

NOTE ON ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY AND EXCAVATIONS
IN NORTH-EASTERN THAILAND IN 1959

by

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Aerial photographs show evidence of the existence in North-Eastern Thailand of more than 200 sites of deserted towns and sanctuaries; many of these have not yet been surveyed. Important progress was made when the Fine Arts Department in 1959 sent out in the field an expedition group to survey, and excavate a number of ancient monuments in that area, mainly belonging to the culture of the Khmer.

The results of this work are now available in an official publication in Thai and in English:

Plan and Report of THE SURVEY AND EXCAVATIONS OF
ANCIENT MONUMENTS in North-Eastern Thailand. 1959.

The Fine Arts Department, Bangkok, 1960; 79 p. English.
Baht 30.-

This splendid work contains a short description of 34 monuments surveyed in the changvats (provinces) Nakhon Ratcha Sima, Buriram and Chaiyaphoom in North-Eastern Thailand. Pictorial evidence is presented in 78 very clear illustrations and 24 plans as well as in one large area map. The aim of the survey and the scope of the work has been clearly defined and operations were carried out accordingly in the dry season of 1959. It is evident from the report that the most important work has been done in the excavations at Prasat Hin Non Ku, and Prasat Hin Muang Khaek, Tambol Korat, Amphoe Soong Noen, Changvat Nakhon Ratcha Sima. The sites of these two small Khmer sanctuaries are easily accessible from the Friendship Highway between Saraburi and Korat (Nakhon Ratcha Sima), a distance of 228 km. from Bangkok. The Research Center of the Siam Society has made the trip several times in the dry season, easily within one day. The report states that it is not unlikely that

in this area of the Province of Nakhon Ratcha Sima, near the Dongrak range, there existed once the old Mahīdharapura, ruled by a king called Hiranyavarman. He was the ancestor of the royal dynasty that governed Cambodia from 1082 to about 1357. (p. 63).

Archaeologists will greatly welcome this new publication because almost the only literature on the area surveyed is to be found in the inventories of Aymonier and Lunet de Lajonquière, published some 50 years ago.¹ The report also records megalithic sites "Hin Tang" at Muang Sema and the old town of Chaiyaphoom. A number of new inscriptions are reported. Evidence of contact with China is represented in the find of a white glazed Chinese bowl of early Sung period (fig. 76) from Muang Khaek. During the excavations at Prasat Hin Non Ku and Muang Khaek it came to light that at least some of the doors and windows were closed by layers of coarse bricks that had no constructional purpose. It seems to us as if these bricks were put there in a hurry. The report does not mention this feature. A possible explanation, verbally suggested by Professor Feroci of the Fine Arts Department is that it seems that at one time the sanctuary was closed deliberately, may be by people of different religion. We noticed a similar development with regard to the main prasat at Tap Siem, Amphoe Aranya Prades, Changvat Prachinburi, during a field investigation. The images found during the excavations are temporarily housed in the Amphoe office at Soong Noen.

Points of iconography.

Prasat Hin Non Ku.

In front of the Eastern gate two stone torsos were found fig. 49 and 50, representing standing deities with bent knees as in a dancing position. It also signifies the *krodha* or angry aspect of the deity. Fig 49 seems to show a female deity with raised skirt on the right side as a result of a swirling dance. The breasts are broken off. The left arm hangs down; the hand is gone. The right hand is raised and displays clearly a *vitarka mudrā*

with thumb and index; the other fingers are spread. The male deity of fig. 50 assumes a similar position with both hands displaying the *vitarka mudrā*. His male character is established by the double anchor garment slip hanging between his legs. It seems that the middle of the three stone heads of fig. 59 fits the stone torsos (p. 77) rather well. Those heads show no *terodha* aspect. Nevertheless there is sufficient evidence to identify these torsos as a *dākinī* (fig. 49) and *ḍaka* (fig. 50). They are indispensable deities in tantric Buddhism as it is known even today in Tibet and Nepal. *Dākinīs* have many aspects and are amongst other slayers of enemies of Buddhism. These "terrible sisters" destroy ignorance, often personified as Hindu Gods and out of skull caps, they drink their blood. Their sacred rites are usually performed at night in cemeteries.

There is also sufficient evidence to identify the dancing "bayadères" on the reliefs above the Eastern and Northern gates of the main prasat of Phimai, as *dākinīs*, though that name is not encountered in Khmer inscriptions. The male aspect, called *ḍaka* is unusual in Thailand, but his characteristics in combination with the *dākinī* sufficiently warrants that name. There are no other statues found at Non Ku. Based on these two torsos found outside the sanctuary itself it seems that it is permissible to recognize a Buddhist tantric character in the monument. We would not venture to mention a date in view of the crude character of the sculpture.

Prasat Hin Muang Khaek.

This sanctuary is dedicated to Śiva; his *liṅga* was found outside the sanctuary. The most important sculpture is a stone relief that represents the scene of Durgā as *mahiṣāsuramardini*. (Fig. 65). This consort of Śiva, in her angry aspect called Durgā, slays the demon (*asura*), disguised as a buffalo. The story is related in the *mārkaṇḍeya purāṇa*; the ultimate

significance is the victory of good over evil.² It seems that there are presently only two statues found in Thailand representing the *durgūmahīśāsūramardīnī* episode.

This one from Muang Khaek of fig. 65, where Durgā is standing on the back of the animal and a much earlier one in a private collection in Bangkok, where Durgā is standing on the head of the mahiṣa. The latter type is well known in Pallava sculptures from Southern India.³ The type of fig. 65 has been remarkably popular in Indonesia, where more than a hundred stone statues of that type are known.⁴ One of these is in the National Museum in Bangkok. Our fig. 1 gives a close-up of the Durgā of fig. 65 from the report. It shows the deity standing with bent knees (*krodha* aspect) on the back of the subdued buffalo. Durgā has four arms. The raised upper right hand seems to hold the wheel or *cakra*; the lower right hand holds a lance that could have been a trident or *triśūla*. The attribute in the upper left hand is unclear; the lower left hand pulls the tail of the buffalo which at the same time seems to serve as vehicle or *vāhana* of Durgā.⁵ Her face is peaceful.

Prasat Hin Khok Prasat.

Amphoe Nang Rong, Changvat Buriram. Fig. 38 shows a seated crosslegged deity in stone on a crudely executed lotus cushion. The two armed deity is wearing a crown. The attention is focussed on the two hands held before the body. The right hand is holding a five pointed thunderbolt or *vajra* and the left hand holds a vajra marked *ghanṭā* or bell, placed on the body, or rather on the navel. It seems that we have no other choice than to identify this statue as Vajradhara, the supreme Buddha in one aspect of tantric Buddhism. Sometimes also called Ādi Buddha. The encounter of Vajradhara in a sanctuary in the province of Buriram shows more light on the development of the *vajrayāna*



Fig. 1. Durgā as *Mahiṣāsuramardini*: Prasat Hin Muang Khaek. Central section of lintel.

Photo by J.J. Boeles

in Thailand at the end of the 12th. century. The date engraved on a bronze found in the vicinity is A.D. 1193 (p. 71). The four armed seated stone deity of fig. 39 was found together with the Vajradhara of fig. 38. The top right hand is holding a rosary, the principal right hand displays the *vara mudrā* on the right knee. The top left hand is most likely holding a conch shell, the principal left hand rests on the left knee and is holding an attribute resembling a stalk of a flower or lotus. The tentative identification by the Department of Fine Arts with Avalokiteśvara, is not clarified.

This concludes a rapid review of this important publication. The leader of this team of scientists of the Fine Arts Department who made this publication a reality, is the Director General, Nai Dhanit Yupho. His enthusiasm and enormous drive has inspired those who carried out the excavations and prepared this report. They are in the first place Nai Manit Vallibhotama, Chief Curator and leader of the expedition group, Nai Chamras Kietkong, Chief of the Survey section of the Archaeological division and M.C. Subhadradis Diskul, Chief Curator of the Department of Fine Arts. We expect that this report will draw wide attention of archaeologists abroad and it is hoped that further excavations and research may produce more illustrated publications also in the English language.

The Research Center of the Siam Society has been permitted to accompany the Director General of the Fine Arts Department and his officials to the sites of excavations and survey on various occasions. Moreover, on research trips of the Center's teams, all out assistance was provided by the Fine Arts Department in order to facilitate the work in the field. For this official support the Research Center is most grateful.

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NOTES

- 1) E. Aymonier, 1900 - 1903; *Le Cambodge*. 3 vols. Paris.
 G. Coedès. *Index Alphabétique pour "Le Cambodge" de M. Aymonier*. Bulletin de la Commission Archéologique de l'Indochine. Paris, 1911. p. 85-169.
 E. Lunet de Lajonquière, 1902, 1907, 1912. *Inventaire Descriptif des Monuments du Cambodge*. 3 Vols. Paris. For Thailand see Vol. II.
 E. Seidenfaden, 1922. *Complément à l'Inventaire Descriptif*. B.E.F.E.O. XXII, 1922, no. 1.
- 2) Mārkandeya purāṇa; 83 English translation by F.E. Pargiter. Bibliotheca Indica, Calcutta, 1888 - 1899.
- 3) F.D.K. Bosch. 1956. *Remarques sur les influences réciproques de l'iconographie et de la mythologie indienne*. Arts Asiatiques, Tome III, fascicule I, 1956. p. 22 - 47.
- 4) J.J. Boeles 1942. *Het groote Durgā beeld te Leiden*. Cultureel Indie, 1942, afl. 2/3.
- 5) The Durgā of fig. 1 is the same figure as represented in the sketchy drawing fig. 101 in E. Lunet de Lajonquière *Inventaire*, Vol. II, p. 305.