣyā Benakaṭikāya dāndā” [Nāgarāja Mucilinda, gift from Tiṣṣyā, inhabitant of Benakaṭa] and “Mucarinda [sic] nāgo”.

²⁰ On the northern pillar of the western *torāṇa*, southern face, Stūpa No. 1 of Sāñcī, today at the Sāñcī Museum; ill. in Rao 1984, pl. 59. An almost identical image is also found on the front face of the eastern pillar of the southern *torāṇa* of the same *stūpa*; ill. in Marshall and Foucher 1982, pl. XIX c.

²¹ Friezes from the inner enclosure of the Amarāvātī Great Stūpa, today in the Indian Museum, Kolkata; ill. in Ferguson 1971, pl. LXXXIII.

of respect to the Buddha's footprints that are placed upon the three coils of his body.²² Interestingly, this last image can be considered the origin of Nāga-Buddha iconography, as the Buddha's presence is symbolized by his footprints placed upon the *nāga* coils, which form a pedestal or seat.

The *nāgarāja* may also be protecting the Buddha or performing the *añjali* to the Buddha who is represented in his aniconic form of a *stūpa*.²³ In the absence of other elements such as the *bodhi* tree or inscriptions, it is unclear whether such scenes represent the Mucalinda episode or purely the Buddha's charisma.

Iconic illustrations of the Mucalinda episode and Nāga-Buddha

The most ancient iconic representation of the Mucalinda story is a bas-relief image on a schist plate from Gandhāra, currently located in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.²⁴ This image is a perfect illustration of the episode according to the texts, realistically depicting the Buddha under the *bodhi* tree with his body wrapped to the chin in the seven coils of the *nāga*. Bushes tossing in the wind suggest the tempest. This type of representation is rare and has no parallel or sequel in Indian art.²⁵ It has been suggested that representation of the Buddha's body covered by the *nāga* coils was considered inauspicious.²⁶

The prototype of the Nāga-Buddha first appears in South Indian art of the Kṛṣṇa-Godavari valley. These first Nāga-Buddha images show a Buddha in monastic robes seated on the coils of a *nāga*, whose polycephalous hood forms a canopy above the Buddha's head that is reminiscent of the *bodhi* tree or umbrella in earlier aniconic images.

Probably the most ancient image of the Nāga-Buddha comes from Nāgarjunakoṇḍa, in Āndhra Pradesh.²⁷ It illustrates the Buddha dressed as a monk displaying the gesture of "granting the absence of fear" or *abhayamudrā*, placed in front of a *nāga* with a hood of seven equally sized heads in frontal view. Two coils and the tail of a *nāga* are represented under the Buddha's legs and one more

²² Now in the British Museum; ill. in Pal 2007, 58. A similar example is on display at the Madras Museum. Pal suggests that the lack of imagery signifying the idea of protection in this scene, as well as the presence of four secondary *nāga* or *nāgī* and other, adoring human figures, may indicate a secondary episode of the Buddha's visit to Mucalinda's subterranean abode during the fifth week after his enlightenment, as described by the *Lalitavistara*.

²³ On a *vedikā* roundel from a railing crossbar of the outer enclosure of the Amarāvati Great Stūpa (2nd century AD), today in the British Museum (BM2); ill. in Knox 1992, 85, pl. 27.

²⁴ L. S. 179–1949; ill. in Pal 2007, fig. 7.

²⁵ See note 1 of the present article for modern representation in Thai art.

²⁶ Pal 2007, 54.

²⁷ 3rd century AD. Today in the Victoria and Albert Museum (I. M. 81-1936); ill. in Dupont 1959, fig. 522.

undulating coil is visible at his right side, a feature absent from later representations, possibly indicating the earliness of this image. The image may be interpreted as a Buddha image placed in front of a polycephalous, theriomorphic *nāga*. The *abhayamudrā*, although not a suitable convention for this episode of the meditation of the Buddha, is the standard gesture of the first iconic Buddha images in the contemporaneous art of Mathurā. The similarity with Mathurā images is here accentuated by the presence of the halo or *prabhāmaṇḍala*, partially visible behind the *nāga* hood. But other details of the Buddha figure in these first southern Nāga-Buddha images—such as the form of the *uṣṇīṣa*, the robe with the right shoulder uncovered, the loose half-lotus posture or *paryaṅkāśana* with legs crossed at the ankles and one foot hanging forward—are in classic southern Amāravatī style.²⁸ In later southern images, the *abhayamudrā* is replaced by the *dhyānamudrā* or meditation gesture, more appropriate to the Mucalinda episode,²⁹ and the nimbus or *prabhāmaṇḍala* appears less frequently. Such images vary in the number of the *nāga* coils and hoods,³⁰ while the *nāga* body never appears beside the Buddha.

The final stage of this evolution culminates in the classic image of the Nāga-Buddha, a Buddha in meditation seated upon the *nāga* coils, which have taken the form of a throne. In the absence of any epigraphical evidence, the meaning of such Nāga-Buddha images is not entirely clear. In some instances it may indeed represent the Mucalinda episode; in most, however, the images could be interpreted as mere evocation of the proselytizing power of Śākyamuni over indigenous godlings.

Besides the Mucalinda episode and their role as guardians of Buddhist relics, *nāgarāja* also appear in several *jātaka* stories. Furthermore, the depiction of *nāga* coils as a pedestal, or the interpretation of the coils as a throne for the Buddha that represents Mount Meru, transforms the Nāga-Buddha into a transcendental, cosmic Buddha.³¹ Other interpretations have been suggested as well.³²

Anthropomorphic *nāgarāja* in northern India

In South Indian art, *nāgarāja* appear in compositions associated with the Buddha (both represented in aniconic and iconic forms) seated on the coils of the *nāga*, which permits identification of such scenes as representations of the Buddha.

²⁸ Dupont has classified southern Amāravatī style as type II b (1959, 252).

²⁹ For example, on a fragmentary plate from Goli, 3rd century AD, today in the Los Angeles Museum of Art (M.71.54); ill. in Pal 2007, 58, fig. 9.

³⁰ Sometimes arranged in two rows, as in an image from the Great Stūpa of Amāravatī, today in the British Museum (BM70); ill. in Pal 2007, 60, fig. 11.

³¹ Pal 2007, 62.

³² Sharrock sees Vairocana in these Nāgārjunakoṇḍa images, on the grounds that the plate on the opposite face of the *stūpa* represents the Buddha in standing posture (personal communication).

However, in northern India independent images of anthropomorphic *nāgarāja* exist either on pillars as bas-reliefs or as independent sculptures in relief or in the round, some of which were found in independent sanctuaries.³³ These images are dated from the Kuṣāṇa to the Gupta and Pāla periods, which shows the persistence of the type; most of them have been found in the Mathurā region, which had functioned as an important center of worship of local deities such as *nāga* and *yakṣa* since prehistoric times.³⁴ Their religious affiliation is unclear; some authors³⁵ have interpreted them as Hindu gods, while others as Buddhist.³⁶ In any case, they appear mostly at Buddhist monastic sites, where they seem to have been worshipped as local protective deities by the faithful in need of succor and as protectors of the *saṃgha*.³⁷ These anthropomorphic *nāgarāja* always wear a royal headdress or turban surmounted by a polycephalous *nāga* hood and are standing or sometimes sitting in *mahārājalilāsana*, as befits their royal status, with the undulating coils of the *nāga* body visible on both sides of the figure, a signature feature of northern *nāgarāja*.³⁸ Of the early images, the right hand would hold a lotus, but later images would show one upraised in the *abhaya* gesture while the left hand would hold a water flask,³⁹ originally an attribute of Maitreya or Vajrapāṇi.⁴⁰ During the Gupta period the rosary (*akṣamālā*) held in the right hand became the second regular attribute of the *nāgarāja*.⁴¹ Such sculptures appear in the Nālandā region in the round or on votive tablets.

³³ As, for example, the *nāgarāja* holding a lotus and with the left hand on the hip from Gulgaon, which has been found with a *nāgī*. See drawing in Misra 1982, pl. 34.5.

³⁴ Sharma 2002, 9.

³⁵ For example Sahai 1975, 86.

³⁶ Misra 1982, 295–302. The shortcoming of Misra's study, one of the first systematic studies of Nāga-Buddha and *nāga* figures, is that all *nāga* sculptures are confusingly named Mucalinda, even the *nāgarāja* from northern India which have obviously another meaning and whose names are sometimes inscribed on the sculpture confirming that they are not Mucalinda.

³⁷ Huntington 1985, 247.

³⁸ Note that the coils visible on the sides exist also in the Jain images of Tīrthaṅkara (Eilenberg 1996).

³⁹ Sometimes interpreted as a fruit.

⁴⁰ One of the most ancient images is a sculpture in the round from Nāgaurī, near Sāñcī (1st–2nd century AD) of a *nāgarāja* holding a *kuṇḍikā*, and a lotus, with a polycephalous *nāga* hood and spires visible on the sides. He is accompanied by his consort, a *nāgī* with a hood of only one *nāga* head; ill. in Misra 1982, pls. 34/6 a–b. Similar images have been found in the Mathurā and the Sāñcī region up to the 5th century AD. Some of them have name inscribed, such as the image from Huvishka's monastery in Jamālpur near Mathurā, which is named Dadhikaraṇa. This image also has been found inside an independent sanctuary.

⁴¹ To this last stage belongs the stucco of the *stūpa* of Maniyār Math, Rajgir (Bihār). The inscriptions designate this ancient site as Maṇi-nāga, which is quoted in the Mahābhārata as a *nāga* worship center (Kuraishi 1951, 20–21).

The famous basalt statue in the round from Nālandā, dated to the first half of the 8th century AD, is sometimes mistakenly identified as a Mucalinda Buddha, but its royal attire and posture as well as the *kuṇḍikā* and *akṣamālā* indicate that it represented a *nāgarāja*.⁴²

In several *aṣṭamahāsthāna* steles from Nālandā that represent the eight events in the Buddha's life or eight pilgrimage places and have been dated to the early Pāla period,⁴³ three small-sized Buddha or Jina images make an unusual appearance under the principal figure which is a Buddha performing the *bhūmisparśamudrā* or earth-touching gesture. The central figure of the trinity is a Buddha figure in *dhyānamudrā* under a three- or five-hooded *nāga*; its coils visible on either side; but the Buddha is not seated on them. So far no satisfactory explanation has been proposed for such a trinity, which in any case is a secondary element in those compositions.⁴⁴ Although the images come from the Nālandā region, one of the most important centers of Mahāyāna Buddhism, these steles with their portrayal of the eight principal events in the Buddha's life or pilgrimage places do not offer clues to any particular doctrinal affiliation.

In summary, Buddhist *nāga* figures are represented in India in two ways. One is the Nāga-Buddha, with the Buddha seated on the coils of a *nāga* that form a pedestal or throne, with a polycephalous hood forming a halo around his head and no coils visible on the sides; that iconography is not found farther north than the Āndhra Pradesh region.⁴⁵ The other is the anthropomorphic *nāgarāja* of northern India, a human figure in royal attire with a polycephalous *nāga* hood as a crown who is never seated upon the *nāga* coils; in such images, the *nāga* coils are

⁴² Ill. in Paul 1995, pl. 9. Paul has identified this figure as Nāgārjuna, the founder of the Mādhyamaka, on the grounds that a second sculpture in the same material, size and style represents a feminine figure issuing from a vase, which according to Paul is a clear representation of the deified Prajñāpāramitā who was kept in a vase according to the Nāgārjuna legend. This identification was suggested by Hīrānāsa Shāstri in 1919. Paul also based her identification on the Buddha's attendants, who on other Pāla sculptures are identified by inscriptions as famous Mahāyāna philosophers regarded as Bodhisattva. Paul remarks that the *akṣamāla* seems to be inappropriate for a simple *nāgarāja*. However, it has become the regular attribute of the *nāgarāja* since the Gupta period (Paul 1995, 97–98).

⁴³ Only four such images may exist: two are in the Nālandā Museum ([4–93] 10793 nn. 366/55; photograph in Paul 1995, pl. 71 and ASI 443/56[1]); one is in Berlin (bkg/Museum für Indische Kunst; photograph of a detail in Pal 2007, 61, fig. 13), and a fourth was sold at Sotheby's New York on 20 March 1997 (lot 28; photograph in Menzies 2001, 50–51). The present author gratefully acknowledges the valuable assistance of Claudine Bautze-Picron in providing information and copies from her personal collection regarding three of these illustrations.

⁴⁴ Paul (1995, 97–98) suggests that 3 of the *pañcajina* are represented in these figures. The 2 *stūpa* that flank the principal image represent the 2 others.

⁴⁵ A relief of the Nāga-Buddha also exists in cave 93 of Kanheri. It seems that only one bas-relief showing the Buddha protected by Mucalinda exists in Ājañṭā, in cave 5 (end of 5th century); quoted by various authors (see Sharma 1982, 295; and Mitra 1959).

visible on both sides, the signature feature of northern iconography. The evolution summarized here suggests that the invention of the Nāga-Buddha can be traced to southern India in the art of the Kṛṣṇa-Godavārī valley during the Ikṣvāku period, i. e., from the end of the 2nd to the 5th century AD. This latter iconography appears to have developed from the iconic Buddha in *abhayamudrā* (as it appeared first in the art of Mathurā), merged with a theriomorphic *nāgarāja*. These images appear on the bas-reliefs decorating *stūpa* elements and at least in some cases seem to represent the Mucalinda episode, although definitive epigraphic evidence is lacking. The northern *nāgarāja* are stylistic continuations of Mathurā and Gupta art, until the Pāla period, of the first anthropomorphic *nāgarāja*-guardians of the Śuṅga period. They do not depict Mucalinda protecting the Buddha, but are representations, sometimes erected in independent sanctuaries, of various *nāgarāja* and local protective deities serving as guardians of the *saṃgha* and Buddhist sacred places, and were worshipped as minor deities at the margins of Buddhist monasteries.

Remarkably, no image of the Nāga-Buddha has been found in India as a sculpture in the round for worship, except for one that was discovered at Bodhgayā in northeastern India.⁴⁶ This figure depicts the Buddha in deep meditation with eyes half-closed and hands in *dhyānamudrā*, seated in full lotus position, as in the style of the Sarnāth school, on the three coils of a *nāga*. The *nāga* hood has seven identical (although much abraded) heads arranged around a nimbus or *prabhāmaṇḍala*. The body of the *nāga* is visible as three undulating coils on each side of the Buddha. This statue has been dated from the 6th to 7th century (post-Gupta or pre-Pāla period). The posture of the Buddha seated on the coils—never depicted in northern India—along with the *nāga* coils visible at the sides (a typical feature of *nāgarāja* of northern India) may be a fusion of the two stylistic types and imply importation of an iconographical concept from the south, albeit executed according to local northern custom. This image could possibly have been worshipped in the Mucalinda sanctuary near the “dragon king” pool, quoted by Xuán Zàng.⁴⁷

The Nāga-Buddha in Sri Lanka art

In Sri Lanka, both theriomorphic and anthropomorphic images of protective *nāga* or *nāgarāja* appear at the beginning of the Anurādhapura period on guard stones, marking the directional accesses of the *stūpa* or *dagoba*. These images clearly derive from an Āndhra Pradesh prototype.⁴⁸ During the late Anurādhapura period

⁴⁶ Today in the Indian Museum, Kolkata; ill. in Sen 2007 67, fig. 2.

⁴⁷ Watters 1904–05, Vol. II, 132–134.

⁴⁸ See Von Shroeder 1990, for comparison of guard stones from Jetavana Thūpa, Anurādhapura Vihāra (p. 87, fig.13C and p. 85, fig.12E) with an Āndhra Pradesh prototype (p. 86, fig. 13A).

(6th to 8th centuries AD) the first Nāga-Buddha images⁴⁹ appear as large-sized images fully in the round,⁵⁰ the first evidence that such figures were being used for worship, an important development in Sri Lanka art. They seem to have originated from a South Indian prototype, while the rendition of the robe (without the typical folds of Amarāvātī art) denotes a later influence from Gupta or post-Gupta style.⁵¹

In these sculptures, the half-lotus position has become standard, but there are still variations in the number of *nāga* heads (from seven to nine) and coils (one to three). The position—in one image from Silā Cetiya, Mihintalē, whose *nāga* hood is missing—appears to have evolved from the loose half-lotus with crossed ankles, reminiscent of Amarāvātī art, to the full *paryāṅkāśana*, having one leg placed above the other, in the other such images. The halo remains in a single image (from Tirukkavi [Sēruvila]; figure 1), but is absent in all the others; this last image also includes seven *nāga* heads of equal size but only one *nāga* coil, which may be archaic as well. The number of coils has been reduced to three, while nine *nāga* heads becomes standard (images of Kantalē, and Maṅgala Rājamahāvihāra, Sēruvila (figure 2). The *nāga* heads are in frontal view, the central head proportionately larger in the later images. In all of them, the hood is rounded and placed above the shoulders. The statue from Sēruvilā, which shows a higher hood of nine heads with overlapping necks, three coils and a full *paryāṅkāśana*, seems to represent the final stage in the evolution.

Notably, these Nāga-Buddha images are dated to the 8th century and to be found in limited numbers mainly at sites on the northeastern coast of the island. The provenance might suggest importation of a new iconography that perhaps corresponded to some novel text or concept with limited diffusion, specifically during the dominance of the Abhayagiri monastery, which had adopted tantric Buddhist practices and texts and received royal protection.

⁴⁹ The most ancient representation of Nāga-Buddha found in Sri Lanka is probably a tablet, dated by Von Schroeder to the 5th–6th centuries, that shows a mature image of the Nāga-Buddha in *dhyānamudrā* without halo, in full *paryāṅkāśana*, and seven *nāga* heads. He has suggested that this piece may be an importation from Āndhra Pradesh and a possible link between the art of southern India and Sri Lanka. (1990, 130 and pl. 27A). According to Dupont (1959, 254) stylistic details of the robe preclude consideration of an Āndhra Pradesh origin.

⁵⁰ In the so-called “dolomite marble” of Von Schroeder. This group consist of 5 images from Silā Cetiya (Mihintalē), Tirukkavi or Maṅgala Rājamahāvihāra (Sēruvila), Kantalē (in Trincomalee National Museum), and Maṅgala Rājamahāvihāra (Sēruvila) which are reproduced in Von Schroeder 1990, 130 (figs. 27F, 27B, 27D, 27E). The 3rd and the 2nd are also reproduced in Dupont 1959 (figs. 525 and 526, resp.). The 5th from Konvāva is also reproduced in Dupont 1959 (fig. 527). A small and most amazing metal image found at Seruvila represents a Nāga-Buddha protected by *nāga* hood of only one head (not published).

⁵¹ Dupont 1959, 259.

The Nāga-Buddha in Dvāravatī art

The collection of Nāga-Buddha images that have survived in Thailand from the Dvāravatī period consists of (a) one stucco fragment from U-Thong, (b) three sandstone *bai sema* from the northeast, (c) a group of four independent stone images in high relief with a slab backing, (d) one fragment of a stone statue in the round, (e) the stucco decoration of the final phase of the Phra Prathon Chedi of Nakhon Pathom that was excavated by Dupont between 1939 and 1940, and (f) perhaps a dozen terracotta votive tablets found in the excavation of a Dvāravatī-period *stūpa* near ancient Nakhon Champasi in the district of Na Dun, Mahāsarakham province, excavated by the Thai Fine Arts Department in 1979.

(a) The stucco fragment from U-Thong, probably part of a decoration of the *stūpa* face, shows the lower part of a Buddha seated in meditation on three *nāga* coils. This fragment may be the most ancient of Nāga-Buddha images in Thailand, having survived for so long possibly because of the relative remoteness of its provenance. The ankles are crossed in archaic fashion, one foot hanging forward, an Amarāvātī characteristic. However, the fragmentary condition of this piece yields little other information.

(b) Three *bai sema* stones or steles found in Muang Fa Daed and Ban Nong Han in northeastern Thailand display bas-relief scenes on their face that most probably illustrate the Mucalinda episode.⁵² The best-preserved of them is stele No. 504/2517 from Muang Fa Daed, on exhibit at Mahawitawong Museum in Khon Kaen (figure 3). The Buddha makes the gesture of teaching or *vitarkamudrā*⁵³ and is seated in loose *paryāṅkāsa* with crossed ankles upon the four coils of a *nāga*, whose five-hooded canopy extends above his head. A bodhi tree is visible above the *nāga* hood, a symbol of the Mucalinda episode. Furthermore, a figure in royal attire and a second figure in *añjalimudrā*, possibly the donor or commissioner of the piece,⁵⁴ are seen in the foreground. The royal figure might be Mucalinda appearing in human form to listen to the first sermon of the Buddha, an identification that would be consistent with the teaching gesture of the Buddha. Thus two moments in the Mucalinda episode would have been represented in the same scene. The crossed ankles, the presence of a halo between the Buddha's head and the *nāga* hood, the five heads, and the *vitarkamudrā* (possibly derived from the *abhayamudrā*), seem to point to the archaic features already noted for South Indian art. The second of these *bai sema*, a much-abraded stone slab from Muang Fa Daed, also depicts a Buddha

⁵² Ill. in Murphy (forthcoming).

⁵³ Or *vyākhyānamudrā* (teaching gesture) according to Pal (2007, 54), rather than the *abhayamudrā*.

⁵⁴ According to Pal (2007, 55), the donor and the goddess Dharaṇī.

in *vitarka* or *vyākhyānamudrā*, seated on the coils of a *nāga* with eight hoods and attended by a royal figure, but without a *bodhi* tree. The last of these *bai sema*, found in Ban Nong Han, is similar to the second one but has neither attendant nor *bodhi* tree. All three *bai sema* have been dated to the 8th or 9th century by Stephen Murphy, who suggests that they may be the work of different sculptors.⁵⁵

(c) The next example of Dvāravatī Nāga-Buddha images consists of four stone images in high relief on a slab approximately 80 cm tall. Dupont has classified them in the S1 group.⁵⁶

The most ancient of them is probably the image from Muang Fai in Buriram province, retrieved in 1967 from a looting at the site of this ancient Dvāravatī-period city. It has been dated to the 7th century by M. C. Subhadradis Diskul (1971, 32–35). The ankles are crossed in an archaic, South Indian mode, but without halo, and the *nāga* hood has seven heads, the norm in this group of stone sculptures. Each of the *nāga* heads has the remarkably novel feature of a small protuberance instead of a small lotus or *cakra*-style circle;⁵⁷ being the first appearance of what would later become an iconographical characteristic.

The second image in this group, found at Si Mahosot in Prachinburi province (figure 4), depicts the Buddha seated with legs crossed at the ankles, but no *nāga* coils, and *cakra*-style circles at the top of each head of the *nāga* hood (except for the central head which is missing). This image features the novelty of two tapered, votive *stūpa* or *stūpakumbha* flanking the Buddha figure, possibly in imitation of an Indian stele or images on votive tablets, which may symbolize the Buddhas of the past and the future. Diskul (1971, 34) dated it to the 9th or 10th century because the robe shows some Pāla features.

The third sculpture comes from Wat Pradhu Songtham at Ayuthaya (figure 5), but its real provenance may have been in Prachinburi as with figure 4. The figure is seated in the classic *paryāṅkāsa* mode with one leg above the other and is flanked by two *stūpa*.⁵⁸ Additional differences in iconographical features include protuberances above the *nāga* heads, two small *stūpa* bearers, the *kāla* face placed at the base of the sculpture, and the lotus bud finial on top of the *uṣṇīṣa*. Furthermore, the three *nāga* coils appear to be arranged in ascending order of magnitude like the

⁵⁵ Murphy (forthcoming).

⁵⁶ Dupont 1959, 255.

⁵⁷ The circles or disks may also be observed on the tablet from Sri Lanka, which purportedly is an import from Āndhra Pradesh (see note 49 of the present article).

⁵⁸ A votive tablet or seal belonging to the Toshio Kawamura collection, on display at the Fukuoka Museum (2008, 12, no. 7), reproduces the Wat Pradhu Songtham image in every detail. Its similarity with the latter and, indeed, the appropriateness of the scaling of the compositional elements for such an object, suggest that the model or a source of inspiration for the Ayutthaya image could have been a votive tablet.

inverted pyramid that is later to mark classic Khmer art of the Angkor Wat period. Both sides of the figure are hidden by the *stūpa* bearers and hardly visible. This sculpture seems to represent the final stage in iconographic evolution; Diskul (1971, 34) has dated it from the 10th to 11th century.⁵⁹ In all these images, the *nāga* hood displays seven heads in frontal view, which has become the norm. The *nāga* necks overlap each other, in effect forming a protective hood and creating an undulating effect that is also found in the Lopburi fragment and in Sri Lankan Nāga-Buddha images. In such examples, the central head tends to be larger and the simian character of faces is relatively pronounced.

An image from Nakhon Si Thammarat that Dupont included in his *Dvāravatī* study⁶⁰ strikingly resembles the Ayuthaya image; it also exhibits two *stūpa* bearers and small protuberances on its *nāga* heads. However, its heavily re-stuccoed and re-lacquered state, as well as its discovery very far from *Dvāravatī* sites in central Thailand, call for caution before attributing a *Dvāravatī* provenance to this image. Its four *nāga* coils are thick, the three lowest possibly being later additions to a figure that originally might have had only one or no coil at all, like the Si Mahosot image.

The only image in the round is a fragment of a Buddha head with seven *nāga* hoods, found in Lopburi (figure 6). Like the Ayuthaya image, it sports protuberances above the *nāga* heads. The *nāga* necks are smooth and bordered with two plain strips without the usual horizontal ribs.⁶¹ The *uṣṇīṣa* has no lotus bud. Unfortunately little else remains for analysis.

The chief characteristics of these images—their size, stone material (not easily available), and their form as a relief on a slab, or in the round—suggests that they were images for worship, placed either in *vihāra* or cellae against *stūpa* structures, and not merely scenes of the Buddha's life decorating the monuments, as is the case with Indian art.

(e) The stucco Nāga-Buddha images from the third phase of the Phra Prathon Chedi, where the original five standing Buddha images of each face of the base have been replaced by two Nāga-Buddha images,⁶² alternating with three Buddha images seated with legs pendant. The presence of the archaic feature of the *prabhāmaṇḍala*

⁵⁹ Comparison with later images from northeastern Thailand and from Cambodia, examined hereafter, suggests an earlier date.

⁶⁰ Dupont 1959, 255–257. Repr. in Vol. 2, fig. 497.

⁶¹ Feature reminiscent of the first Khmer Nāga-Buddha images (see below). Perhaps this image should be dated to the 10th century.

⁶² Dupont 1959, 74. Three of these Nāga-Buddha were effectively recovered: one in the 2nd niche of the northwest face and two others in the 2nd and 4th niches of the southwest face. Dupont suggested that the monument, being symmetrical, might have had other, similar figures in the remaining niches.

between the Buddha's head and *nāga* hood is noteworthy.⁶³ The number of coils exceeds six, presumably in order to fill the lower space of the niche, so no special meaning should be attributed to their number. The number of *nāga* heads, supposedly five or seven, could not be determined with certainty during excavation because of the ruined condition of the stucco. According to Dupont, the details of the monastic garment, although not clear on the very abraded surface of the stucco, showed a robe with right shoulder uncovered. Interestingly, this stucco decoration belongs to the final phase of this monument of Nakhon Pathom, a city that supposedly developed during the late Dvāravatī period, implying the late appearance of this new iconography. N. Revire suggests⁶⁴ suggests that this monument may have been built or refurbished after some Mahāyānic iconographic concept, since the figure of the Buddha seated with legs pendant is not part of the ancient Theravāda tradition but found mainly in a Mahāyānic context in India, China and Java.

The collection of Nāga-Buddha images from the Dvāravatī period is completed with a series of votive tablets from Na Dun⁶⁵ that M. L. Pattaratorn Chirapravati dates from the 9th to 11th centuries AD.⁶⁶ Interestingly one of the tablets shows a Nāga-Buddha in *Māravijaya mudrā*.⁶⁷

Some experts have suggested⁶⁸ that the Nāga-Buddha of Dvāravatī originated in Sri Lanka, the only place where similar Buddhas appear as images for worship from the 7th to 8th centuries. Two considerations argue against an imported prototype from Sri Lanka, however. First, while Sri Lanka seems to be the origin of Nāga-Buddha images in the round, most of them have a nine-headed *nāga* hood that never appears in Dvāravatī sculpture. Second, Dvāravatī Nāga-Buddha *bai sema*, as well as the stucco from U-Thong, bear archaic features such as the five-headed *nāga* hood and *vitarkamudrā* (possibly derived from the *abhayamudrā* of the earlier Nāga-Buddha) that do not appear with Sri Lankan Nāga-Buddha images, *pariyāṅkāsaṇa* with legs crossed at the ankles, haloes, and other features also observed in some of the later Dvāravatī stone images.

Such features bespeak an Indian origin or direct influence from Āndhra Pradesh, as P. Pal has suggested.⁶⁹ While no Nāga-Buddha as images for worship

⁶³ Dupont (1959, 75, 258) insists twice on the presence of a halo that he could observe during the excavation.

⁶⁴ Revire 2008. See also article in the present issue of *JSS* (No. 98, 2010).

⁶⁵ Illustrations of 6 of these tablets in Veraprasert 1995, 228–230, figs. 8, 9, 11.

⁶⁶ According to Chirapravati (1997, 25–26), the votive tablets found at this site could be assigned to three periods; the Nāga-Buddha tablets belong to the second, on the grounds that they show “treatment of Khmer themes in a Dvāravatī style”.

⁶⁷ Veraprasert 1995, 222–235. A few rare Nāga-Buddhas in *māravijayamudrā* are evident in the Buddha of Grahi and in later images from Burma.

⁶⁸ Dupont 1959, 258–259; Woodward 2007, 72; Sharrock 2006, 124.

⁶⁹ Pal 2007, 57.

have yet been found in southern India, the stone statues of Dvāravatī show the possibility of stylistic borrowing from votive tablets,⁷⁰ suggested by the presence of the two *stūpakumbha* flanking the Buddha as well as the very shape of those sculptures. The invention of the concept of a Nāga-Buddha as an independent object of worship, at least in this case, could be attributed to local Dvāravatī ingenuity and not to a Sri Lankan prototype. Nevertheless, the full *paryaṅkāśana* and the bared right shoulder, while typical of Amāravatī style but admixed with the post-Gupta feature of a smooth fabric surface that appears in the late Anurādhapura period, hint of a Sri Lanka origin.

The Dvāravatī Nāga-Buddha, presenting such a mixture of archaic features from southern India and more evolved features observable in Sri Lankan art, may thus be thought to have received different influences from the two regions at different periods. The importation of an early Sri Lankan prototype, before the generalization of the nine hoods, could account for the absence of such a feature in Dvāravatī art. Finally, a votive tablet found in Krabi⁷¹ with a Nāga-Buddha in *vitarkamudrā* could be evidence of transmission of an iconographical concept as well, or a new textual tradition, through the peninsular region.

In conclusion, the stylistic evolution of the series of Dvāravatī Nāga-Buddha images is in itself noteworthy, as apart from the innovative ingenuity of Dvāravatī craftsmen that is revealed in the introduction of the *stūpa* bearers and the simian character of *nāga* heads.

The Nāga-Buddha in Khmer art

After a long absence in the Khmer kingdom, Buddha images reappeared in the second half of the 10th century.⁷² Interestingly, almost all of them represent the Nāga-Buddha, which become the main representation of the Buddha during the Angkor period. They belong to Mahāyāna Buddhism, and since the last 20 years, researchers such as C. Prapandvipa, H. Woodward, W. Lobo and P. Sharrock⁷³ have shown that it is of Vajrayānic denomination.

⁷⁰ See note 58 of the present article.

⁷¹ Dated to the 4th–6th centuries by Diskul, who suggests a South Indian origin (1990, 5), and to the 7th century by Chirapavati (1999, 81).

⁷² Inscription of Vat Sithor (K. 111, 980 AD), st. XXVII: “Nairātmyacittmātrādidarśanārkkas tiraskṛtaḥ mithyādṛṣṭiniśā yasmin bhūvo dina ivāvabhan” [by him (the minister Kīrtipaṇḍita) the sunlight of the doctrines of *nairātmyā*, citta and other (Buddhist) doctrines which had been eclipsed by the night of false teachings, were shining once more as daylight]; tr. from Cœdès (1954, 205) by the present author.

⁷³ Prapandvipa 1990; Woodward 1981, 2004 and 2007; Lobo 1997c; Sharrock 2006.

Dupont,⁷⁴ 60 years ago in his investigation of the Nāga-Buddha in Khmer art, distinguished several groups of Khmer Nāga-Buddha images: the first (“*catégorie I*”) that includes the most archaic images (from the second half of the 10th to the beginning of the 11th century), the second (“*catégorie II*”) that regroups the bejeweled images of the Angkor Wat style (first half of the 12th century), and the third (“*catégorie III*”) that includes the Buddha images without jewels or regalia of the Baphuon style (second half of 11th century AD). Dupont alternatively named these two last groups, respectively, “Khmer images” and “Indian images”, since the images of group II—of the bare-chested Buddha with royal ornaments—would be a Khmer reinvention of the Buddha image based on the imitation of Brahmanical statues, while the images of group III—showing a monkish, unadorned Buddha—would have come from a copy of a misunderstood Indian model, with a few incongruous details such as incoherent representation of the monastic upper garment as well as a beard and moustache, betraying a Brahmanical influence. The artists may have been unused to Buddhist iconographic rules after a century and a half of disruption in Buddhist statuary production. Dupont also included the Bāyon style images in his last category, from which they stylistically derive. Mutual influences and borrowings can be observed in groups II and III, which also seem to overlap chronologically, suggesting that the two types were contemporaneous.

Nāga-Buddha “missing links” from northeastern Thailand

A few images of the Nāga-Buddha from northeastern Thailand have recently come into private collections that seem to qualify as examples of Dupont’s “missing link” between the Dvāravatī Nāga-Buddha and the Khmer Nāga-Buddha of *catégorie I*.

A small stone Nāga-Buddha at the Norton Simon Museum⁷⁵ shows a Buddha meditating in *vajrāsana* under three *nāga* hoods in frontal view. The base on which the Buddha is seated may be a single *nāga* coil. Although in poor condition, the sculpture shows a protuberance above the central *nāga* head and a lotus bud finial on top of the conical *uṣṇīṣa* that appear on later Dvāravatī Nāga-Buddha images. A *prabhāmaṇḍala* is visible between the Buddha’s head and the *nāga* hood. What remains of the robe indicates that it may have covered both shoulders.⁷⁶ The position

⁷⁴ Dupont 1950, 39–66. His *L’archéologie mène de Dvāravatī* includes a comprehensive stylistic study of the Nāga-Buddha (1959, 251–266) that examines the link between the Dvāravatī and Khmer images, which he had neglected in his previous study. Notwithstanding, he remains inconclusive about a possible Mon or Sri Lanka origin of the Khmer Nāga-Buddha.

⁷⁵ In the Norton Simon Museum. Ill. in Pal 2007, 54, figs. 2, 3, 16.

⁷⁶ According to Sen’s observation (2007, 65).

of the *nāga* necks, forming a back support visible on both sides of the Buddha, and the stepped heads are reminiscent of a Nāga-Buddha statue from the central pit of Angkor Wat that Dupont classified in group I.⁷⁷ P. Pal has tentatively dated it to the late 9th century.⁷⁸ Besides the unusual feature of three hoods, the *vajrāsana* and the robe draped over both shoulders (if confirmable) betoken a northern Indian influence since they have rarely if ever been seen in Dvāravatī and Khmer images.

A bronze Nāga-Buddha image, probably also from northeastern Thailand and today in the Walters Art Museum of Baltimore,⁷⁹ shows a Buddha meditating in a loose lotus position under a seven-hooded *nāga*. The scales on the rectangular base appear to constitute a single *nāga* coil. The necks of the *nāga* are distinctly separate. The treatment of its smiling heads seen in frontal view is very close to that of the Dvāravatī Nāga-Buddha; the difference here is a crest of foliate design that surrounds each hood. A disk at the juncture of the *nāga* heads is visible behind the Buddha's head but does not encircle the head as a *prabhāmaṇḍala*. The conical *uṣṇīṣa*, with a jewel or lotus finial, is very similar to that of the image in the Norton Simon Museum. An anomalous moustache reminiscent of the Baphuon Nāga-Buddha adorns the Buddha's face, and the *uttarasāṅga* visible on the chest leaves the right shoulder bare. It has been dated to the 10th century by H. Woodward.⁸⁰

A visual link between the sculptures described here and the Nāga-Buddha of the Baphuon period is a bronze piece from the private collection of Aziz Bassoul.⁸¹ A bare-chested Buddha is meditating in *paryāṅkāsa* on three coils of *nāga*, with seven separated necks and hoods crowned by a foliate wreath or crest that are very similar to those in the previous piece. However, here the heads of the *nāga*, three to each side of the central head, are turned slightly upward and the hood is markedly triangular in shape that is to become the norm in later Angkorian Nāga-Buddha images. No halo or disk is apparent. This piece is dated to the Baphuon period, as it shares its stylistic characteristics; but the presence of the foliate crests surrounding the *nāga* hoods indicates an earlier date and inclusion in the same group. The foliate crest seems to betoken the final stage in the evolution of circle or disk motif above *nāga* heads in some Nāga-Buddha images from Sri Lanka and Dvāravatī. The device became transformed into a protuberance in later Dvāravatī sculpture. It may also be interpreted as an influence of contemporaneous Khmer art.

In these last two images, a marked fold or line at the waist denotes the *antaravāsaka*, a feature that later became a standard element in Khmer images. It

⁷⁷ Dupont 1950, figs. 2–3.

⁷⁸ Pal 2007, 57.

⁷⁹ Ill. in Woodward 1997, 53, pl. 45.

⁸⁰ Woodward 1997, 72.

⁸¹ Bassoul 2006, 233 fig. 88.

is supposed to have been derived from stucco Dvāravatī Buddha images,⁸² although the Dvāravatī Nāga-Buddha seldom exhibits such a feature (excepting the Muang Fai image). These last two iconographically resemble other images that Dupont included in his *catégorie I*.

The Angkor Nāga-Buddha

To Dupont's *catégorie I* belong several early representations of Nāga-Buddha carved in bas-relief on the so-called *caitya* shrines or Buddhist monuments,⁸³ square boundary stones or steles found in Banteay Meanchey province, Cambodia and Thailand.⁸⁴ The stele faces represent alternative arrangements of the Khmer Mahāyānic Triad deities (Buddha, Lokeśvara, and Prajñāpāramitā [Tārā?], or Vajrapāṇi) depicted in their different forms. Two of the *caitya* have a Nāga-Buddha on one face. One *caitya*, the Thma Puok *caitya*, bears an inscription, K. 225,⁸⁵ with a date of 989 AD that consequently dates the whole group and whose contents confirm the Mahāyānic (and even tantric) character of the compositions. The *caitya* from Kbak Yeay Yin (Phnom Srok, in Banteay Meanchey), today displayed in Musée Guimet in Paris,⁸⁶ shows on one of its faces a Buddha in *dhyānamudrā* seated on two thick coils of a seven-hooded *nāga*. The *nāga* has long, slightly overlapping, smooth necks. The hoods are arranged in a triangular fashion, as in the two bronze statuettes described above. The hoods in frontal view are crowned by the kind of foliate motif or crest observed in the previously studied pieces. The Buddha headdress with its conical *uṣṇīṣa* and lotus bud finial is also very similar, but here a small strip marks the hairline as in the later Baphuon pieces.⁸⁷

One other stele or *caitya* has been discovered in Thailand, of unknown provenance, and is on display at the National Museum, Bangkok⁸⁸ (figure 7). Flat and rectangular, it bears a Nāga-Buddha on its main face, seated on three thick,

⁸² Dupont 1959, 262, 264–265.

⁸³ The so-called *caitya* shrines belong to a group of 6 from Thma Puok and Phnom Srok that were first examined in 1921 by L. Finot (1925, 251–254), who coined the term “*caitya*” in the process. Lobo (1997a, 142) has interpreted these objects as *stūpa* with their 3 distinctive parts—the square base, the 4-faced body and the upper dome or uppermost 8 faces that end in a lotus—as representing, respectively, the phenomenal world, the means to attain *nirvāṇa* and the *dharmadhātu*. The 16 petals of the lotus motif on the upper part would represent the 16 vacuities of Vajrayāna Buddhism.

⁸⁴ Two of them are displayed at the National Museum of Bangkok. They are of unknown provenance but most probably come from Prachinburi province.

⁸⁵ Cœdès 1951, 66–69.

⁸⁶ MG 17487. Ill. in Baptiste and Zéphir 2008, 185 (catalogue 52).

⁸⁷ Boisselier (1955, 45) has dated this piece to the Kleang style on the basis of the stylistic details of the monk garment.

⁸⁸ In the South wing; LB 12-2475.

scaly coils and protected by seven *nāga* hoods with smooth, separated necks that show the foliate crest, very similar to the Guimet piece. The Buddha has the same conical *uṣṇīṣa* with a lotus bud finial, but no strip along the hairline. According to H. Woodward, it should date to the middle of the 10th century.⁸⁹ The three coils of the *nāga* would also indicate a slightly later date than the previous *caitya*.

Another important sculpture is the Kuk Trong stone Nāga-Buddha found at Angkor Thom and classified in *catégorie I*.⁹⁰ It has a five-headed *nāga* hood also with foliate crests and only one coil, archaic features which suggest that it belongs among the same group. The presence of small disks (*cakra*) or stylized lotus motifs on the *nāga* necks is a significant innovation that becomes a distinguishing characteristic in later Khmer Nāga-Buddha.

From the 11th century, three coils and seven hoods become the norm for the Khmer Nāga-Buddha, while the foliate crests crowning the *nāga* hoods disappear. An intermediate stage could be Dupont's figure 5, whose *nāga* has only one coil and seven hoods but no crest and still arranged in a stepped fashion. The *nāga* hoods with their overlapping necks come to form a single unit that increasingly takes the shape of a tapered *bodhi* tree leaf in which the lateral heads turn upward to the central one. *Cakra* motifs on *nāga* necks have become a constant.

The Nāga-Buddha of the Baphuon period (Dupont's *catégorie III*) depicts an unadorned Buddha seated on three *nāga* coils of equal size. They exhibit two alternative types of headdresses: either bulging with small curls and a slightly swollen *uṣṇīṣa*, or plaited hair with a conical chignon-cover borrowed from Brahmanical sculptural vocabulary. The appearance of moustache and beard, as well as anomalies in the rendition of the robe (no diagonal line depicting the *uttarasaṅga*, but adherence of the left arm to the body that implies a robe with the right shoulder uncovered) suggest the imitation of an imported model misinterpreted by craftsmen used to working principally with Hindu statuary. During the Mahādhara-pura dynasty (Sūryavarman II, Angkor Vat period, first half of the 12th century), a new image appears, the Angkor Wat Nāga-Buddha (*catégorie II*), a crowned, bare-chested Buddha. This new type exhibits two important innovations: the images are heavily adorned with bejeweled regalia consisting of at least a crown, a diadem and earrings, and sometimes even with full regalia; the Buddha is also seated on three *nāga* coils of ascending width in the shape of an inverted pyramid. The knees tend to be larger than the superior *nāga* coil, accentuating the inverted pyramidal shape, which is perhaps an evocation of Mount Meru to emphasize the cosmic character of the

⁸⁹ Woodward (2007, 77–78) has analyzed the iconographical content of the two *caitya* as illustrations of the Garbhadhātu Maṇḍala of the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra*.

⁹⁰ Dupont 1950, 45, fig. 4.

Buddha.⁹¹ The *nāga* heads are turned inward and upward in a hood that resembles an elongated *bodhi* tree leaf.

The Bāyon Nāga-Buddha

During the reign of Jayavarman VII (1181–1220 AD, Bāyon period), who converted the state religion from Śivaism to Vajrayāna Buddhism, the Nāga-Buddha became the supreme deity. A gigantic Nāga-Buddha was placed in the central cella of the Bāyon state temple, the sacred center of the empire, identifying it with the king himself. Stylistically the Bāyon Nāga-Buddha appears to have derived from the Baphuon prototype, its greater precision in depicting robe and hair could indicate an improved iconographic knowledge from new images or texts by craftsmen who otherwise would follow the general stylistic features of the previous period. The three Bāyon *nāga* coils were of equal size, just as those of the Baphuon style were, but the *nāga* hood has become rounder and lower, resembling a tree leaf with a shriveled edge. Differences in the *uṣṇīṣa* characterize several subtypes that evolved during Jayavarman VII's reign and his successor's, as hundreds of images were produced.

While most of the larger stone Nāga-Buddha images are without jewels or regalia,⁹² or display only earrings and a conical tiered chignon-cover, the smaller bronze images (either individual or components of triads or more complex arrangements) are always crowned and diademed, in some instances fully bejeweled like the Angkor Wat images. Most metal images of the Bāyon Nāga-Buddha bear a small object on the right palm, with their hands placed on their lap in the gesture of meditation, sometimes with the right middle finger upraised (figure 8).⁹³ Such objects, which never appear in stone images whose hands are only adorned with the lotus-*cakra* symbol, take different forms and have been variously identified as boxes, water flasks, relic-caskets or lotus buds, among other objects.⁹⁴ They might even be understood as the medicine box or myrobalan fruit, an attribute of Bhaiṣajyaguru,⁹⁵

⁹¹ Pal 2007, 62.

⁹² Some of the bigger sculptures are presumed to have been decorated with removable jewelry, where incised holes or grooves are evident along the hairline (Boisselier 1966, 275, para. 192; Zéphir in Baptiste and Zéphir 2008, 273, 276).

⁹³ *Mudrā* specific to the Buddha of Healing Bhaiṣajyaguru in certain traditions (Birnbaum 1980, 82–83).

⁹⁴ Boisselier (1966, 301) tentatively suggests Amitābha for the Nāga-Buddha holding an object on their lap. Indeed, Amitābha in China and Tibet ordinarily holds a bowl full with *amṛta* (water of immortality). The normal *mudrā* of Amitābha is the meditation gesture, common to the Nāga-Buddha.

⁹⁵ Sharrock (2006, 72) follows this interpretation.

the Buddha of Healing who was the central deity of the hospital chapels built by Jayavarman VII throughout his empire. This interpretation has been rejected⁹⁶ on various grounds. In any case, the Buddha of Healing has no connection with the *nāga* in any of the known texts or iconographical traditions.

Two iconographically distinct types of Bāyon Nāga-Buddha images thus exist: (a) unadorned images and (b) smaller images with regalia and an object on their lap—or even (c) a third type having the further distinction of partial regalia (the crowned figures) and full regalia (fully bejeweled and crowned figures). The distinctions suggest that the Bāyon Nāga-Buddha might have a double or versatile identity.⁹⁷

The identity of the deity represented by the Khmer Nāga-Buddha, which becomes the supreme Buddha of Jayavarman VII's state religion, remains unclear, despite the abundant literature that Jayavarman's brand of Buddhism inspired. The Mucalinda episode, never quoted in the inscriptions, should be rejected as the main meaning. The various identifications⁹⁸ suggested for this figure, as well as a range

⁹⁶ Boisselier (1966, 301) tentatively identified as Bhaiṣajyaguru the so-called Vajradhara images that hold a kind of flask or box in their hands at chest level and are found in a few hospital chapels of Thailand (Ku Khanthanam [Roi-et], Prang Ku [Nakhon Rachasima] and Ban Samo [Sisaket]). Phiromanukul (2004, 42–43) upholds this identification on the grounds that no images of the Nāga Buddha have been found so far in the hospital chapels. Furthermore, Phiromanukul identifies Bhaiṣajyaguru's two acolytes in the four-armed figures previously identified as Lokeśvara, on the grounds that they have no image of Amitābha on their head and hold a small object. Phiromanukul also remarks that the triads with the central Nāga-Buddha holding an object could not represent the Bhaiṣajyaguru triads because Bhaiṣajyaguru does not have a female acolyte. More recently, in an intervention at the 2nd Banteay Chhmar Conference in Sisophon, Woodward offered a novel interpretation of a bronze image that was recently for sale in New York and that shows a central crowned figure holding a *vajraghanta* in front of its chest, flanked by two identical figures each holding an object in front of its chest, similar to those that Phiromanukul had identified as Bhaiṣajyaguru. Woodward identified this triad as Bhaiṣajyaguru flanked by his acolytes (Sūryavairocana and Candravairocana), instead of the expected Vajradhara flanked by two Bhaiṣajyaguru. Woodward's assessment relies mainly on a single piece of unknown provenance, whose authenticity may be not certain (Woodward 2009).

⁹⁷ And perhaps not always Buddhist. See Cœdès 1989a, 348 and Maxwell 2007, 109.

⁹⁸ One identification, proposed by Diskul and other Thai scholars, is that the Bāyon Nāga-Buddha is the Ādi-Buddha, the transcendental Buddha of the Mahāyāna. This proposal rests mainly on a single text by Cœdès, *Phraphim nai Prathet Thai (Tablettes votives du Siam)*, incidentally the only extant text that he wrote in Thai, that the present author consulted in photocopied form in the library of Silpakorn University, Bangkok. This ephemeral publication is the text of a conference and bears no date; the library catalogue gives 1925 as the year of publication. Most of its substance was taken from "Bronzes Khmers" that he published in 1923. Mus (1928, 156–159) rejected such an identification on the grounds that the Nāga-Buddha triad appears much earlier than the Ādi-Buddha concept. In later texts, Cœdès never repeats the Ādi-Buddha identification, but identifies the Bāyon Nāga-Buddha as the *Buddharāja* (1989b, 319). The same Thai scholars propose no alternative to the Ādi-Buddha for the deity.

The Ādi-Buddha is without form, rather being manifested in the form of other deities such as Samantabhadra, Vajradhara or Vajrasattva, among others, in the various Tantra traditions that adopted

of additional meanings for the *nāga*,⁹⁹ do not correspond to any known iconography in other Vajrayāna Buddhist traditions. The Vajrayāna Buddhism of Jayavarman VII, on the other hand, bespeaks a very good knowledge of the texts, judging by the content of the inscriptions and the iconographical accuracy of the other deities of the Vajrayāna pantheon. The Nāga-Buddha has also been considered a Khmer invention, related to the local legend of the Nāgī and to a hypothetical local *nāga* worship.¹⁰⁰ Notwithstanding, images of Buddha seated on *nāga* existed earlier in India, where they originated, as well as in Sri Lanka and Dvāravatī. This iconography could well have appealed to the ancient Khmers because of its resonance with indigenous beliefs, which may have been the main motivation for its adoption.

The bigger Nāga-Buddha images of the Bāyon and other temples are generally considered to be the apotheosis or *vraḥ rūpa* of the king, whose features would be depicted on the Nāga-Buddha's face, thus identifying the king as a *Buddharāja*.¹⁰¹ The supposed resemblance to the king, known by his portrait-statues, is nonetheless problematic.¹⁰²

Most of the smaller images of the Bāyon Nāga-Buddha appear as the central element of the Khmer Mahāyānic Triad where it is flanked by a four-armed Lokeśvara and Prajñāpāramitā. The representation of some images of the Mahāyānic Triad in different arrangements or combinations of figures suggests that they were

the Ādi-Buddha concept. Vajrasattva and Vajradhara have a well-known and specific iconography in Bāyon art (perhaps not so well known, according to Woodward [2009; see note 96 of the present article]). The term Ādi-Buddha has never been confirmed in inscriptions; some scholars have recognized it on the Sab Bāk inscription (l. 23; Prapandvipa 1990), but that interpretation has been rejected by Sharrock (2006). Sharrock has also proposed (2006, 33–34, 55, 73–74) the identification of the Bāyon Nāga-Buddha with Vairocana or Mahāvairocana, the central deity of the two main *maṇḍala* of the *yoga-tantra* on the grounds that the repartition of both Hindu and Buddhist deities in the Bāyon temple is reminiscent of these *maṇḍala*. However, the *nāga* and the *dhyānamudrā* are not depicted with the classic iconography for Vairocana in this tradition, although the dragon (= *nāga*) sometimes substitutes for the normal vehicle of Mahāvairocana, the lion, and Mahāvairocana sometimes presents the *dhyānamudrā* in certain *maṇḍala* (Sharrock 2006, 34, note 67). Woodward has suggested that the *caitya* or stele of the National Museum, Bangkok (LB12-2475) represents the structure found in the *Mahāvairocanasūtra* and the *Garbhadhātu Maṇḍala* (2007, 78).

⁹⁹ Such as symbolizing the rainbow uniting the world of men with the world of Gods or Buddhas (Mus, for example), symbolism that is also part of the Nāga-Buddha iconography. See also Lobo 1997b.

¹⁰⁰ Groslier 1973, 298.

¹⁰¹ Cœdès 1937, 274, 276

¹⁰² Dagens (2000) and Sharrock (2007, 244) suggest that the features of the Bāyon period are very stereotyped and it would be hazardous to see the king's features in the Nāga-Buddhas. Suksavasti (2530, 69 and 2531, 112) suggests that the king's features are represented not only on the portrait statues, but also on the Bāyon and other state temples' Nāga-Buddhas as well as in two Buddha statues found in Phimai and Say Fong. The Nāga-Buddha, according to this interpretation, would be the king divinized during his lifetime as a Buddha-Rāja, and the last two Buddhas (without *nāga*) would represent the king divinized after his death.

seen as the apotheoses or posthumous images (*vrah rūpa*) of those who dedicated them, accompanied by their parents or *guru*,¹⁰³ as confirmed by the so-called small inscriptions on the door jambs of the private chapels (*cellae* or *kuṭi*) of the great temples where those images were. Indigenous ancestor worship thus seems to have become incorporated into Mahāyāna Buddhism. The Mahāyānic Triad also appears to have become associated with such tantric deities as Hevajra, Saṃvara and others not always easily identifiable in the complex arrangements on moulds and seals (votive tablets; see figure 9¹⁰⁴) that exemplify Khmer ingenuity. Symbolically, the Nāga-Buddha is always at the top of such arrangements, signifying his supremacy in this tantric system.

A Dvāravatī link?

Most of the Dvāravatī Nāga-Buddha images have been found in the eastern and northeastern regions of Thailand where a Khmer presence and influence once prevailed. At Si Mahosot a Nāga-Buddha has been found at the site of a Buddhist monument outside the city walls; this site was a Khmer Viṣṇuite city with Buddhist *stūpa* and *vihāra* only outside the city walls. That would signify the presence of Mon communities in the suburbs of the city and thus explain the Dvāravatī Buddhist and artistic influences there.

The group of later Nāga-Buddha images found in northeastern Thailand indicates continuity of the presence of the Nāga-Buddha in this region since the Dvāravatī period. They exhibit some features in common with the first Angkorian Nāga-Buddha images of the second half of the 10th century (*catégorie I*). Buddha images in both groups are protected by three-, five- or seven-hooded *nāga* with long, smooth, separate necks. Each *nāga* head is surrounded by a foliate design forming a crest, a typical characteristic of both groups. Other more archaic characteristics — such as the five-hooded *nāga* of some of the earlier Khmer images (also observed on the Dvāravatī *bai sema* of the northeast), the inconsistent number of *nāga* coils, and the half-lotus position with legs crossed at the ankles instead of the full *payāṅkāsa* that became standard in later Khmer sculpture — suggest either a Dvāravatī origin for the northeastern Thai and Khmer images, or a common lost model.

The first Khmer Nāga-Buddha of the Angkorian period (10th century) are represented on *caitya* steles that were discovered in the Phnom Srok area, not far from the road between Angkor and Phimai through the Khorat Plateau. This road seems to have been important “trading corridor”¹⁰⁵ between Cambodia and the Chao

¹⁰³ Cœdès 1989a, 346–348.

¹⁰⁴ One of these objects, the mould LB 204 of the National Museum, Bangkok, has been analyzed by Boeles (1966).

¹⁰⁵ The expression is Sharrock’s (2006, 125).

Phraya basin and beyond to South and Southeast Asia. The so-called “Prakhon Chai”¹⁰⁶ Mahāyānic bronzes of Śrī Vijaya influence that date from the 7th to the 10th century were discovered at sites along this road, demonstrating that the corridor was also a road for artistic and religious exchange. Such iconographical exchanges have been suggested by Woodward,¹⁰⁷ who mentions a group of “Bengali-style bronzes”¹⁰⁸ found in Thailand that are contemporary with the Dvāravatī period. The Dvāravatī Nāga-Buddha of Ban Fai and a Khmer Nāga-Buddha of Baphuon style¹⁰⁹ have also been found at two of those sites¹¹⁰ along with Prakhon Chai bronze images of Bodhisattvas, testimony that the area had received Mahāyāna ideas and art forms from Śrī Vijaya as well as Dvāravatī and Khmer influences. The land route through the Khorat Plateau was the main line of communication for the Angkor Kingdom, since access to the sea route from the Mekong delta was barred by Campā until its conquest by Jayavarman VII; hence, imports of images from the old Dvāravatī cultural area, as well as access to Mahāyāna doctrine and new texts from farther south and west, were possible. A few standing Buddha images of Dvāravatī style found in Cambodia, such as the Buddha from Tuol Preah Theat (Kompong Speu province),¹¹¹ dated to the 7th to 8th century and which interestingly is inscribed with a *Ye dhamma* in Pāli language, and others¹¹² show that exchanges took place very early on between the Dvāravatī culture area and lower Cambodia.

The Angkor–Khorat road leads past the city of Phimai, the ancient city of Vimayapura centered around its Mahāyāna Buddhist temple founded during the reign of Jayavarman VI (1080–1107 AD). The Nāga-Buddha discovered in the main sanctuary is dated to the later Bāyon period, while the lintel above the entrance of the cella represents a Nāga-Buddha, thus suggesting that the image of the Lord of Vimāyapura may originally have been a Nāga-Buddha as well. Phimai was an important regional center of Vajrayāna or Tantric Buddhism,¹¹³ as can be observed

¹⁰⁶ In fact found at Khao Plai Bat, *tambon* [sub-district] Yai Yaem, *amphoe* [district] Lahan Sai, and at Ban Fai, *amphoe* Lam Plai Mat, *changwat* [province] Buriram (Bunker 2002, 108, 110).

¹⁰⁷ Woodward 1997, 72 and 2003, 93. For example, the Pāla-style Vairocana bronze displayed at the National Museum, Bangkok, found in the northeast.

¹⁰⁸ Woodward 2003, 92.

¹⁰⁹ Today in the National Museum, Bangkok (LB 83). Bunker 2002, 110; Diskul 1971, 33.

¹¹⁰ Bunker 2002, 110.

¹¹¹ In Musée Guimet (MG1891). Ill. in Baptiste and Zéphir 2008, No. 3.

¹¹² Such a Buddha can be found at the Museum of Berlin; and a later image of Baphuon period (11th century) at the National Museum of Cambodia, Phnom Penh (No. 2885). Ill. in Bunker and Latchford 2004 (pls. 21, 81).

¹¹³ A late Tibetan source suggests that when the great monasteries of northern India were destroyed by the Muslim invasions at the end of the 12th century, monks took refuge in Cambodia. Phimai, one of the most important regional centers of Tantric Buddhism in Southeast Asia at that time, could have been among their destinations (Chattopadhyaya 1970, 330).

by the various tantric deities and figures (such as Saṃvara, *yoginī*, and *vajraghanta* bearers, among others) in the decoration of the main sanctuary. At the center of Angkorean power from the end of the 11th century was the Mahādhara-pura¹¹⁴ dynasty, which may have made Phimai its capital at one time. Whatever the geographical origin of the dynasty, northeastern Thailand and Phimai certainly grew in importance during the reigns of its kings Jayavarman VI, Sūryavarman II and Jayavarman VII; during this same period the Nāga-Buddha became prevalent at Angkor.

Conclusions

The continuous presence of Nāga-Buddha images in the east and northeast regions of Thailand from the 7th to the 13th century, beginning with the Dvāravatī period, and their stylistic evolution up until the first Khmer images in the 10th century, suggest that the origins of the Angkorian Nāga-Buddha lie in Dvāravatī art.

The dearth of images of the Dvāravatī Nāga-Buddha—and their discovery within a zone that had received Mahāyāna influences via the Malay Peninsula, as evidenced by the Prakhon Chai bronzes—suggests limited worship of possible Mahāyānic affiliation outside the mainstream of Dvāravatī Theravāda Buddhism. Whatever the case, the absence of inscriptional evidence precludes confirmation of the doctrinal affiliation of the Dvāravatī Nāga-Buddha or clear explanation of its significance.

The later reappearance of the Nāga-Buddha as the central deity of a Vajrayāna temple in the provincial city of Phimai, capital of a vassal kingdom of Angkor, suggests the adoption of the Nāga-Buddha as the palladium of a local dynasty that later converted to Vajrayāna. It may have been a Buddha image worshipped locally since ancient times as a protective deity.

Only when Phimai became a center of Tantric Buddhism during the reign of the Mahādhara-pura dynasty did Nāga-Buddha images become ubiquitous in Angkor. During the reign of Jayavarman VII, the Nāga-Buddha is reappropriated as the central deity of the empire, reinterpreted as the supreme Buddha and integrated within a reorganized religious system that mixed Tantric Buddhism with an indigenous ancestral cult.

¹¹⁴ First suggested by Boisselier and Groslier; lately rejected by Jacques (2007, 30) who suggests Kompong Svay was the capital of this dynasty. Woodward (2003, 128) has suggested seeking the origin of this dynasty in the region of Ko-Ker. In addition, an inscription was found near Khorat that refers to “Mahādhara-pura” in apparent confirmation of the Phimai link (Mayurie Veraprasert, personal communication).

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Figure 1. Nāga-Buddha from Tirukkavi. Anurādhapura period. Maṅgalarāja cetiya, Sēruvila (Sri Lanka). Author's photograph.



Figure 2. Nāga-Buddha. Mangalaraja Cetiya, Sēruvila (Sri Lanka). Anurādhapura period. Author's photograph.



Figure 3. Nāga-Buddha scene on a *bai sema* from from Muang Fa Daed. Dvāravatī period. Mahawitawong Museum, Khong Kaen (Thailand). Photograph by Stephen A. Murphy.



Figure 4. Nāga-Buddha from Si Mahosot (Thailand). Dvāravatī period.
National Museum, Bangkok. Author's photograph.



Figure 5. Nāga-Buddha from Ayuthaya (Thailand). Dvāravatī period.
National Museum, Bangkok. Author's photograph.



Figure 6. Nāga-Buddha from Lopburi (Thailand). Dvāravatī period. National Museum, Bangkok. Author's photograph.



Figure 7. Nāga-Buddha on *caitya*. Found in Aranyaprathet province (Thailand). 10th century. National Museum, Bangkok. Author's photograph.

Figure 8. Detail of a Khmer bronze Nāga-Buddha found in Thailand, showing the Buddha with an object in his hands. 12th century. National Museum, Bangkok. Author's photograph.



Figure 9. Bronze mould for tablet from Sukhothai province (Thailand). Bāyon period. National Museum, Bangkok. Author's photograph.

