

COMMENTS ON DVARAVATI ART IN THAILAND

By Prof. Jean Boisselier

Before I share with you my thoughts on Dvaravati Art, it may be appropriate to specify what we really know about Dvaravati, from the historian's as well as the geographer's viewpoint. The fact is, we know very little about Dvaravati. If researches (mainly over the last 30 years) have revealed many unknown sites, at times unsuspected aspects of Dvaravati art and culture, our knowledge of history and locations have not made much progress.

The name Dvaravati appears in the official title of Bangkok and Ayutthaya. It is, of course, not by accident that huge Buddha images in Dvaravati style were installed in Ayutthaya, unfortunately at an unknown date.

However, confronted with history's silence and a rather confusing archaeological context, at the end of the last century and in the first decades of the present one, who would have thought of an art, yet unknown, and consider connections that no one suspected?

The existence of a Dvaravati kingdom and its approximate location towards the beginning of the seventh century is now well known. In his translation of the "Report on the Western Regions" by Hsuan-Tsang, Samuel Beal suggested as early as 1884, that the name To-Lo-Po-Ti was the same as Dvaravati. At the time of Hsuan-Tsang, in the Indochinese Peninsula, there existed



Fig. 1. Dvaravati coin. Silver. Diam. 19 mm. Seventh century A. D. Found at Nakhon Pathom in 1959. On the obverse is a cow and her calf. On the reverse exists an old Sanskrit inscription which reads "Sri Dvaravatisvara Punya" which can be translated as "the good fortune of the King of Sri Dvaravati". Bangkok National Museum.

three states from West to East: Srikshetra, Dvaravati, and Isanapura. The capital of Srikshetra was located near Prome, and this corresponds to all or parts of Lower Burma. Isanapura, the capital of Tchenla under King Isanavarman I, is identified with the Sambor Prei Kuk site (to the east of Tonle Sap). It covered an area which was more or less as large as present-day Cambodia. Dvaravati could have been located in the lower basin of the Chao Phraya River, between the kingdoms of Srikshetra and Isanapura.

Briefly mentioned by Hsuan-Tsang, it would be hazardous to conclude that the three states could have had common borders. Moreover, contrary to Srikshetra and Isanapura, which were more or less easily located, the site of the Dvaravati capital remains unknown.

Over the years, the cities of Ayutthaya, Nakhon Pathom or Lopburi were suggested.

In the years 1964 – 66, we even thought U-Thong was the site of the Dvaravati capital. Because its archaeological material corresponded perfectly to what could have been expected from a very ancient city. At that time aerial photography was not yet available to scholars. U-Thong was clearly outlined by a moat and it is where the only known royal inscription attributed to the second half of the seventh century, was found.

Recently, after multiple survey *in situ* and a study using a one to 50,000 scale map, the outline of the old city of Nakhon Pathom and its important size (about 3.8 kilometres by 2.1 kilometres) were at last revealed.

Approximately centered on

Wat Chula Paton, we did not hesitate to identify Nakhon Pathom with Dvaravati. It was here, in the years 1940-45, at some 800 metres to the west of this temple, that inscribed coins carrying the same Sanskrit inscription "Deed of merit of the King of Dvaravati" were found. This allowed Georges Coedes to undoubtedly establish, at last, the existence of Dvaravati in 1963.

Other similar coins (Figs. 1 and 2) were found later. They had the same characters as those belonging to the seventh and eighth centuries. Many others were also found in other sites, but none of them could

difficult to believe the two toponyms have been interchanged.

Although the location of the capital in Nakhon Pathom seems reasonably well established, the kingdom's dimension and history are still uncertain. For about 40 years, Dvaravati experienced a rather peculiar situation. It was then represented by an art, specifically sculpture, which was well defined by deduction. At the same time, however, its political existence had not yet been ascertained.

In view of this, together with the importance given to the use of the Mon language, there was a tendency

In the evolution of religious arts the trends were inspired by religion. As such, they do not have well-defined limits.

Therefore, one cannot, without risk, substitute a notion of Mon Art for the Art of Dvaravati. Neither can we extend the term Dvaravati to any place which has, more or less, an art similar to Dvaravati and link it to the use of Mon.

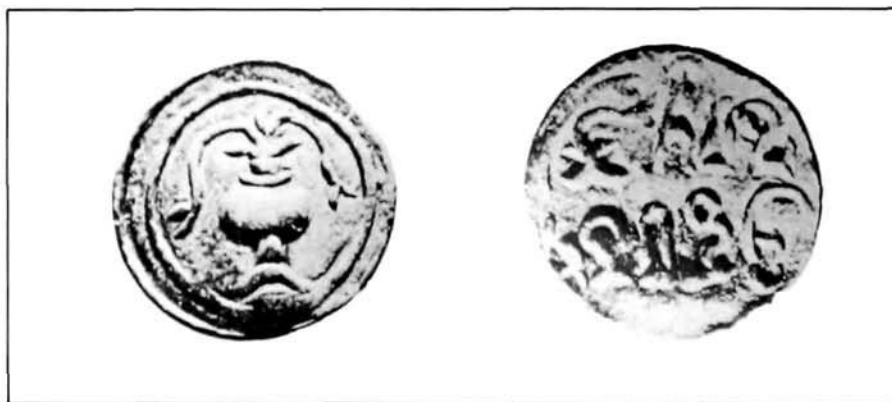
For example, why make a difference between the Mon art of present-day Thailand and that of Lower Burma, a region truly Mon? At the same time why ignore all manifestations of Dvaravati Art seen in Peninsular Thailand and the East, from Prachinburi to Battambang, beyond the border? Up to now, no Mon evidence has been found in these places.

Moreover, how can we attribute to "Dvaravati" a sculpture simply because its Dvaravati characteristics can be related to a Mon inscription. This sculpture was found near Viang Chan (Vientiane) in Laos (at some 550 kilometres from Nakhon Pathom).

The general tendency to put everything together under the term "Dvaravati" seems fortuitously schematic, confusing, and neglecting history. It is neglecting history because some existing texts should be taken into consideration. It is confusing because of the tendencies to associate Dvaravati to images and remains of monuments whose only characteristic in common is their Buddhist inspiration. Rather unprecise, after all.

Facts given by the chronicles, published in German by Adolf Bastian, at the end of the last century are neglected. As in the West, in general,

Fig. 2. Dvaravati coin. Silver. Diam. 16 mm. 7th Century A. D. Found at Nakhon Pathom in 1959. On the left is a purnaghata (an abundant vase) while on the right is an old Sanskrit inscription which reads as in Fig. 1. Bangkok National Museum.



rival the importance of those found in the old Nakhon Pathom.

Twenty years ago, the identification of Nakhon Pathom with Dvaravati was again indirectly confirmed. Another coin, bearing the unique word: "Lavapura" (Fig. 3), was discovered.

Lopburi, of course, is a name attesting close relation to Dvaravati. It was often said that Lopburi may have been a possible capital of Dvaravati. But today, it is rather

to talk only of Mon Art or Mon Archaeology of Dvaravati. This was the title chosen by P. Dupont for his thesis, published in 1959. Essentially it was dedicated to his work on Nakhon Pathom.

This choice was somewhat ambiguous since different arts, which were not Mon inspired, may have existed during the Dvaravati period. It was also a hazardous choice, because it tended to give a definite role to ethnic and linguistic factors.

one tends to doubt the mingling of historical facts with accounts characterizing the chronicles.

But there is always the evidence of a few Chinese texts. These are the favourite sources of scholars working on Southeast Asia. It is rather curious and regrettable that only L. P. Briggs noticed the remarks of Ma-Tuan-Lin which can possibly enlighten our problem. This problem is the location of a place occupied by Dvaravati in Central Indochina, around the seventh to ninth centuries.

L. P. Briggs suggested two regions : *Chu Chiang* (or Chu Ki-ang, "Country of the Red River") and *Ts'an-Pan*. He tentatively placed Chu Chiang between the Menam Mun and the Menam Chi, right in the middle of Northeast Thailand. *Ts'an Pan*, he said, is to the south and west of the Great Lake. No doubt, one can find other information from Chinese encyclopedias and history books. Unfortunately, Sinologists have, for more than 50 years, practically ceased interest in the research of Southeast Asia.

Anyhow, the information gathered by L. P. Briggs seems of interest, especially when they are compared with studies on local epigraphy and archaeology.

If Canasa Kingdom is extended over the Nakhon Ratchasima area (Muang Sima and Buriram), where one of its inscriptions was found *in situ*, and if further east, the area included between the Mun and the Dong Rek region was probably an important part of Tchen-la, we are inclined to believe that Chu-Chiang is in the Chi valley. Hence, it may not be between the Chi and the Mun, as suggested by L. P. Briggs. Our hypothesis concurs with the archaeol-



Fig. 3. Lavapura or Lopburi coin. Silver. Seventh Century A. D. Bangkok National Museum.



Fig. 4. Standing Buddha image of Dvaravati Period. (Boisselier)



Left : Fig. 5. Wheel of the Law, inscribed with the text of the first sermon of Buddha. Stone. Diam. 89 cm. Seventh-Eighth century A. D. Dvaravati style. Found at Wat Saneha, Nakhon Pathom by H.R.H. Prince Bhanubandhu Yugala.

ogy of Northeast Thailand which has, up to now, revealed its relative originality.

Ts'an-Pan, considering the archaeology to the west of Tonle Sap, may be found only in this direction. And not to the south as well. It could have possibly extended to Prachinburi where, to our knowledge, no Mon inscription has yet been found. But the area seems to have been important from the beginning of the historical period.

If we add the above to what is known from Lopburi, from the chronicles (*Jinakalamali*, *Chamdevivamsa*, etc.), and from Si Thép, we are inclined to think that the Dvaravati Kingdom mainly covered

the areas west of the Menam Chao Phraya: the Menam Ta Chin and Meklong basins. The southern part of the kingdom probably extended to Phetburi. But its northern part probably did not extend beyond Nakhon Sawan.

Although the kingdom of Dvaravati seems to have been limited in size, the scope of its art was considerable. All scholars have, for a long time now, recognized Dvaravati art in a certain type of Buddha image. The Dvaravati influence should however not be confined only to one type of image. It is doubtful that the attribution to one type of image is due only to the existence of a kingdom which has left so little trace in history. It may be mainly due to the authority enjoyed by the School of Buddhism established in and around the capital.

The religious prestige of Dvaravati had not been forgotten during Ayutthaya's time, inspite of the passing of centuries and historical changes. This religious prestige was also the reason behind King Mongkut's devotion to Phra Pathom Chedi before his accession to the throne.

Here Phra Pathom Chedi's reconstruction and Nakhon Pathom's foundation shall no longer be mentioned as we have already devoted much time to this research. However, we would like to point out that King Mongkut's work should be regarded as one of the last philosophies of a modern king. It was entirely permeated by the role of a *Cakravartin* monarch.

From these various points, we remember that the astonishing influence of Dvaravati was not political. It was entirely religious. The spread of its art was a matter of be-



Fig. 6. A stone slab representing the life of Buddha when he returned, after his enlightenment, to his native town, Kapilavastu. Shown on his left is his former wife, Bimba. She was so grieved she spread her hair to wash his feet. The young boy, held by a nurse, and pointing at Buddha is probably Rahula, their son. Seated on the right are Buddha's father and a relative. In this scene a wooden pavilion and a wooden gate are in view. Found at Muang Fa Daed Sung Yang, Kalasin. Khonkaen National Museum. Dvaravati style. Ninth-Tenth century A.D.

lief, not the result of military conquests.

Many years ago, Dvaravati Art was represented by a certain type of construction belonging to a specific profile, especially sculptures. **The different varieties of its sculpture, somewhat concealed by the standing Buddha images, (Fig.4) seem to be characterized by the Wheel of the Law (Fig.5).** On the other hand, the Buddhist art of the Northeast, as distinguished from the somewhat similar

“Chu Chiang”, seem to be characterized by sema stones, so often recorded (Fig.6).

The *Wheel of the Law*, was unexpected and exceptional at the time when Dvaravati art was flourishing. It had left many scholars perplexed. It has been called chariot wheels, *sema* or solar discs. Two such wheels, with inscriptions guaranteeing their Buddhist origin, were even recently proposed to be identified as Vishnu's *cakra*.

The importance given to these wheels of the law remains unexplained. It was probably inspired by a Pali school of Buddhism. Most of the wheels of the law were found in an area predominantly Dvaravati, especially in Nak'hon Pathom. Some were found in other places which were probably never a part of the Dvaravati kingdom. To mention a few, some wheels were found in Nak'hon Si Thammarat and in Yarang. Another was found in a temple close to Muang Sema, on the Korat Plateau. The wheels of Sithep are as distant from Dvaravati Art as from Lopburi art. But one was found in Aranyaprathet (or Battambang).

The same remark can be made for the stelae called “Buddha on Panasbati” (Fig.7). They are still enigmatic and probably of a later date than most of the wheels. The stelae spread over a different area. They were found in Phanat Nikhom, Battambang, and Phimai (1955). The reason for their spread in the said areas seems religiously influenced. And this may have resulted in a specific iconography. Western Christianity has also experienced similar situations with the spread of certain monastic orders.

Towards the end of the eighth and the ninth century, another problem arose for Dvaravati. This time it was somehow contrary to what had just been mentioned. A wave of Srivijaya influence, *Mahayanist*, came together with the empire's expansion in all central and eastern parts of the Indochinese Peninsula. Short-lived, it seems to have only impinged on Dvaravati.

However, it left behind very significant evidences. First, in architecture and the architectural deco-



Fig. 7. Buddha seated on Panasbati. Stone. Ht. 67 cm. Eighth to Tenth Century A. D. Transferred to the Bangkok National Museum from Pitsanulok Museum.

ration, the Srivijaya influence was a real renewal. This is particularly perceptible in U-Thong and Ku Bua, where the spread of simple Avalokitesvara images showed a specific iconography (Fig.8). Second, it gave rise to the importance of Buddhism in the Sanskrit language. This type of Buddhism was however not always related to the Mahayanist influences, which seemed to have



Fig. 8. Standing Avalokitesvara. Bronze. Ht. 24.5 cm. Eighth-Ninth century A. D. Found at U-Thong, Suphanburi Province. Srivijaya style. U-Thong National Museum.

Right : Fig. 9. Vishnu. Stone. Ht. 148 cm. Eighth-Ninth Century A. D. Found at Wat Wieng Sa, Banna, Surat Thani. Bangkok National Museum.

been established on the Korat Plateau (Phimai and Buriram area). This new wave of influence is revealed in certain foundation rites found in U-Thong, the discovered Mahayanist votive tablet which is inscribed in *nagari*, and old Javanese scripts.

Again, this seems to be a matter of religious influence, which unsuccessfully attempted to implant new schools of Buddhism. This influence is not even slightly mentioned in Chinese texts from the mid-eighth century. And who would think of talking about the absorption of Dvaravati into the Srivijaya empire when there is so little evidence available?

Another problem perhaps partly linked to the aforementioned, is the spread of Brahmanical cults in areas with a long Buddhist tradition. From the beginning of this century, Vishnu images have captured the attention of scholars. Their remarkable quality, leading one to think of "Hindu Art" often co-existing with Buddha images in pure Dvaravati



style. But, there is a profound difference between these sacred images (Fig.9), and those of Si Thep (Fig.10). They are aesthetically different from the Sithep Buddha images even if they are contemporaries.

These Vishnu images have mainly been found in Peninsular Thailand and in the East (Khok Pip). Could they really have been executed at the same time as other Buddhist images? It only seems apparent that religious artists and craftsmen can only work in the style of their own religion.

Therefore, at a given time and place, even when a particular aesthetic style prevails, it would be inconceivable for a *silpin vaishava* to create a Buddha image. Likewise, it would be the same for a Buddhist to execute an image of Vishnu. In any case, the style adopted was usually a reflection of the prevailing style of the religious sect or the school to which the artist belonged.

There exists an important proof showing that Vishnu and Buddha images were contemporaries. This proof is in the relief carving on the wall of the Tham Phra Photisat cave (near Saraburi), discovered only 20 years ago. This relief carving illustrates a text, which is briefly mentioned in the Buddhist Pali Scriptures. The text is however well developed in Sanskrit scriptures. It depicts the Buddha, teaching the Gods of the Human World, starting with Mahesvara-Siva and Narayana-Vishnu. But, all the carved images appear with Dvaravati features. At this point the writer would like to make a few observations on this relief :

1. Since the work is of Buddhist inspiration, a Buddhist aesthetic

style prevails.

2. Vishnu in this carving does not wear the usual mitre hat. It is because this mitre was always covered with a bejewelled *mukuta*, only seen in bas-reliefs.

It is not the writer's intention to cover the whole spectrum of Dvaravati Art in its complexity. Neither did he expect this art to answer all the historical and religious problems which are as yet unsolved.

Three points should be given more consideration :

1. It seems that the Dvaravati Art did not expand as much as one would like to think.

2. Dvaravati Art seems to have been a meeting point and a starting point for the expansion of various influences in religious art.

3. Dvaravati Art seems to have played an important role in the spread of one form of Buddhism. The importance of this role are revealed in King Rama IV's devotion to Phra Pathom Chedi and in the many original writings of Pathama Sambodhi.

— *Translated from French to English by Mrs. Janine Gray. This article is based on the French lecture delivered by the author to the Bangkok Museum Volunteers on September 20, 1988.*

Notes :

Prof. M.C. Subhadradis Diskul, SPAFA Director, questioned Prof. Jean Boisselier on his comment, "It would be inconceivable for a Silpin Vaishnava to make a Buddha image. Likewise, it would be the same for a Buddhist to execute an image of Vishnu." He asked why, in the fourth-sixth century A.D., during

the Gupta style in India and in the 13th-15th century A.D. during the Sukhothaistyle in Thailand the faces of the Hindu gods and the Buddha images were so much alike. They seemed to have been created by the same artist or come from the same studio. In reply, Prof. Boisselier explained that during the Indian Gupta

period, the Indian aesthetic conception was so strong it spread over both religions. During the Sukhothai period, the artists who created Hindu god images were probably already Buddhists, he said.

In retrospect, Prof. M.C. Diskul feels the reply to his question was rather unclear.



Above : Fig. 11. Rubbing of a stone bas-relief representing Buddha preaching to Hindu gods. The height of the Buddha is about 1.20 m. Eighth-Ninth century A. D. Dvaravati style. Bodhisattva Cave, Tambon Tab Kwang, Amphoe Kaeng Khoi, Saraburi.

Right : Fig. 10. Vishnu or Krishna. Stone. Ht. 119 cm. Seventh-Eighth century A. D. Found at Sitep, Northern Central Thailand. Bangkok National Museum.

