

Design and Symbolism of Prasat Muang Tam, Northeastern Thailand

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The *prasat* or sanctuary in the Khmer civilization emerged from organized culture. Khmer communities, starting from villages to towns, constructed different types of *prasat*. They varied in function and size, depending on the community that created it.

Religious, economic, political or cultural reasons usually lead to the building of a *prasat*. There are generally three types of *prasat*.

The first type of *prasat* is the mountain-temple. Khmer kings, powerful in both the economy and politics of the kingdom, created shrines for their coronation as a universal monarch (*chakravartin*). This type of *prasat* was unified with the Great God (Mahadeva) in the form of a phallic emblem (*Sivalinga*). The emblem was enshrined at the centre of the temple to dignify the temple's central power and to generate prosperity for the kingdom's people. Each mountain-temple also represented the sacred mountain, the Sumeru which, according to the



Door entrance on the left-southern wing of the main eastern gate of the outer wall. Lintel, pediment, and pilaster design are in style B.

Hindu and Buddhist conception of the universe, was situated at the centre of the king's new capital. It was located in the middle of the kingdom, following the concept of the *mandala* (sacred boundary), A Khmer king, therefore, constructed a mountain-temple only at the centre of his capital, the town of Angkor.

The concept of constructing a mountain-temple began in the reign of Jayavarman II (802-850) in Phnom Kulen. The first mountain-temple was probably the Krus Preah Aram Rong Chen. And the last in the Khmer empire was the Bayon, constructed by Jayavarman VII (1181-1219) at the centre of the town of Angkor Thom. Because not every Khmer king had the same power, in all the six centuries of the Angkor period, only about 12-13 mountain-temples were discovered.

The second type of Khmer *prasat* are those dedicated to royal ancestors. Khmer kings built them simultaneously with the mountain-temples. After a Khmer king's accession to the throne, he would construct public foundations such as a *prasat* dedicated to his ancestors and a mountain-temple. The concept of constructing a *prasat* for ancestors

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Perspective view of the core buildings of Prasat Muang Tam in its natural environment. Foreground shows one of the four L-shaped sacred ponds outside the gallery.



The remaining four of the five brick prang (towers). The middle, which is also the main prang, has already disintegrated.



Eastern gate of the inner gallery flanked on each side by two balustraded windows.



The southern gate of the outer wall is in style B. Its only entrance is flanked on both sides by a window with four balusters.



Central gate (type A) of the outer wall on the east.

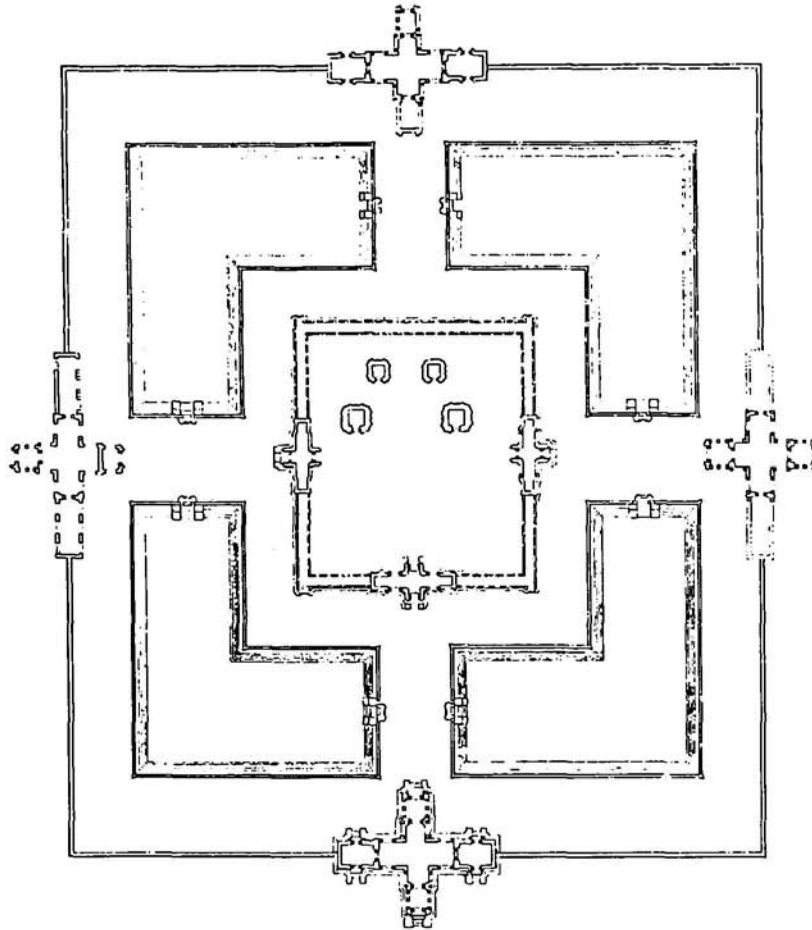


Details of the eastern gate of the inner gallery shows lintel in style A2 and pediment in style A.

came from the desire to create stability to the throne before a Khmer king's coronation. A Khmer king becomes a *cakravartin* by using the relation with his ancestors for his protection. It was also used to induce prosperity in the kingdom, which was more or less also a function of the mountain-temple.

also the centre of the economic network. The construction of this sanctuary sometimes originated from the king's command, primarily for his glorification or his victory. Other times, they were constructed for religious purposes such as in Hinduism. Some of these sanctuaries were built along the traditional

architecture evolved from the original elements of the sanctuaries dedicated to ancestors. They were accomplished from the royal style of the mountain-temples. Artistic styles throughout the kingdom were patterned after the mountain-temple as it was the centre of the empire. In fact, all of Khmer's artistic works are based on the



Architectural lay-out of Prasat Muang Tam

The third type of *prasat* is a sanctuary built by the various levels of the population. It was either built by a large community in the middle of a principality or a small group belonging to a village in the Khmer empire. This type of sanctuary, apart from being a religious shrine, was

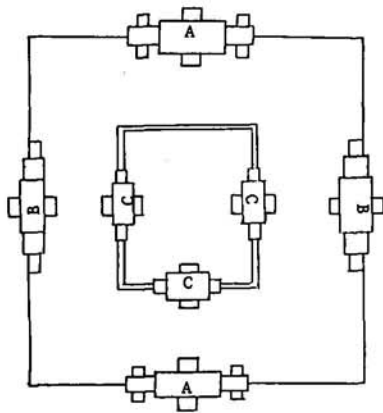
pilgrimage paths of Khmer kings.

Architectural Style and Artistic Schools in Khmer Civilization

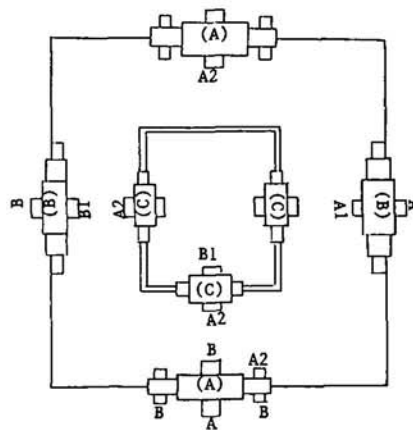
The art and architectural style in the Khmer culture originated from the accession to the throne of Khmer kings. The art style used for

original mountain-temple model.

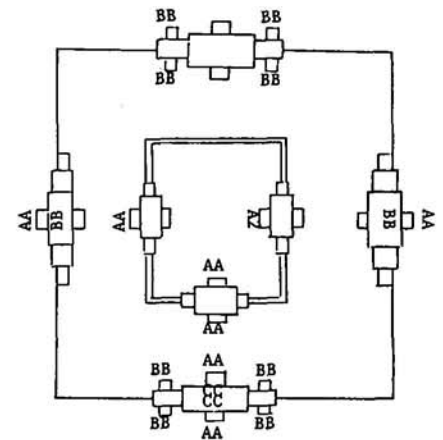
Art historians have always suggested that the Khmer art found in present-day Thailand is in the original Khmer form or very near that found in Cambodia. At the same time, they also agree that actually



1. Diagrammatic lay-out of gopura (gate) types A, B, C



2. Diagrammatic lay-out of lintel styles A, A1, A2, B, B1



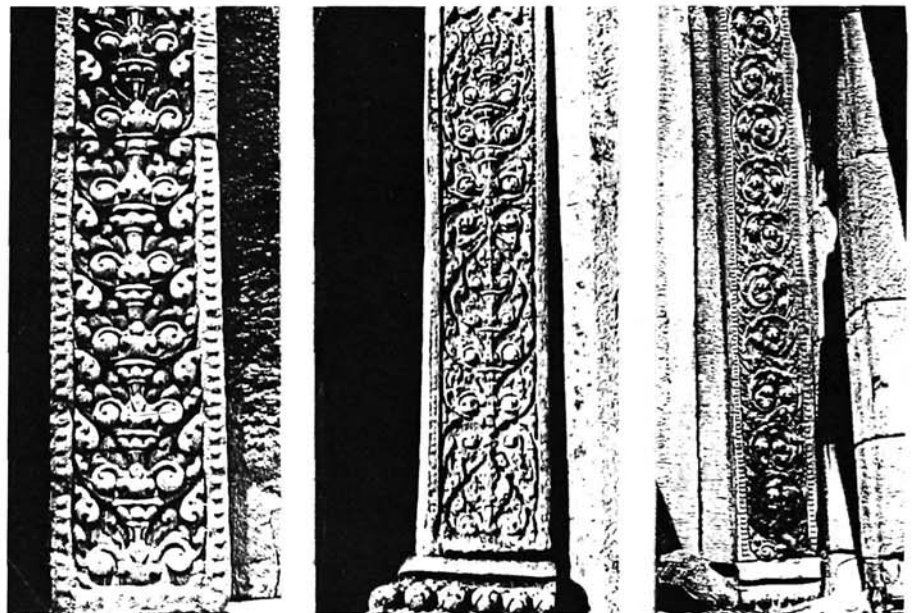
3. Diagrammatic lay-out of pilaster styles A, B, C

Architectural Lay-out and Building Structure.

there are differences existing in the forms of Khmer art. The location of the art school has a lot to do with this as some principalities produced their own peculiar artistic spirit. In parallel with highly aesthetic styles are cosmopolitan areas in Angkor.

According to history, the Khmer civilization developed in two regions of Southeast Asia. One was around the Great Lake in Cambodia and the other was along the northeastern and eastern parts of Thailand. The region of civilization in Cambodia was however always the centre of Khmer power. And that part of civilization in Thailand composed mostly of outlying vassal states gained through marriage or established as bases for the central political power in Angkor.

But those former Khmer regions which are now part of the present-day Thailand were not underdeveloped provinces. They possessed their own society and culture. They had their own social centres and artists from the



Pilaster designs in styles A, B and C respectively at Prasat Muang Tam.

cosmopolitan to the village level. Therefore, apart from the artistic model from the centre of the Khmer kingdom, they also created their own artistic style which emerged from their own experience, intelligence, taste, and environment. Nevertheless, although their art is unique, it was basically patterned after the style in the centre of Angkor.

Prasat Muang Tam and the Cultural Environment Surrounding Phanom Rung Plai Bad Hill

Prasat Muang Tam is situated between the sixth and ninth village of Ban Khok Muang, Tambon Chorakhe Mak, Prakhon Chai District, Buri Ram Province. The

area is a part of a large plain on the southeast of Phnom Rung Hill.

Prasat Muang Tam belonged to a group of Khmer sanctuary complexes comprising Prasat Phnom Rung compound, Prasat Plai Bad, Muang Tem Barai (North Muang Tam) and two small shrines near Prasat Muang Tam and Phnom Rung Hill. Prasat Phnom Rung, on top of Phnom Rung Hill, is one of the most important sanctuary compounds in the northeast of Thailand. According to artistic and architectural evidence found, it dates back from the 10th-13th centuries A.D. On the other hand, Prasat Plai Bad, on Plai Bad Hill southwest of Prasat Muang Tam, dates back to the 11th century (Khleang-Baphuon styles). Inside the crypt of Prasat Plai Bad were found many bronze images belonging to Mahayana Buddhism and dating back from the 9th-10th centuries.

Prasat Muang Tam is located between Phnom Rung Hill and Plai Bad Hill. Probably constructed between the 10th and 11th centuries, it lies next to a large reservoir called Barai Muang Tam which is still in use. The two small shrines near Prasat Muang Tam and Phnom Rung may have been hospital shrines constructed in the 13th century during the time of Jayavarman VII.

Design of Prasat Muang Tam

The Khmer architecture is an architectural form of symbolism. It is a synthesis of architectural principle and theology. In the study of architecture during the Khmer civilization, it is always therefore necessary to deal with art and

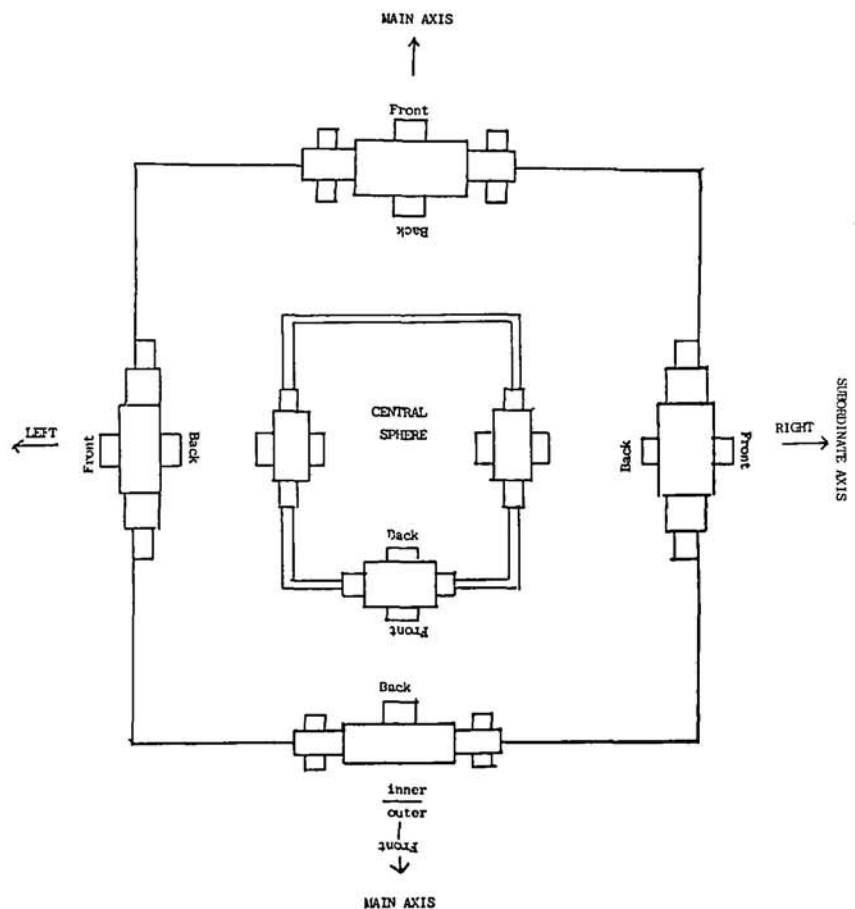
religion. Here, the design of Prasat Muang Tam will be discussed prior to its symbolism.

Prasat Muang Tam is a structure lying on a plain of about 110×125 metres. Its lay-out consists of four important parts:

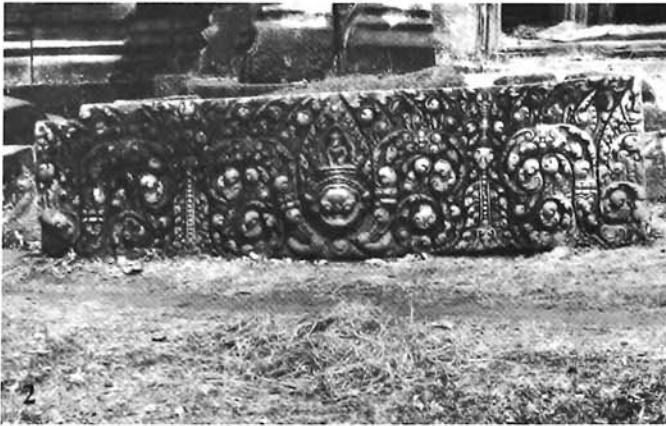
1. The five brick prang (tower) in the centre. The central prang has already crumbled down thus only the four surrounding prang remain standing. The two lateral prang in the front are larger than the two others behind. They are actually all situated further back towards the west, not in the middle of the gallery.

2. The sandstone gallery around the brick towers. There are only three gates (gopura) : at the eastern, northern and southern sides.

3. Four L-shaped sacred ponds outside the gallery at the four corners. Embanked by sandstone steps, the top part of each pond is carved to form the body of *naga*, the five-headed snake. Every corner of each L-shaped pond displays a head of the *naga*. Each pond is provided with two flights of steps at the narrow sides for fetching sacred water. These ponds are one of the most impressive sights at Prasat Muang Tam.



Diagrammatic Lay-out of 4 Analytical Systems in Architectural Design.



1. Stone lintel, in style A1, on the inner main entrance of the northern outer wall type B gate.
2. Stone lintel, in style A, of the gate on the outer wall on the east. This is the early Baphuon style of the 11th centuries A.D.
3. Inner door entrance on the right wing of the main gate. Notice the lintel in style A2, the pediment in style C, and the pilaster design in style B.
4. Innerside details of the eastern gate of the inner gallery reveals lintel in style B1 and pediment in style A.
5. Stone lintel, in style B, at the inner porch of the outer main gate. Also in Baphuon style, 11th centuries A.D.
6. Stone lintel, in style B, on the front side entrance of the southern outer wall type B gate.





Left: The outer wall enclosure is made of laterite. It displays the very neat and precise manner of construction centuries ago.

Below: Stone lintel of a brick prang (tower) on the Southwest representing Varuna in a niche riding on three hamsa. Baphuon style, 11th century A.D.



4. The laterite wall. Two and seventy-seven metres high, the laterite wall surrounding the whole monument has four gates (gopura), one each at the north, south, east, and west sides.

Prasat Muang Tam, when compared part by part with other Khmer structures, is rather small. But owing to architectural ability in spatial structural design, the clever use of horizontal line in the plan, the size and positioning of the buildings as well as the rhythm of the inner gallery and the outer wall, the monument exudes grandeur, elegance and perfect harmony with its surroundings.

Facing towards the east, Prasat Muang Tam's position follows the usual concept of Khmer sanctuaries. The main axis, from east to west is most significant. The inner gallery, the design of which is interdependent with this main axis, and the outer wall both lead to the important main entrance on the east. The outer wall is provided with type A gopura or gate on the east and the west. The less important gopura (type B) are on the north and south. The outer gopura on the west, however, is the least important.

In the inner gallery, the style and size of each gopura follows the same basic structure. Interestingly, there is no gopura on the west.

The symmetry of the gopura structure depends on its own sphere, not on the total plan. In the inner gallery every gopura has the form of a Greek cross whose front projecting part is longer than the inner one. The inner part contains the four sections which brings out the meaning of the gopura's design and symbolism.

The design and symbolism of each gopura are stressed at the entrance, designed with a lintel at the top which has a door-colonnade on both sides. On both sides of the doorway is a pediment and two pillars for support.

Concept of the Symbolism

Prasat Muang Tam is believed to have been constructed after the Hindu cosmology. This is supported by the presence of the five brick prang, representing the five summits of the Sumeru mountain surrounded by a gallery symbolizing Jambudvipa. The four surrounding ponds signify the great oceans encircling the Jambudvipa and the outer wall, the stone boundary limiting the universe.

That it belonged to a yantra, a written magical formula or symbol, after the Tantric (of the dominant feminine energy) mandala (sacred space) is something more difficult to explain. This is so because there are some details that cannot be seen from the plan of the sanctuary. The inner gallery group may be classified as manda, the centre, and the outer wall as la, the enclosure, in the concept of mandala, as the cosmogram of the universe.

A Yantra or mandala is complicated in itself. The functions

of *Yantra* may be divided into three: for reciting magic formulae, for meditation, and for architecture. There is also a special architectural *Yantra* for a deity, or a special *Yantra* for a deity or higher symbols in Hindu mythology such as *Srichakra*.

Through the author's research, it is now known that the architect of Prasat Muang Tam utilized some of the architectural elements of the Khmer *gopura* (gate). For example, the lintel and the pediment as well as the carved design on the pilasters, which belonged to a style of differing ranks relating to the axis, were adopted. And to clearly display the meaning and the symbol of a *mandala* and *Yantra* as well as the religious philosophy, the balance of symmetry in the Khmer tradition was used.

Elements of the *gopura* can be divided into the following:

1. Major and subordinate axes system
2. Right and left system
3. Front and back system
4. Outer and inner system

Although these four systems are distinct from each other, they are not totally separated from one another. They are, in fact, integrated with one another. For instance, both the main axis and the outer wall belong to different parts of the four systems.

Major and Subordinate Axes System

In the case of Prasat Muang Tam, the east-west axis is the major solar axis of the universe. The north-south is therefore a subordinate axis. Type A *gopura* is used in the main axis for the outer wall, type B *gopura*

for the subordinate axis, and only type C *gopura* for the inner gallery. Type C was not designed according to the style and main axis of the outer wall. However, in the main axis, its design followed the architectural grammar of the outer wall. It has a lintel in style A2, a pediment in style A, and a pilaster-design in style A.

Apart from their differences in forms, type A and type B *gopura* also differ in elements. The type A *gopura* in the east was provided with the lintel and the pilaster-design of style A for the main entrance. But in the right and left wing (north and south), the subordinate entrance used a lintel in style B. Its pediment and pilaster-design have the same rank of style B type.

Although the *gopura* of the outer wall on the west displays the architectural form of style A, it is considered low ranking. Some parts of the pediment and the lintel are unfinished. The lintel in the inner main porch is in the style of A2 which signifies inferior ranking.

Right and Left System

This system is related to the subordinate axis of the first system. This is especially so in the case of type B *gopura* (north-south). Although the form is the same the elements of the *gopura* show difference in ranking. The outer side of the right *gopura* (north) is provided with a lintel and pilaster-design in style A. But the lintel used for the left *gopura* (south) is in style B.

Front and Back System

This third system is closely related to the first and second systems. This is revealed when the symbol of the back part is

systematized to contrast with that of the front for both axes and is lowered to another level. The outer lintel in the main porch of the back *gopura* (west) on the outer wall displays style B while the pilaster-design is in style A. The inner lintel of the lateral porch in the northern wing is in style A2, its pediment is in style C, and the pilaster-design in style B. The inner lintel of the northern *gopura* is in style A1 while the inner lintel of the southern *gopura* is in style B1.

In the front *gopura* of the inner gallery, the outer part is provided with a lintel in style A2, a pediment in style A, and a pilaster-design also in style A. The back part, however, has a lintel in style B1, a pediment in style A, and a pilaster-design in style A.

Outer and Inner System

This fourth system is supplementary to the third one when attempting to show the graduation in the ranking of architectural elements previously mentioned.

The outer pilaster-designs of every *gopura* is in style A. But type A *gopura* in the lateral porches have pilaster-designs in style B. The inner door of the porch is a *gopura* in style A on the main axis (east-west). It uses the pilaster-design of style C. This proves the presence of ranking in the styles of pilaster-designs.

The pilaster-design of the inner door of the porch is type B *gopura* in style B while the one on the door in the south (left) is in style B1. This indicates that style B1 is lower in rank and as such is in order with the other elements in the symmetry.

The symbolism of Prasat Muang Tam may therefore be summarized as follows:

1. *Hindu Cosmography* - is clearly composed in the plan of Prasat Muang Tam together with the elements of the four systems.

2. *Hindu Philosophy of the Right and Left (Siva and Sakti)* - is used as symbol for creative force. Complimentary principles are used in the different *gopura* symbols on the north and the south. For example, if on the right is a male, on the left should be a female. Likewise, if on the right is Siva, on the left should be Uma, his sakti, or Agni versus Soma.

3. *Symbol of Kali Yantra* - as previously mentioned, the plan of Prasat Muang Tam, apart from displaying general Hindu cosmography could also serve as a *mandala* or *Yantra* in *Tantrism*. The inner gallery, which is the *manda* of a deity belonging to a *mandala*, is provided with only three *gopura*. This has never existed in the history of Khmer Architecture.

The triangle which was brought about by the position of the three *gopura* displays an inverted triangle. Its top, pointing downward is a form denoting the symbol of feminine *sakti* (energy). It can therefore be said that the symbolism of Prasat Muang Tam is *Kali Yantra*.

The five brick *prang* of which only four are still standing, show more of the local characteristics. The stone lintel of the already crumbled central *prang* presumably represents Siva. The lintels of the surrounding four structures display Siva and Uma riding the bull, *Nandi*. Krishna, on the other hand, is shown upholding Mount Goverdhana in the northwest and Varuna riding on three *Hamsa*, wild geese, in the southwest.

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