

# **Tantric Buddhism in Phimai: A New Reading of its Iconographic Message**

**Pia Conti**

## **Introduction**

The beautifully carved sandstone temple at Phimai on the Khorat Plateau is the first tantric Buddhist sanctuary built on a royal scale in the ancient Khmer empire. It was built between 1080 and 1108 CE in the reign of Jayavarman VI (r. 1080-1107 CE) who founded the Mahīdharapura dynasty that took Angkor to its apogee of power in the twelfth century. Jayavarman VI was crowned in Angkor, but he did not build a state temple there. The great work of sacred architecture of his reign was Phimai with its powerful new message from the gods of tantric Buddhism. Phimai is the only major temple in the Khmer empire to be adorned with tantric Buddhist imagery before Jayavarman VII (r. 1181/2-1216 CE) made tantric Buddhism the “state religion” in Angkor at the end of the twelfth century.

This paper presents a new English translation of a key tantric Buddhist inscription found at Sap Bak, near Phimai, and argues that the tradition of tantric Buddhism had long thrived on the Khorat Plateau. Tantric beliefs cross several generations and have links to both the tantric Buddhist history of tenth century central Cambodia as well as to the birth place of Buddhism in India. A discussion of these links paves the way for a new reading of Phimai’s famous inner lintels showing that one of their key functions is to symbolise the unity of body, speech and mind, as a central idea of this tradition. It takes the *maṇḍala* of the *Guhyasamāja Tantra* and of the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra* to be primary influences on its iconography.

## **Background and New Research on Tantric Buddhism**

In 1966, Jan Boeles wrote a ground-breaking article (1966: 28) suggesting that the Hevajra cult had adherents in northeastern Thailand in the early twelfth century and that a form of Vajrayāna, originating from Phimai on the Khorat Plateau, might have spread to Angkor, the capital city of the Khmer empire. The religious orientation of the Khmer empire subsequently changed under Jayavarman VII from a Brahmanical outlook to Buddhism of a tantric kind.

Two newly published bronzes of dancing women inspired Boeles’ thesis: a fierce looking one from somewhere east of Nakhon Ratchasima, the other one, rather friendly looking, originating from Khon Kaen. Boeles connected them to a small collection of bronzes of dancing deities from the National Museum in Bangkok and identified them as *yoginīs*, probably companions of the tantric deity Hevajra. A Hevajra or Trailokyavijaya *maṇḍala*, a clay tablet displaying the world order of a tantric universe, and a lintel from the Khmer

Buddhist temple of Phimai in the province of Nakhon Ratchasima provided the core material for his suggestion (Boeles 1966: pls 1-9).

Boeles found help in his endeavour to interpret the rather mysterious Vajrayāna figures in the recently published translation of the *Hevajra Tantra* (henceforth *HT*) by David Snellgrove (1959). The book had given him “a valuable instrument” for the study of tantrism, then still in its infancy in Europe (1966: 21). Since the publication of his article and Snellgrove’s pioneering translation, more tantras relevant to Phimai have been reconstructed and translated into western languages, for example the *Guhyasamāja Tantra* (henceforth *GST*) by Francesca Fremantle (1971) and the *Cakrasamvara Tantra* (*CS*) by David Gray (2007).

Art historical and epigraphical research into Cambodian Buddhism, especially in its tantric form, has brought new findings as well. Phnom Trap, a small temple in Kompong Cham province, previously interpreted as Brahmanical (Aymonier 1900: I, 32), has now shown to be tantric Buddhist (Green 2012). Moreover, the famous inscription of Wat Sithor, recently retranslated by Tadeusz Skorupski, sheds new light on the extent tantric Buddhism was likely present in the Khmer empire in the tenth century.

Furthermore, new research on the history of tantric Buddhism and its sculptural traditions in India, the birth place of the tantric movement, has broadened our general knowledge on this branch of Buddhism. In the light of these recent discoveries, we will have to reconsider Boeles’ proposition on the movement of Vajrayāna from Khorat to Angkor in favour of a much more reciprocal relationship between the Khorat Plateau and the Angkorian heartland.

## **Traces of Tantric Buddhism on the Khorat Plateau before Phimai**

Until recently evidence for the presence of tantric Buddhism on the Khorat Plateau has been rather sparse. Besides the material from Phimai and the inscription of Sap Bak, we have two Khmer style steles with tantric images hailing from the Northeast, now located in the Bangkok National Museum [Figures 1a-b & 2]. The first stele is dated to the tenth century (Woodward 2007: 74), the second to the beginning of the twelfth century (Piriya 2012: 301), that is contemporaneous to Phimai.

The first stele shows images of a *nāga*-enthroned Buddha [Figure 1a], a dancing Vajrapāṇi, a Prajñāpāramitā, a Tārā (possibly), a four-armed Avalokiteśvara and a ten-armed Avalokiteśvara [Figure 1b] whose lower arms are in a particular gesture which seem to relate the image to an early tantric text, the *Kāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra*, in which this gesture, called *pretasantarpita*, is explicitly described (Woodward, forthcoming). There is also epigraphical evidence for the presence of the *Kāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra* in the Khmer empire (Woodward 2007: 72).

The second stele shows an assemblage of Vajrapāṇi, the *nāga*-enthroned Buddha and possibly Prajñāpāramitā [Figure 2]. Three early tantric Bengali-style bronzes found on the Khorat Plateau (Woodward 2003: 93) are further proof of the presence of tantric images. Since bronzes are easily movable objects, it is likely that itinerant monks or merchants brought them to the region or that travelling bronze casters made them for local patrons.

Besides these previously known icons, Emma Bunker and Douglas Latchford (2011: 185-218) presented a whole series of tantric bronzes from private collections which were said to have been found on the Khorat Plateau or in northwestern Cambodia. These bronzes, among them one eight- and two four-armed Avalokiteśvaras and two Padmapaṇīs, four Vajrasattvas, one Vajradhara, and a Cundā were previously unknown, hidden as they were in private collections. Their presence substantially enlarges the amount of tantric material known from the region and leads us to infer that tantric Buddhism had a much greater presence on the Plateau than previously surmised.

There is also one image of a *nāga*-enthroned Buddha exhibiting Khmer features, which was found on the Khorat Plateau. Woodward (1997: 72) assigned it a tenth century date and concluded that the little Buddha figure illustrates the “exchange of iconographic ideas between workshops of the Dvāravatī towns and the Kingdom of Cambodia.” A unique *caitya*, i.e. a Buddhistic monument or object of veneration [Figure 8], which was found at Prasat Ta Muean, a small Buddhist temple in the Dangrek range on the route between Angkor and Phimai, also bears testimony to the exchange of iconographic ideas. The *caitya*, now in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, features one Prajñāpāramitā with a *nāga*-enthroned Buddha over her head, two unidentified female deities and an Avalokiteśvara.

The *nāga*-enthroned Buddha became the most widespread image representing the Buddha in tenth century Cambodia (Dupont 1950). For the Khmers, it has been proposed by various scholars, the *nāga*-enthroned Buddha came to symbolize the transcendent nature of the Buddha (Cœdès 1923: 37; Lobo 1997; Woodward 2003: 152, 311; Sharrock 2011: 487).<sup>1</sup> George Cœdès and Wibke Lobo see the Buddha on the *nāga*-throne as representing the Ādibuddha, who was “enlightened before the beginning of time.” He is the “personification of the most fundamental principles of Buddhism.” Peter Sharrock (2011: 488) suggests that in the tenth century Buddhist context, the Khmer *nāga*-enthroned Buddha came to symbolize Vairocana, the main Buddha of the *vajradhātu maṇḍala*. It is interesting to note in this context that the *nāga*-enthroned Buddha was first portrayed in ancient Cambodia in company of the tantric deity Vajrin [Figure 6b]. The presence of the *nāga*-enthroned Buddha in ancient Khmer territories could thus be interpreted as an indicator of the presence of tantric thought.

## **Traces of Tantric Buddhism in the Angkorian Heartland Before Phimai**

In tenth century Cambodia we find other early expressions of Buddhist tantrism. The presence of the deities Vajrin (“possessor of the vajra”) or Vajrapāṇi (“vajra in hand”) and of Trailokyavijaya (“conqueror of the three worlds”) in the Khmer heartland and their reappearance in Phimai one hundred and thirty years later, suggests that Angkor’s strand of tantric Buddhism may have travelled to the Khorat Plateau and influenced the choice of icons presented in Phimai.

One of the first manifestations of Vajrayāna in Angkor can be found in the inscription K. 266 of the little three tower temple at Bat Cūṃ which was built around 953 CE. The temple is dedicated to the deities Vajrapāṇi, the Buddha and Divyadevī (Prajñāpāramitā) (Cœdès 1908: 8). Bat Cūṃ was built by Kavīndrārimathana, the Buddhist architect and military leader of king

Rājendravarman (r. 944–968 CE). It celebrates a military victory over the Cham. This military success has been credited to the spiritual help of Vajrapāṇi, the tantric warrior deity.

Unfortunately, no images of Vajrapāṇi, Prajñāpāramitā or the Buddha hailing from Bat Cum have been recovered. There is, however, a group of tenth century images found at Tuol Chi Tep near Phnom Trap at the Musée Guimet in Paris which hails from the same period. The group includes a fierce Vajrapāṇi with bulging eyes and fangs [Figure 3], an Avalokiteśvara [Figure 4] and a Buddha [Figure 5] (Baptiste & Zéphir 2008: 166-170).

A similar group of tantric deities appear, chiseled in brick, inside the three *prasat* shrine of Phnom Trap D where a four-armed Avalokiteśvara, flanked by two four-armed Devīs, is depicted in the central shrine; an eight-armed Avalokiteśvara embellishes the southern and a four-armed Vajrapāṇi the northern shrine (Green 2012).

The deities praised at Bat Cum are also portrayed on the *caitya* of Kbal Sre Yeay Yin, where a *nāga*-enthroned Buddha [Figure 6a] appears in company of Vajrin [Figure 6b], Prajñāpāramitā [Figure 6c] and Avalokiteśvara [Figure 6d]. Another *caitya* features Vajrin/Vajrapāṇi [Figure 7a] with a tantric ten-armed Prajñāpāramitā [Figure 7b] and Avalokiteśvara. These four deities thus seem to form an important sacred nexus for the tenth century Buddhist devotees. Interestingly only Vajrapāṇi and the *nāga*-enthroned Buddha feature in Phimai. Avalokiteśvara and Prajñāpāramitā, so prevalent in the tenth century, did not make their way to Phimai. They gained supreme importance only under Jayavarman VII, who installed them as protectors of Buddhism and patron deities of two of his major temples, Preah Khan and Ta Prohm.

The inscription (K. 111) of Wat Sithor (980 CE) also bears testimony to the fact that tantric Buddhism had a significant presence in the Khmer empire. A recent retranslation by Skorupski showed that many tantras were known at the time of Jayavarman V (r. 968-1000/1 CE). This Angkorian king, though publicly a Śaiva, encouraged his Buddhist minister Kīrtipaṇḍita to strengthen Buddhism and to import Buddhist texts from abroad (Sharrock 2012: 233). One of these texts is named the *Tattvasaṅgrahaṭīkā*, a commentary to the *Tathāgatattattvasaṅgrahanāmamahāyāna Sūtra (STTS)*, the principal scripture of the Yoga-tantras (Sanderson 2003: 427; Sharrock 2012: 208). This tantra probably originated in the Buddhist monasteries of Nālandā and had a widespread influence in medieval Indian society and many Buddhist communities in Asia. A fair number of subsequent tantric texts took their inspiration from it.

One of the protagonists of this tantra is the deity Trailokyavijaya, “the conqueror of the three worlds,” who features prominently in the Phimai inscription K. 397. Vajrin/Vajrapāṇi is another major player in the *STTS*, where he appears in two *maṇḍalas*. One, dedicated to Vajrapāṇi, is called the Trailokyavijaya *maṇḍala*. Thus the *STTS* presents Vajrapāṇi as an aspect of Trailokyavijaya and vice versa. The central myth celebrated in the *STTS* is the subjugation of Maheśvara (or Śiva) by Vajrapāṇi and the former’s subsequent conversion to Buddhism.

Tantric Buddhism thus seems to have had a significant presence in ancient Cambodia, though it never functioned as the official “state religion,” which remained Śaiva. Buddhism appears to have played a role as private faith for the Khmer intelligentsia – for important intellectuals such as Kavīndrārimathana and Kīrtipaṇḍita. There are even hints in the

inscriptions which suggest that Jayavarman V was privately a Buddhist (Sanderson 2003: 429). Tantric deities were invoked as protectors during war as well as during times of peace. The inscription of Wat Sithor also relates that tantric Buddhist rituals, such as *homa* rites, were performed daily in Jayavarman V's palace in order to protect the state (Sharrock 2012: 205). Kīrtipaṇḍita also established Buddhist *āśramas* for the *saṃgha* and guests.

## The Inscription of Sap Bak (K. 1158)

The inscription K. 1158 is the major text documenting the presence of tantric Buddhism on the Khorat Plateau. The inscription stone was found broken near the village of Sap Bak, located about 40 km southwest of Phimai in the province of Nakhon Ratchasima and there is no other archaeological context for it. No remains of a sanctuary or monastery have been unearthed. Sap Bak's proximity to Phimai, and the extent of the tradition of tantric Buddhism it alludes to, suggests that the deities celebrated in the inscription were well known in the region. Information gathered from the inscription will contribute to this paper's interpretation of Phimai's iconography.

The inscription is dated to the year 1066 CE, to the end of the reign of king Udayādityavarman II (r. 1050-1066 CE). Only a short interval of fourteen years exists between the inscription and the time in which the extant temple of Phimai was most likely conceived. The extant temple was built under the reign of Jayavarman VI. Phimai itself, however, has a long history as a sacred site. Archaeological evidence shows that there were previous holy structures at the site (Groslier 1962; Talbot 2002). An inscription, K. 1000, which is undated, mentions a stone image of the Buddha, a *muniraj* (Jacques 1969: 58), and K. 954, dated 1041 CE, found at the site, gives homage to Śiva and Buddha.

The inscription has been translated several times: first by Chirapat Prapandvidya (1990: 12-15) into English shortly after its discovery. Another Sanskritist, Julia Estève (2009: 442-520), went over the rubbings of the inscription and proposed an alternative Sanskrit reconstruction of the text together with a new translation into French. Based on her Sanskrit reconstruction, Tadeusz Skorupski, a tantra specialist, has provided another English translation from which I will procure most of my information. Skorupski's translation is published as an appendix to this essay [cf. Appendix 1].

The inscription has two parts. The first part consists of fifteen verses written in Sanskrit praising a deity called Śrī Samāja. This deity appears to be the name of the main deity in the *GST*. The second part is an inscription in Khmer referring to a restoration of nine Buddhist images (*buddhalokeśvara*) undertaken by the author of the Sanskrit inscription whose name is Dhanus. Both Chirapat (1990: 13) and Estève (2009: 450) have offered translations of the Khmer part.

## The Sanskrit Portion of K. 1158

These verses give us a small, but precious insight into the tradition of tantric Buddhism among the Khmers of the Khorat Plateau.

Verse 1 starts with Vraḥ Dhanus, the author of the inscription, bowing to “the five Sugatas” which are seen as “the originators of the glorious bodies of the excellent gods.” The term *sugata* is here used as an epithet for the five directional Buddhas, or Jinas, Akṣobhya, Vairocana, Ratnasambhava, Amitābha and Amogasiddhi.

Verse 2 praises Vajrasattva, “the sixth, the preeminent lord of the existing Bodhisattvas, the foundation of all Buddhas.” In the *GST*, Vajrasattva is the supreme Buddha who is above the five Buddhas or Jinas and, at the same time, seen as the ground or foundation of all of them.

Verse 3 expresses the hope that the author of the inscription will become part of the tradition of believers in the deity Śrī Samāja in all his future rebirths or lives. The first three verses thus establish the deities praised in the inscription as the five Sugatas (Jinas), Vajrasattva, and Śrī Samāja who here is meant to be a deity and not a text. These three entities appear later under the name *triguru* or the triple *gurus* (cf. verse 11).

Verse 4 relates that Dhanus “has heard the command of the supreme *guru*,” presumably Śrī Samāja and that he pays homage to him.

Verse 5 introduces a region or place called “Chpārransī, which was originally called Jayantapura,” where “the protector Śrī Samantaprabheśvara has resided.”

Verse 6 relates that the above named Śrī Samantaprabheśvara “has made the Buddha’s dispensation or teachings firm in Kambuja down to the present time,” after “having appeased the fear [or apprehension] of the Buddhists.”

Sap Bak is located on the Khorat Plateau near Phimai. There has been a lot of speculation on the whereabouts of Chpārransī. According to Étienne Aymonier “Chpārransī” is the Khmer translation of the Sanskrit word *aṃśārāma*, which is the equivalent of *veṇuvana*, the famous Bamboo Grove of the Buddhist texts. Aymonier has thus given an early hint that the place may be Buddhist (Estève 2009: 433). Chpārransī is mentioned fourteen times in the corpus of Khmer inscriptions between 924-1190 CE. Estève has gone over all the inscriptions in the Khmer corpus which mention Chpārransī and has argued that it is an important tantric Buddhist place in the Angkor region (Estève & Vincent 2010: 150). She also concluded from the corpus of inscriptions that Chpārransī had been an important religious place for centuries.

Several identities have been suggested for the “protector Śrī Samantaprabheśvara.” Chirapat (1990: 13) speculated that he could be king Suryavarman I because he was believed to have been in favour of the Buddhists during religious rivalries in the eleventh century. Alternatively, Chirapat proposed that Śrī Samantaprabheśvara could be a deity. Estève (2009: 444-450) argued that Śrī Samantaprabheśvara is the very deity of Chpārransī, either a Buddha or his image. According to the latter, the deity protected the Buddhists in Kambuja during times of religious strife and helped to anchor tantric Buddhism in Cambodia. Jacques (1969: 60) also finds that Srī Samantaprabheśa is a Buddha.

The inscription on the Khorat Plateau would thus connect its religious heritage to a place in the region around Angkor which, according to the different sources studied, may have been Buddhist from “mid-tenth century onwards until the fourteenth century” (Estève &

Vincent 2010: 154). This evidence ties in well with the other manifestations of tantric Buddhism in the tenth century as discussed above.

The inscription's verses 7-9 praise three venerable teachers. They are likely to be the teachers of the author Dhanus. The three individuals, all accomplished beings, seem to form a lineage of *gurus*, thus implying that the *GST*, or related tantras, and its adepts have been in the region for an extended amount of time.

The first *guru* in line is Cuñvi; the second *guru* is called Campakapāda. He is respected by other *siddhas*, or accomplished beings, and may have been a teacher in Chpārransī. He is said to have reached *nirvāṇa* in the region of Sthalāsvāy. The third *guru*, the venerable Dharaṇīndrapura, has “settled his heart in enlightenment” and possibly contributed to the adoration of the Buddhas by giving treasures to images.

These three “calmed ones,” says verse 10, “have reached the fruit of reality [or the fruit that is the ultimate reality] under the secret tree [or the mystical tree], after having traversed the ocean by way of the perfection of wisdom, the commentaries on logic and the rest.” In other words, the three *gurus* reached enlightenment after having studied the Mahāyāna scriptures such as the *Perfection of Wisdom*, and logic, and gained true knowledge of reality, of what really exists, and then passed away. In short, they became Buddhas.

Verse 11 says that Dhanus is a student of the “established doctrine” and venerates the triple *gurus*. The triple *gurus* relates back to the deities introduced in the first three verses, namely the five Jinas, Vajrasattva and Śrī Samāja. These are the deities of Dhanus' three teachers, Cuñvi, Campakapāda and Dharaṇīndrapura, the three *gurus* in our translation.

Verse 12 relates that Dhanus with a mind inflamed with “sparks of the Kāśikā, poetry and other outer texts,” sips “the secret elixir” already for a long time and is keen on “the sap of fire oblations, recitations, and yoga.” Dhanus thus is involved in all kinds of tantric rituals such as the *homa* ritual, mantra recitations and yogic exercises.

Verse 13 tells us that Dhanus has “installed Jinas and other images in Teṅpāsnaḡa, the fortunate place of pilgrimage.”

Verse 14 is an invocation of several deities through which Dhanus “has realised and personally grasped something about the destruction in this world and, indeed, in the other world.”

Dhanus finishes the inscription in verse 15 expressing the hope that due to his meritorious deeds he will be reborn in Kambuja. He is still on the way to being enlightened and finds Kambuja an ideal place for the achievement of this goal.

## **The Khmer Portion of K. 1158**

The Khmer text describes the erection of nine Buddhist images (*buddhalokeśvara*) on mount Abhayagiri by Śrī Satyavarman, a tantric practitioner of the past, who was renowned for supernatural powers. The images were erected to deter “Javā” from attacking the Khmer territories. These images all deteriorated in the course of time and were renovated by the above mentioned *guru* Dharaṇīndrapura. In turn, his pupil, Dhanus, reinstalled them in 1066 CE.

K. 1158 thus gives us a quite extensive account of the presence of tantric Buddhism in the Khorat Plateau. It reveals that there is a lineage of tantric adepts, which is in its fourth generation now and which have chosen Śrī Samāja as their deity. It also shows that there is a connection between the followers of the *GST* on the Khorat Plateau and an as yet unidentified sacred place in the Angkor region named Chpārransī, and that one of the followers of the *GST* also played a role in that sacred place. It implies that the way to achieve *nirvāṇa* is through the studying of the Mahāyāna scriptures, Buddhist logic and grammar, performing rituals, erecting images, emitting mantras, and above all through identification with Śrī Samāja. It tells us that all the adepts of the tantras have reached their goal and left this earthly existence for *nirvāṇa*. It tells us that the deities worshipped in the tantra are Śrī Samāja, the Jinas and Vajrasattva, and indicates that tantric Buddhism is the established doctrine in the land. In addition it speaks of a *tīrtha*, a sacred place of pilgrimage, at Teṅpāsnaḡa, which was probably in the region. This pilgrimage site was in existence for a substantial amount of time, since images, which had deteriorated were reinstalled by two successive *gurus*.

The Khmer part also gives some interesting information regarding the erection of images at Teṅpāsnaḡa by Satyavarman. A Satyavarman is also mentioned in an earlier Khmer inscription, K. 111 (Wat Sithor), discussed above, which relates that Kīrtipaṇḍita, who lived in the tenth century, had re-erected more than “nine and or ten images of Vajrin and Lokeśa, which were raised by Satyavarman on the eastern hill and whose pedestals were damaged” (Sharrock 2011: 216). The fact that a Satyavarman is mentioned in both inscriptions, K. 111 and K. 1158, in connection with the erection of tantric images, makes it likely that we are dealing with the same person.<sup>2</sup> The images at the *tīrtha* of Teṅpāsnaḡa on mount Abhayagiri thus have a long history, they may have been erected as early as the ninth century. Unfortunately, I have not yet been able to further determine the location of the *tīrtha*, but it is not unreasonable to assume that it was located somewhere near Sap Bak on the Khorat Plateau.

I would now like to link these results with the temple in Phimai and see if we can find any correspondences between the elements in the material record in the area surrounding Phimai and the Buddhism celebrated at the temple itself.

## The Deities of Phimai

The late eleventh-early twelfth century Khmer temple in Phimai [Figure 9] is innovative in more than one way. It provided the prototype for the “pine-cone” shaped towers which later crowned the temple of Angkor Wat, built under Suryavarman II (r. 1113-1150 CE), and was the model for the later *prang* structure of central Thailand. Moreover, it features a cruciform layout in the main sanctuary that inspired later Khmer temples such as Phnom Rung on the Khorat Plateau and Banteay Samré in Angkor.<sup>3</sup>

The iconography of Phimai has several elements which connect it with the above described tradition. Epigraphic fragments provide vital information as well. The fragment K. 397, dated 1108 CE, found on the pedestal of the southern *gopura* of the second enclosure, states that an image of Trailokyavijaya was erected at the Phimai sanctuary by a local dignitary “Kamraten Añ Srī Vīrendrādhīpatvarma of Chok Vakula.” This image is called a general



(*senāpati*) to the Kamraten Jagat Vimāya, presumably the main image of Phimai which was probably a Buddha (Cœdès 1924: 346-350). The Trailokyavijaya image was installed most likely in the southern *gopura*.

Srī Virendrādhipatvarma, the author of the inscription, is known to us as a participant in the big military parade of dignitaries on the southern relief enclosure at Angkor Wat (Cœdès 1924: 346), where he is identified by an inscription. His participation in the parade depicted in Angkor indicates he was still a powerful individual under Suryavarman II, the builder of the temple, and one of the successors in the line of kings from Mahīdharapura which was founded by Jayavarman VI probably in the Khorat region.

Trailokyavijaya, the “conqueror of the three worlds,” is a tantric deity who became prominent in the second phase of the development of tantrism in India during the eighth century (Linrothe 1999: 270). He is a form of Vajrapāṇi and has a key *maṇḍala* in the *STTS*. The *Sādhanamālā*, an important manual on tantric deities, sees Trailokyavijaya as an emanation of the Jina Akṣobhya. Trailokyavijaya shares the colour blue with Akṣobhya, a colour that is generally associated with fierce deities and with “gruesome rites” in the tantras (Bhattacharya 1924: 60). Akṣobhya is seen as the source of other wrathful deities such as Heruka, Hevajra and Cakrasaṃvara.

Trailokyavijaya generally displays the *vajrahūṃkāramudrā*, the gesture of “being victorious over the three worlds.” A bronze which is now at the Bangkok National Museum represents Trailokyavijaya with this gesture. This unique image [Figure 10] came from Phimai (Woodward 2003: 154; Piriya 2012: 298) and may have had some similarities to the stone image of Trailokyavijaya evoked in K. 397.

Phimai also features the early manifestation of Trailokyavijaya as Vajrapāṇi. The main sanctuary is guarded at its doors by this longstanding bodyguard of the Buddha and master of magic ceremonies, shaking the bell (*ghaṇṭā*) and the thunderbolt (*vajra*) and holding off unwanted visitors [Figure 11].

## The Buddhist Lintels of Phimai’s Inner Sanctuary

There are five Buddhist lintels in the interior of Phimai. Four of them are located above the entrance to the central *cella*, one over the entrance to the antechamber (*antarala*). The iconography of the lintels is complex and it is especially difficult to find an interpretation including all five lintels.<sup>4</sup>

Four of the central lintels have similarities in design: they display a central figure in a medallion and two registers with subordinate figures. The eastern, northern and western lintel feature dancing *yoginīs*, an element, which connects them thematically and visually. The southern lintel depicts the *nāga*-enthroned Buddha surrounded by worshippers on the lower register and by seated Buddhas on the upper register (Manit 1962: Fig. 35). Rows of seated Buddhas in *dhyānamudrā* are a recurrent motive in Phimai. The presence of the *nāga*-enthroned Buddha in the southern lintel has led researchers to suggest that the central image of the temple was probably also a *nāga*-Buddha (Manit 1962; Woodward 2003: 149). Erik Seidenfaden (1923: 17), the first western visitor to describe the temple in a lecture at the Siam

Society, had found the central sanctuary empty, so there is no definite proof as to the identity of the central Buddha.

In the remaining part of this paper, I will mainly focus on two of the lintels, namely the northern and the eastern lintel [Figures 12a-b].<sup>5</sup>

## The Northern Lintel

The northern lintel [Figure 12a], I argue, shows a stretched out *maṇḍala* of Akṣobhya (as Śrī Samāja) with his four fellow Jinas. The five Buddhas sitting cross-legged feature three crowned heads and six arms. The front arms are folded in the meditation gesture (*dhyānamudrā*), the second proper right hand holds a very clearly sculpted *akṣamāla* or rosary. In their third right hand the deities, who are all identical, seem to hold a lotus [Figure 12c, close-up]. Possibly, the second proper left hand holds a bell (*ghaṇṭā*) and the third hand a jewel (or a different kind of lotus). Some of these attributes make the identification of the deities more difficult, since they do not correspond to the usual attributes given to the Jinas in various texts. The only deities in the Buddhist pantheon holding an *akṣamāla* so prominently are Avalokiteśvara, Prajñāpāramitā, Tārā or Cundā.<sup>6</sup>

Several scholars have identified the images as representing Vajrasattva (Boisselier 1966: 302; Dagens 1995: 19; Woodward 1980: 171), although they also admit that the attributes do not fit the usual iconographic scheme. Bruno Dagens in particular points out that the rosary is not an attribute of Vajrasattva.

Regarding the identification of the central image of the northern lintel as Vajrasattva, it is worth noting that most Khmer Vajrasattvas found on the Khorat Plateau or in Cambodia do not generally feature six arms and three heads, but only one head and two arms [Figure 13]. Most of the local Vajrasattva images balance the *vajra* on their right hand in front of their chest. They hold the *ghaṇṭā* in the left hand on the left hip (Bunker & Latchford 2011: 207-210; Sharrock 2011: 493-496). Despite the iconographic inconsistencies, which pose problems for all interpretations, and against the received view, here I identify the central deity as Akṣobhya, with his four fellow Jinas. Akṣobhya is the Jina in the centre of the *GST maṇḍala* and the supreme “deity.” The Jinas in Phimai fit the description given in the *GST* where they are described in their “vajra form” as “three-headed” with “six arms” and wearing a “crown” (Fremantle 1971: 80). The following excerpt of the *GST* describes them:

Imagine Vairocana [delusion], the color of autumn clouds, three-headed, white, black and deep red, adorned with piled-up hair and a crown; imagine the Vajra Lord [Akṣobhya], three-headed, his faces black, red and white, blazing, wearing piled-up hair and a crown, agitating the world-realms; imagine the Passionate One [Amitābha], three-headed, his faces, red, black and white, delighting in piled-up hair and a crown, and you will surely succeed; imagine in their right hands the wheel, vajra and lotus; imagine their vajra forms with six arms, beautiful, bearing various weapons.

I identify the central deity with Akṣobhya because *Guhyasamāja* or Śrī Samāja himself is regarded as a tantric form of Akṣobhya. Furthermore, we know from the Sap Bak inscription that the *GST* was already known in the region. Vajrasattva, the sixth deity of Sap Bak, may also have had a place in the temple. He could have been represented by the central icon of the temple, possibly a *nāga*-enthroned Buddha.

## The Eastern Lintel

The eastern lintel [Figure 12b] seems to feature the tantric deity Cakrasaṃvara (or Trailokyavijaya) with three heads and eight arms dancing on an elephant head. On both sides of the deity are rows of repeated figures: the top row shows ten Buddhas in *dhyānamudrā*, the row below consists of eight *yoginīs* and two *yogins* dancing on corpses. The difference between the *yogins* and the *yoginīs* is threefold: The male figures hold a *vajra* and a *ghaṇṭā*. The females hold a variety of attributes. The *yogins* dance on their proper left leg, and the *yoginīs* on their proper right leg on a row of corpses. The amazing precision of the sculptural work suggests that they may have been related to real dance performances at the temple.

The Cakrasaṃvara in stone which we see here is almost unique in the Khmer material record. His only other representation is in bronze on the Poipet mould which will be discussed below. He can be identified with certainty because of the outstretched elephant hide from which he emerges. He dances in *ardhaparyāṅka* on the bodies of two prone figures which lie on top of the elephant head. It is most unusual to show the elephant head underneath the dancing deity and the corpses. In India, the head of the elephant hide is stretched behind the deity.

As Chirapat (2007) has pointed out, the *ardhaparyāṅka* is not in tune with the position Trailokyavijaya/Cakrasaṃvara is given in the *Sādhanamālā* which should be the *pratyāliḍhāsana*, that is the archer position with one foot forward and the back leg stretched. The Cakrasaṃvara in *ardhaparyāṅka* is in fact closer to another famous angry deity, the dancing Hevajra. This deity, another Heruka (wrathful Buddhist deity), with its sixteen arms and eight heads, will become more prominent under Jayavarman VII. Cakrasaṃvara's wild dance on the corpses may symbolize the dynamism of the process of enlightenment as it does for Hevajra (Lobo 1994: 119) and the conversion of Śaiva deities to Buddhism.

A twelfth century bronze mould from Poipet shows a pantheon of deities [Figure 14] which seem to belong together conceptually. The mould has three registers. The first register features a *nāga*-enthroned Buddha. The second register apparently features a Cakrasaṃvara, here in *pratyāliḍha* pose to the left and Hevajra, dancing, to the right of a six-armed three-headed sitting figure, most likely Akṣobhya, the alleged deity of the northern lintel in Phimai. Vajrapāṇi can be seen dancing in the third row next to a standing six-armed figure which may be Avalokiteśvara. On its right there is a figure, holding a lotus, possibly Padmapāṇi. There is a lintel in Phimai which Dagens (1995: 35) identified as showing Padmapāṇi, its precise location, though, is not given by Dagens who visited Phimai before its reconstruction.

On the Poipet mould, the identified Cakrasaṃvara, Hevajra and Vajrapāṇi dance on a corpse, just like they do in Phimai.<sup>7</sup> The *nāga*-enthroned Buddha placed above the other figures may perhaps represent the so-called Ādibuddha, the “primordial Buddha” of the tantric

universe, or possibly Vajrasattva, the form the Ādibuddha would assume in *saṃbhogakāya*. If the Poipet mould has any information to offer for a reading of Phimai's deities, the *nagā*-Buddha's position in the tablet reinforces the argument that Vajrasattva may possibly be represented as the *nagā*-enthroned Buddha in Khmer iconography.

The Saṃvara of Phimai displays other peculiarities. In Pāla India, where the original iconography was most likely conceived, Cakrasaṃvara usually holds his hands in *prajñālinganābhinaya*, embracing his sometimes virtual consort. The Saṃvara of Phimai, however, has a special wrist touching *mudrā* [Figure 12d] which is very rare; it only appears once more in a pedestal at Banteay Samré. In the Indian tradition there are two-, six- and twelve-armed versions of Cakrasaṃvara (like the one in the Poipet mould). Only the Phimai version has eight arms and holds the split elephant hide with the remaining six arms. The “*Śrīchackrasambhāra Tantra*,” (Dawa-Samdup 1919: 19) interprets the split elephant hide as a symbol for “the splitting of illusions,” or a liberation from the illusionary world that keeps non-enlightened people in bondage.

In his study of the development of tantric iconography, Robert Linrothe (1999) has proposed a three phase scheme to distinguish between several generations of tantric deities. In the first phase, Buddhist deities are accompanied by angry deities or *krodha* which are in a subservient role. In the second phase, angry deities play an important role, but are not central to a tantra or a *maṇḍala*. In the third phase, these deities have their own *maṇḍala* and tantras. Linrothe suggests that Trailokyavijaya and the wrathful Vajrapāṇi are tantric deities of the second phase out of which the deities of the third phase, Cakrasaṃvara and Hevajra, developed. According to this author, Cakrasaṃvara appears in India just as Trailokyavijaya disappears. The former has so much in common with the latter that he may be considered “a phase three reincarnation of Trailokyavijaya” (Linrothe 1999: 278). One of the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra*'s most powerful mantras is the Trailokyavijaya mantra. It is called the “universal king of spells (*vidyārājacakravartī*)” (Gray 2007: 295). This shows how intimately connected the two deities still are in the CS. In Phimai Trailokyavijaya and Vajrapāṇi play a subordinate role in relation to Cakrasaṃvara, who dwells in the centre of the temple – they both have a place in the southern quarter of a possible Phimai *maṇḍala*.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to the five central lintels, all found *in situ*, there are several lintels with related subjects still laying on the ground in the temple area. More lintels presenting Buddhist subjects are on display in the Phimai National Museum.<sup>9</sup> Some lintels feature rows of crowned teaching Buddhas in double *vitarkamudrā* and *yoginīs*, and some lintels just display dancing *yoginīs*, some just standing crowned Buddhas.

## Interpretation of the Images of Phimai

Cakrasaṃvara is the main protagonist of the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra* and other texts which together form the *Cakrasaṃvara* tradition. The tantra refers to itself as the “Great King of Yoginī Tantras, called the Śrī Cakrasaṃvara (*śricakrasaṃvaranāmāmahāyoginītantrarāja*)” (Gray 2007: 4). This tantra was very popular in India from the late tenth through late thirteenth

century, thus during the time Phimai was built. Together with the *HT*, it is the most important “mother tantra” emphasising female deities.

What does *saṃvara* mean in Sanskrit? Snellgrove (2004: 152) takes the term to mean a “vow or a bond.” Shinichi Tsuda (1974: 55) interprets it as “union of aspects of the world fused into one.” Linrothe (2007: 278) proposes “supreme bliss.” The different translations of the name stem from a variant in spelling as Snellgrove (2004: 152) explains:

*Śambara* and *saṃvara* represent the same name in Sanskrit with slightly variant spellings, but the second spelling happens to be identical with the word meaning a vow or a bond. Thus the Tibetans translated them differently: *Śambara* as *bDe-mchog*, “Supreme Bliss,” which is how they interpret this name, whatever the spelling, and *Samvara* as *sDom-pa*, understood as “binding” or “union.” The compound name, *Cakrasaṃvara*, is thus interpreted as the ‘union of the wheel of the elements’ explained in various ways, but suggesting in every case the blissful state of perfect wisdom.

In his recent translation of the tantra, Gray (2007: 36) suggests *cakrasaṃvara* should best be translated as the “binding of the wheels,” or the “binding of the *dākinī* network.”

The *Cakrasaṃvara maṇḍala* consists of the main deity *Cakrasaṃvara* and three wheels of *yoginīs* or *dākinīs*, eight to each circle. The *maṇḍala* is called the “triple wheel” (Gray 2007: 179). To the wheels of the *maṇḍala*, three dimensions of human experience are assigned. The first wheel is called the “body wheel,” the second the “speech wheel,” and the third the “mind wheel.” The tantra uses the expression “body, speech and mind” to symbolise the three essential dimensions of a human being. “Body, speech and mind,” in Sanskrit *kāyavākcittā*, is an expression widely used in all kinds of Buddhist texts for the three-fold human experience, but also for the experience of Buddhahood. The idea behind this formulation is to transform human experience into an experience of transcendence and unity, into the Buddha’s body, speech and mind. In *CS*, the *yoginīs* stand precisely for the idea of transformation of the human experience into Buddha experience, in other words for the path to enlightenment. On the northern and southern lintels of the inner sanctuary as well as on lintels found in various locations in Phimai, the *yoginīs* are very prominent. Phimai is the first place where *yoginīs* appear in stone in the history of Buddhism in Cambodia and Thailand, and they appear together with *Samvara*. Parallel to the depiction of *yoginīs* in Phimai, we have the set of *yoginī* bronze sculptures as well as the bronze *Hevajra* in Baphuon style (mid-eleventh century) which Boeles (1966: pl. 5) discussed. The presence of both the bronze sculpture of *Hevajra* and the stone representation of *Cakrasaṃvara* indicates that both the *HT* and the *CS* must have had some followers in the eleventh century; and it shows that in Phimai the latter was given precedence over the former. The *yoginīs* will play an important part again under Jayavarman VII, whose preference for the *HT* is well documented (Woodward 1981). Several bronze *Hevajra* images and several *Hevajra maṇḍalas*, in two or three dimensions, show *Hevajra* surrounded by his eight *yoginīs* (Boeles 1966: pl. 4; Dalsheimer 2001: 269).

The *GST* does not refer to *yoginīs*, though it features female consorts. It is thought to be earlier than the *CS* and the concept of the *yoginīs* had not yet been developed. However, the *GST* expresses a similar idea of unity using different metaphors. *Guhyasamāja* can be translated simply as the “secret union,” but the full title of the tantra is according to its translator, “The Union [or Assembly] of the secret Body, Speech and Mind of all Tathāgatas.” Fremantle (1971: 15) explains:

Body, speech and mind together comprise the total activity and experience of a living being; the body alone may be interpreted as the material form *nirmānakāya*, while speech and mind represent the spiritual and absolute natures, *sambhogakāya* and *dharmakāya*.

The concept of *kāyavākcittā* (body, speech and mind) is used many times in the tantra. Its main mantra is *oṃ sarvatathāgatakāyavākcittavajrasvabhāvātmaḥ* which means “Oṃ I am of the nature of the vajra of body, speech and mind of all Tathāgatas.” This mantra expresses the wish of the tantric adept to become a Buddha.

In the *GST*, Akṣobhya is “Vajra Mind,” Vairocana is “Vajra Body,” and Amitābha is “Vajra Speech.” Vajrasattva, the sixth Buddha, or ground of all Buddhas, symbolises this unity of body, speech and mind. Vajrasattva’s name varies according to his function. According to Chirapat (1990), Vajrasattva may be called “Sarvatathāgatakāyavākcittavajra, or Sarvatathāgatakāyavākcittādhipati. He is also called Vajradhara, Mahāvajradhara, Vajrapāṇi, etc.” The identity of *kāyavākcittā* with Vajrasattva is expressed in the first two names.

There are other concepts which connect the two tantras. Akṣobhya in the *GST* and Saṃvara in the *CS* are both described as emanations of Vajrasattva. The two northern and eastern inner lintels in Phimai would thus display two different emanations of Vajrasattva – one representing Akṣobhya and the Jinas, peaceful forms of Vajrasattva, the other Cakrasaṃvara, an angry emanation of Vajrasattva. Though the lintels in Phimai appear to represent two different tantra traditions – the *GST* and the *CS* –, they are closely related in the idea of the union of all aspects of the world, the central idea of many tantric texts. This is the idea they express symbolically, either in the metaphor of emanation and fusion of Buddhas or Jinas in a transcendental Buddha, or through the unifying of all elements constituting human experience.

Chronologically speaking the *CS* tradition is slightly later than the *GST* tradition and may also have arrived on the Khorat Plateau a little later. The *CS* tradition sees itself as an extension of other tantras and as more powerful, in fact as “the most excellent, the highest of all the yogas, which can kill anyone, gods, titans and men” (Gray 2007: 176). The adept who masters the yoga of the *CS* will be invincible and cannot die of natural causes. The yoga of the *CS* is described as the most powerful yoga, because “everything, whatsoever, spoken or unspoken, exists in Śrī Heruka” (Gray 2007: 177). The *CS* promotes itself as the latest tantric weapon. Using its yoga one will have the powers of being unhindered in the three worlds, of being invisible, and of travelling in the underworld. Its yoga would also give the powers of resurrection, flight and alchemy. The *CS* promises to be even more powerful than the previous

tantras and provide even faster liberation. Seen from an internal Buddhist perspective, Phimai seems to honour the deities of the latest, most powerful tantra from India at the time.

## Conclusion

The iconographic program of Phimai builds partially on the tantric traditions of tenth century Cambodia, but not as much as one might expect, given that Phimai is situated along the important trade route between Angkor and the western frontiers of the Khmer empire. Deities such as Vajrin/Vajrapāṇi, Trailokyavijaya and the *nāga*-enthroned Buddha are present and play a substantial role in Phimai. Others, such as Avalokiteśvara and Prajñāpāramitā, do not appear in Phimai, but become important again eighty years later.

The Buddhist tradition from the Khmer heartland is complemented by the presence of deities invoked in the Sap Bak inscription, which celebrates the powers of the Jinas, Vajrasattva and Śrī Samāja. In addition, it is argued that Phimai introduced a new tantra, the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra* with its main deity Saṃvara and its wheels of dancing *yoginīs*. In my reading, the deities Cakrasaṃvara and Akṣobhya (Śrī Samāja) and their entourage of male and female deities embody two different aspects of a central idea celebrated in the tantras: the unity of body, speech and mind and the transformation of human fragmentation into Buddhahood. Whereas the *Guhyasāmaja Tantra* and the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra* do not seem to have had many followers among later Khmer Buddhist generations, the *Hevajra Tantra*, another, later, “mother tantra” in which *yoginīs* also play an important role, will be taken up by the Khmer’s most renowned Buddhist king, Jayavarman VII. The latter showed his appreciation for Phimai and his ancestor Jayavarman VI by erecting two side shrines within Phimai’s first enclosure ground and a “hospital” chapel outside the city walls. One of the side-shrines, the so-called Prang Brahmataṭṭha, featured his and his wife’s portrait.

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## Abbreviations

<i>CS</i>	<i>Cakrasaṃvara Tantra</i>
<i>GST</i>	<i>Guhyasāmaja Tantra</i>
<i>HT</i>	<i>Hevajra Tantra</i>
<i>STTS</i>	<i>Tathāgatatattvasaṃgrahanāmahāyāna Sūtra</i>



## Appendix 1: Sap Bak Inscription (K. 1158)

### Translation from Sanskrit by Tadeusz Skorupski Based on Julia Estève's Transliteration (2009: 541-542)

1. In the first instance, the glorious five Sugatas are the originators of the Śrīghanas, and the Śrīghanas of the excellent gods. I bow to them, the givers of glory.  
(Alternatively: Primordially, the glorious five Sugatas are the originators of the glorious bodies, and the glorious bodies of the excellent gods. I bow to them, the givers of glory.)
2. But Vajrasattva is the sixth (as) the pre-eminent lord of the existing Bodhisattvas, (and) the repository (or foundation) of all the Buddhas. I bow to him for the sake of deliverance.
3. In all my existences, may I become a servant of the servant who has supreme devotion and stainless faith in the glorious Samāja.
4. Having thus heard the command of the supreme guru, I respect it with praises, (and) having repeated it with devotion, I always pay homage to the glorious Samāja.
5. The region originally called Jayantrapura and afterwards Chpārransī, it is there that the protector Śrī Samantaprabheśvara has stayed (or resided).
6. He indeed, having appeased the fear (apprehension) of the Buddhists, has made firm the Buddha's dispensation in Kambuja down to the present time. I bow to him again and again.
7. The venerable Cuṇvi, delightful in manners, pure, accomplished in many activities, blameless in speech, eloquent and pious, is supreme in recitation and devotion to the Jina(s) [=Buddha(s)].
8. The venerable Campakapāda, devoted to his teacher's feet, respected by the siddhas, (and) the teacher in Chpārransī, has passed into appeasement (tranquillity, *śama*) in the region of Sthalāsvāy.
9. Pious and steadfast, the venerable Dharaṇīndrapura, having adorned the base (*aṅghrir alaṃkṛtavān?*), and having enriched the wise (or firm) ones with fine treasures, has settled his pure heart in enlightenment.
10. Having traversed the ocean by way of the perfection of wisdom, the commentaries on logic and the rest, those calmed ones (*śrānta*) have reached the fruit of reality under the secret tree.
11. The one called Vraḥ Dhanus, steadfast, intelligent, and student of the established doctrine, constantly and joyfully venerates the triple gurus of the three gurus.
12. (With his) mind inflamed with the sparks of the Kāśikā, poetry and other outer (compositions), since a long time he sips the secret elixir, (and is) intent on the sap of fire oblations, recitations, and yoga.
13. In the year 988 [*śaka*=1066 CE], on the seventh day of the bright fortnight of the month of Tapasya, this learned Vraḥ Dhanus is the one who has installed the Sugata and other images in Tenpāsana, the fortunate and excellent pilgrimage place (*tīrtha*).

14. Śrī, Śakti, Kīrtti, Devendra and many more, through them I have realised and personally grasped something about the destruction in this world and indeed in the other world.
15. If I have the fruit of my merit, (it is my) swift rebirth in Kambuja, but we work here for the sake of the deity through the deliberation of Sāmāja, not for anything else. Moreover, there are other aspirations, not just one.

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## Figures



Figure 1a: Stele with *Nāga*-enthroned Buddha, Thailand, 10th Century, Bangkok National Museum, Inv. 12.2475 (Photo by Pia Conti)



Figure 1b: Stele with Preta Satisfied Avalokiteśvara, Thailand, 10th Century, Bangkok National Museum, Inv. 12.2475 (Photo by Pia Conti)



Figure 2: Stele with Dancing Vajrapāṇi and *Nāga*-Buddha, Thailand, 10th Century, Bangkok National Museum, Inv. 2.276 (Photo by Pia Conti)



Figure 3: Vajrapāṇi, Tuol Chi Tep, Cambodia, 10th Century, Musée Guimet, Paris, Inv. MG 14892 (Photo by Pia Conti)

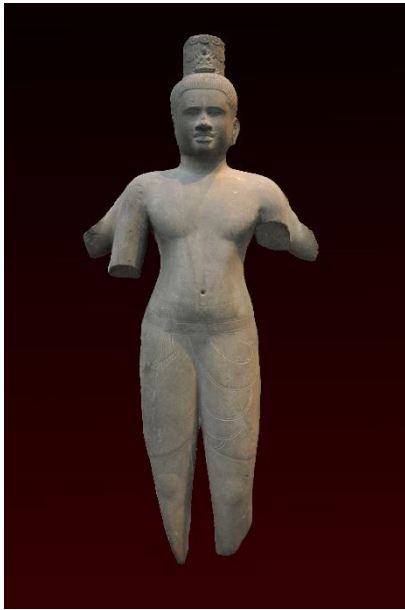


Figure 4: Avalokiteśvara, Tuol Chi Tep, Cambodia, 10th Century, Musée Guimet, Paris, Inv. MG 14912 (Photo by Pia Conti)



Figure 5: Buddha, Tuol Chi Tep, Cambodia, 10th Century, Musée Guimet, Paris, Inv. MG 14880 (Photo by Pia Conti)



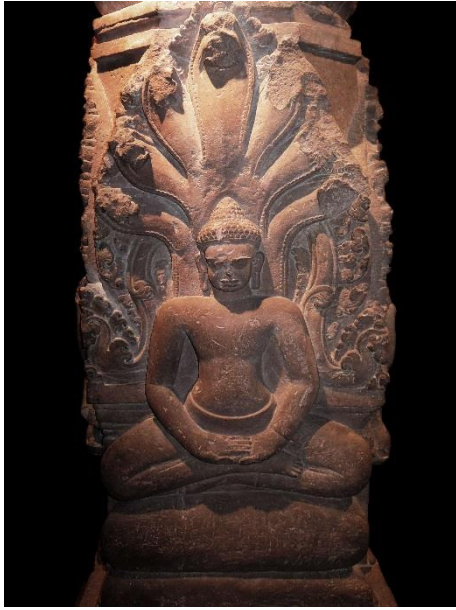


Figure 6a: *Nāga*-Buddha, Caitya Kbal Sre Yeay Yin, Cambodia, 10th Century, Musée Guimet, Paris, Inv. MG 17487 (Photo by Pia Conti)

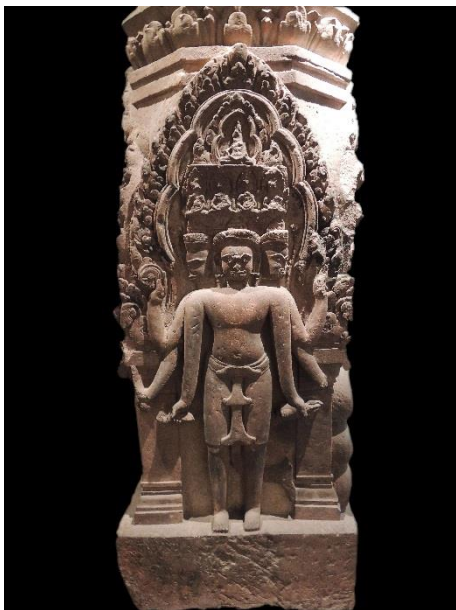


Figure 6b: Vajrin, Caitya Kbal Sre Yeay Yin, Cambodia, 10th Century, Musée Guimet, Paris, Inv. MG 17487 (Photo by Pia Conti)



Figure 6c: Prajñāpāramitā, Caitya Kbal Sre Yeay Yin, Cambodia, 10th Century, Musée Guimet, Paris, Inv. MG 17487 (Photo by Pia Conti)

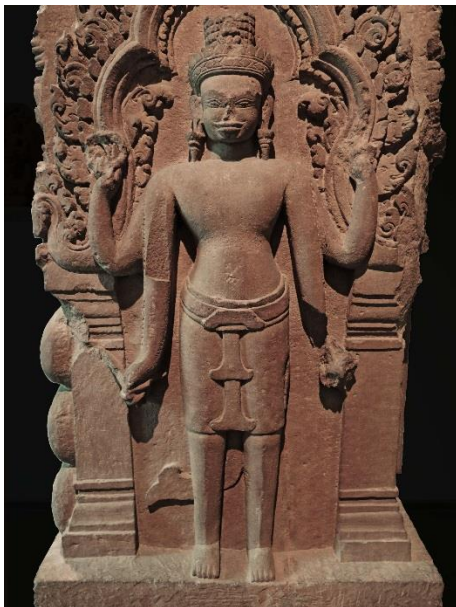


Figure 6d: Avalokiteśvara, Caitya Kbal Sre Yeay Yin, Cambodia, 10th Century, Musée Guimet, Paris, Inv. MG 17487 (Photo by Pia Conti)



Figure 7a: Vajrin, Kbal Sre Yeay Yin, Cambodia, 10th Century, Phnom Penh National Museum, Inv. Ga 1735 (Photo by Pia Conti)



Figure 7b: Ten-armed Prajñāpāramitā, Kbal Sre Yeay Yin, Cambodia, 10th Century, Phnom Penh National Museum, Inv. Ga 1735 (Photo by Pia Conti)

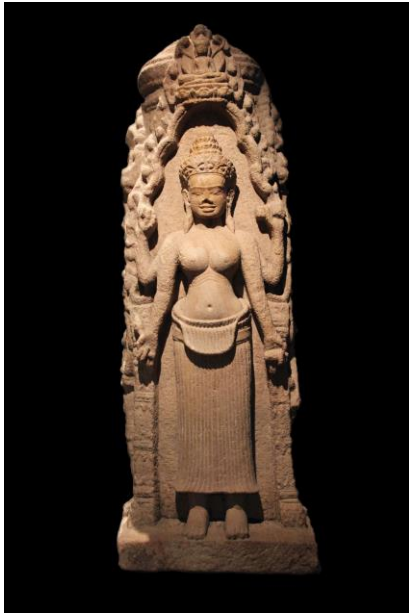


Figure 8: Prajñāpāramitā, Cambodia, mid-10th Century, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, Inv. EA 1999.102 (Photo by Pia Conti)



Figure 9: View of Prasat Phimai from the Northwest, Thailand, 11th-12th Century (Photo by Pia Conti)



Figure 10: Bronze Trailokyavijaya, Phimai, Thailand, 11th-12th Century, Bangkok National Museum, Inv. 2.271 (Courtesy of Paisarn Piemmettawat)



Figure 11: Vajrapāṇi, Gate of Victory, Southern *Gopura*, Phimai, Thailand, 11th-12th Century (Photo by Pia Conti)

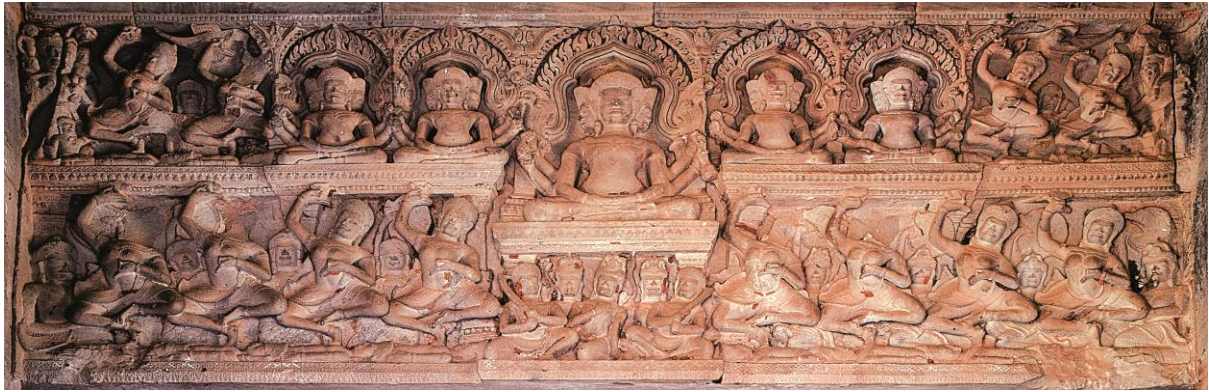


Figure 12a: Akṣobhya Lintel, Phimai, Thailand, 11th-12th Century (Courtesy of Paisarn Piemmettawat)



Figure 12b: Cakrasaṃvara Lintel, Phimai, Thailand, 11th-12th Century (Courtesy of Paisarn Piemmettawat)



Figure 12c: Akṣobhya (Close-up), Phimai, Thailand, 11th-12th Century (Photo by Pia Conti)



Figure 12d: Cakrasamvara Dancing on Elephant Head (Close-up), Phimai, Thailand, 11th-12th Century (Photo by Pia Conti)



Figure 13: Bronze Vajrasattva, Barong Lovea, Cambodia, 10th-11th Century, Phnom Penh National Museum, Inv. Ga 5432, Formerly E. 808 (Courtesy of Peter Sharrock)



Figure 14: Bronze Mould Showing Khmer Tantric Universe, Poipet, Cambodia, 12th Century, Phnom Penh Museum, Inv. Ga 5657 (Courtesy of the Phnom Penh National Museum)



## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The term *nāga*-enthroned (instead of the usual *nāga*-protected) Buddha dissociates the icon from the Mucalinda myth which plays a significant role in Theravāda Buddhism, but does not seem to play a role in Mahāyānist Buddhist societies (Sharrock 2011). Furthermore, the term *nāga*-enthroned Buddha seems to convey more powerfully the acquisition of the transcendent status which the Buddha gained in Mahāyāna and tantric belief systems.

<sup>2</sup> Arlo Griffiths (2013: 72-75) has recently proposed to identify „Satyavarman as king Satyavarman of Pāṇḍuraṅga in Champā.“ This Satyavarman reigned in the last quarter of the eight century CE. He also proposed that Abhayagiri may be identified as „Ratu Baka hillock in Central Java.“

It seems to me, however, that the field of reference of the inscription is local. The lineage of the three tantric *gurus* which are mentioned in the Sanskrit part is a local lineage, with connections to a region near Angkor. Dhanus identifies Kambuja as the land in which the Buddhists work for their liberation [see stanza 15 in the Sap Bak inscription]. An overseas location for their sacred *tīrtha*, or place of pilgrimage, seems unlikely, since it implies that several tantric Buddhist travelled from Khorat or Angkor to Java during three centuries to keep up images placed in a holy place there.

<sup>3</sup> The ground plans, cross-sections and an excellent description of the architectural history of Phimai are given by Pierre Pichard (1976).

<sup>4</sup> Hiram Woodward (2003: 151) has proposed that the four central lintels represent the four bodies of Māra. This interpretation is grounded on his reading of inscription K. 953 found at Phimai and dated to 1041 CE in which the four bodies Māra are mentioned. Woodward’s proposal is highly speculative and relies on a complex web of possible associations which seem to me too tendentious to work.

<sup>5</sup> Most of the lintels and pediments on the outside of Phimai represent Brahmanical topics. Many pediments and lintels feature scenes from the *Rāmāyaṇa*. There does not seem to be a general tenor to the chosen scenes. The most common denominator I could find is the representation of a fight between just and unjust causes. Boreth Ly (2007: 35) reads the pediments and lintels surrounding the central sanctuary as a providing a political and apotropaic function.

<sup>6</sup> According to Marie-Thérèse de Mallmann (1975: 21), Vairocana in the *vajradhātu maṇḍala* may have a rosary, but not his three-headed and six-armed form.

<sup>7</sup> For a schematic representation of the Poipet mould, see Woodward (1981: 61).

<sup>8</sup> Many thanks to Hiram Woodward for pointing out that two of the wrathful deities in Phimai (Vajrapāṇi and Trailokyavijaya) are located in the southern part of the Phimai *maṇḍala*, a location traditionally assigned to *krodha*, as, for example in the esoteric *mahākaruṇagarbha* of Japan. If Phimai indeed represents a *maṇḍala*, the southern position of the *krodhas* may go some way in explaining the orientation of Phimai. The temple is facing south and not east, as most Khmer temples do. Woodward (2003: 148) reads Vajrapāṇi as representing Vajrasattva in his secondary role as one of the sixteen vajra beings represented in esoteric Japanese *maṇḍalas*.

<sup>9</sup> I have been trying to find an excavation report showing where the lintels which were not *in situ* were found exactly, but have as yet been unsuccessful. The closest to a report is Dagens’ (1995) paper where he gives an inventory list of lintels found *in situ* and scattered on the ground. With many lintels, he gives only a vague indication of where they were found and a description of their likely content. Dagens is also not entirely sure where the various lintels were located on the outer structures, since at the time he went to Phimai many were still broken and scattered on the ground. Dagens concluded his research stating that it is not possible to say whether the particular layout of the central group, where the non-Buddhist themes surround the Buddhist ones inside the temple, can be found elsewhere in the temple.