

Fig. 1 Stone lintel, dated to the first half of the seventh century A.D., found on the eastern side of the central sanctuary of Prasat Khao Noi.

## Pre-Angkorian Discoveries in Thailand

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**F**our stone pre-Angkorian lintels were recently discovered in Thailand. They were found only about a kilometre away from the Cambodian border, at the sanctuary on the 80 metre high Khao Noi Hill, located in Amphoe Aranya Prathet, Prachinburi. A modern Buddhist monastery is situated at the foot of the hill.

Twenty years ago, when the writer visited Khao Noi, there was only a Khmer style brick temple flanked by two earthen mounds. There was a stone lintel above the eastern door-way of the temple. One stone door-column supported the lintel on the left side of the temple.

The lintel dates back to the Khmer Sambor Prei Kuk style, about the first half of the 7th century A.D. It has two *makaras* (a mythical animal being a crocodile with an elephant trunk), one at each end of the lintel where a deity is seen riding on top of each end.

The *makaras* turn their heads inside and spew four arches. These arches are intersected with three medallions bearing an indistinct motif inside. The motif is probably Indra riding on an elephant and two divinities riding on horseback. Underneath the arches are figures of garlands with a triangular leaf motif inside as well as extending floral pendants. Below these motifs lies another row of scroll designs.

It is interesting to note that one could see only half of the body of the *makara* on each side (Fig.1). The stone door-column is octagonal with a rather large leaf-motif decorating each of its sides.

Judging from the form and decoration of the stone door-column, the pediments over the front eastern door, and the other three false doors in the form of a reversed U, on each of the three directions of the compass, this sanctuary might have been reconstructed in the 9th century A.D. And the lintel, from an original structure belonging to the 7th century was re-used. A stone inscription in Sanskrit and Khmer giving a date equivalent to 637 A.D. was also discovered in the area. It is now preserved in the Buddhist monastery at the foot of the hill.

In the latter part of 1988, the stone lintel at the main shrine of Prasat Khao Noi (literally, sanctuary on the small hill) was stolen. Fortunately, because of timely

publicity, it was eventually retrieved by the Thai Fine Arts Department. The incidence drew public attention to the sanctuary and prompted the department's decision to excavate the central and main shrine as well as the two earthen mounds.

The excavation, carried out from December 1988 until March 1989, revealed that the main shrine

was flanked by one redented square brick shrine on the north and a rectangular brick chamber on the south. All three of them have only one entrance on the east. The central and the northern shrines are situated on the same base. The rectangular chamber on the south is built on a separate base but linked to the central chamber by an adjoining passage (see Fig. 2 and Fig. 3).

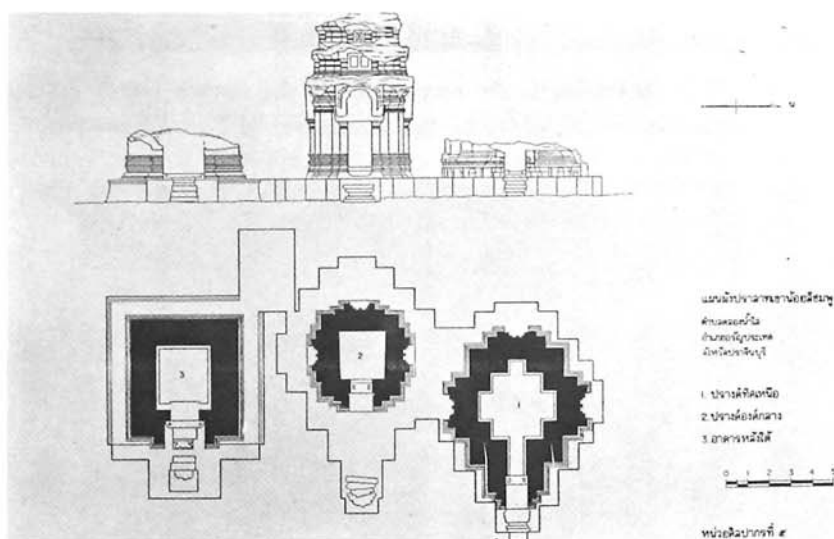


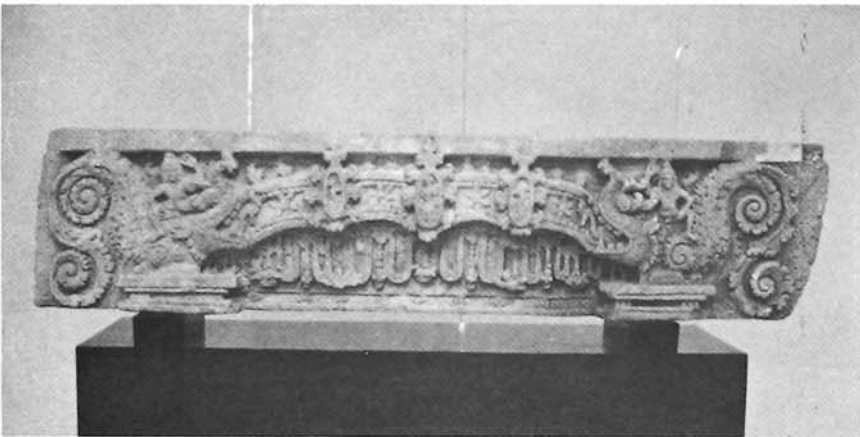
Fig.2 Plan of Prasat Khao Noi after recent excavations.



Fig. 3 The two mounds on both sides of the central sanctuary of Prasat Khao Noi as they appear after the excavations made.



**Fig. 4** Stone lintel, belonging to the second half of the seventh century A.D., discovered on the eastern side of the northern sanctuary of Prasat Khao Noi.



**Fig. 5** Stone lintel, from the first half of the seventh century A.D., found on the southern side of the northern sanctuary of Prasat Khao Noi.

Discovered on the eastern side of the small shrine on the north is a very beautiful sandstone lintel. It probably dates back to the second half of the 7th century A.D. (the Khmer Prei Kmeng style). This  $135 \times 50 \times 19$  cm. lintel is decorated with an arch in the middle, intersected with three medallions.

The arch itself has beads ornamenting the borders and has two flowers at the centre. Its ends curve inside in a beautiful leaf design. The medallions have no motifs inside but

are surrounded with floral motifs. Under the arch are beautifully carved garlands and hanging floral pendants. A triangular leaf motif is seen in each garland.

Above the arch are carved leaf motifs. On each side of the lintel figures a seated divinity in the attitude of adoration. One of the divinity's leg is lifted up in front of a large leaf motif upon a base. A line of scroll designs join the two bases together. This lintel can be regarded as one of Thailand's best discovered lintels

from the second half of the seventh century. (Fig. 4).

Also found during the excavation is a lintel of the first half of the seventh century A.D. (Khmer Sambor Prei Kuk style), found on the south of the northern shrine. This  $150 \times 35 \times 16$  cm. stone lintel resembles the lintel of the main central shrine. It also has a *makara* at each end, bearing a rider and spewing an arch.

Swan figures dominate this lintel. They are seen coming out from the mouth of each *makara*. They are also depicted in the three medallions on the arch. The swan at the centre arch looks outward while the other two are looking towards the central one.

The medallions are quite beautifully surrounded with floral motifs. Two rows of beads and four flowers decorate the arch. Underneath are garlands and floral pendants and above are leaf motifs. The rider of the *makara* is lifting up one hand.

The *makara* is standing upon a base. Its trunk is well curved upwards. The tail is beautifully carved into two scrolls and the mythical animal is standing upon a base. A line of leaf motifs joins these two bases together (Fig. 5).

On the west of the northern shrine, a stone lintel belonging to the second half of the eighth century A.D. was likewise unearthed. This Khmer Prei Kmeng style lintel, similarly possesses an inside curling arch at both ends. The middle part is carved with garlands, hanging floral pendants underneath and leaf motifs on top.

This  $1.20 \times 50 \times 40$  cm. large lintel has five medallions decorated with floral motifs and a swan inside each of them. The central swan faces

outwards whereas the other two on each side have heads positioned in opposite directions.

Beads, four flowers and leaf motifs decorate the body of the arch. A standing lion figures on each side of the lintel. The one on the right side (of the lintel) is unfinished. A line of scroll designs at the bottom joins a plain base on each side of the lintel together (Fig. 6).

The last stone lintel was discovered on the northern side of the northern shrine. It is carved from sandstone and measures 188 × 42 × 15 cm. The lintel dates back to the first half of the seventh century A.D. (Khmer Sambor Prei Kuk style).

At the centre of this stone lintel is an arch with three medallions spewed by a *makara* at each side. The *makara* has a rider and its trunk curves down much lower than those of the southern lintel (Fig. 5).

The central medallion shows Indra riding on his mount, the elephant Airavata with one head. The god is flanked by other two divinities riding on horseback and turning their faces outside. There are, as usual, garlands and hanging floral pendants underneath and leaf motifs on top. A line of floral motifs joins together the two pedestals under the *makaras* (Fig. 7).

A swan again comes out from the mouth of each *makara*. The arch is decorated with floral motifs and bead borders. It is rather surprising that this lintel, representing Indra, the god of the eastern direction, was unearthed on the north, instead of on the east, of the sanctuary.

As has been described, one realises that the artists of the northern sanctuary tried to keep the order of the lintels. They kept the Sambor Prei

Kuk style on the north and south and the Prei Kmeng style on the east and west. The date of the sanctuary should be about the middle of the seventh century A.D. Some of the steps leading up to the three shrines are carved in the form of "en accolade".

These three shrines were probably constructed for Hinduism of the Saivite sect as many *sivalingas* and their bases, including foundation stones, have been unearthed (Fig. 8). The most interesting object is probably a pair of square stone bases for door-columns on the east of the northern shrine. Its front part represents the standing elephant

whereas each lateral part represents a seated lion or monkey (?) (Fig. 9).

Apart from these interesting objects, a stucco male torso wearing a costume very much like that of the Khmer Koh Ker style (first half of the tenth century A.D.) was excavated, including the feet of a small stone statue upon a base with a tenon and bas-reliefs representing the head of a bull or a horse and a bird.

Not many terracotta objects were unearthed except some small oil-lamps, a conch for pouring lustral water and a plate with a tall base which might be a candlestick. As for metal objects the most important

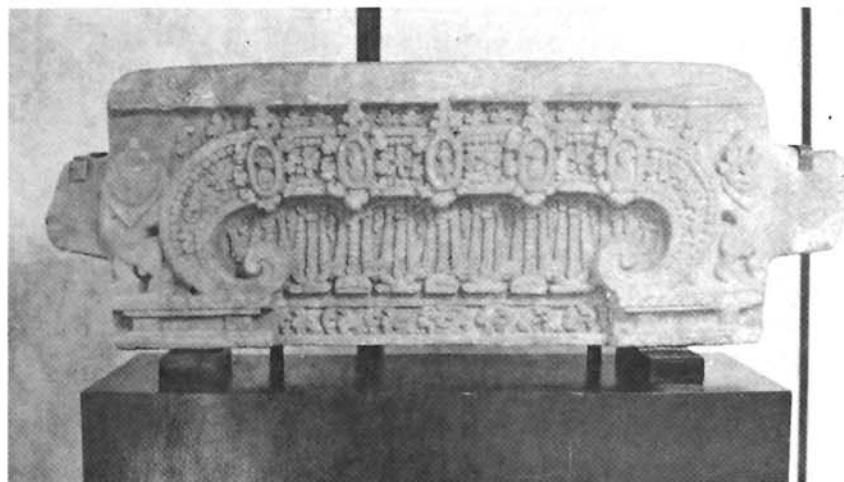


Fig. 6 Stone lintel, dated to the second half of the seventh century A.D., uncovered in the eastern side of the northern sanctuary of Prast Khao Noi.

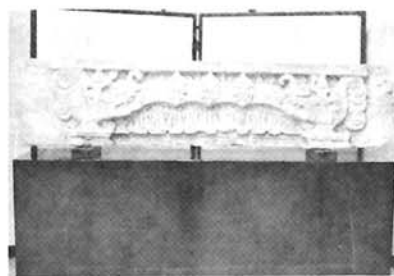


Fig. 7 Stone lintel, from the first half of the seventh century A.D., found on the northern side of the northern sanctuary of Prasat Khao Noi.



Fig. 8 Sivalinga, or the phallic emblem of Siva (centre) and foundation stones found at Prasat Khao Noi.



Fig. 9 Stone bases of wooden columns (?) discovered on the eastern side of the northern sanctuary of Prasat Khao Noi.



Fig. 10 Another stone lintel, belonging to the second half of the seventh century A.D., found at Prasat Ban Noi, Vadhana Nakhon District, Prachinburi Province, east of Thailand.

found is which, at the 1.8 cm. wide end, are inscribed Khmer letters in Sanskrit language. They can be translated as “should be permitted” “for a governor” or “should be killed”. The script can be dated back to the 11th century A.D.

Behind the northern sanctuary a buried human skeleton was found with its head towards the southeast. Although the body was tied, only the skeleton legs and the back part of the

skull were left intact. Thirteen earthenwares, plain and engraved, were also unearthed with the skeleton.

Apparently, the swan figures are quite popular on the lintels at Prasat Khao Noi. The same can also be noticed on the stone lintel found in the sanctuary of Ban Noi or Prasat Ban Noi. This sanctuary is located in Amphoe Vathana Nakhon, Province of Prachinburi, not very far from Prasat Khao Noi. The lintel from

Prasat Ban Noi is now preserved in the Bangkok National Museum and belongs to the Khmer Prei Kmeng style (second half of the seventh century A.D. (Fig. 10).

On the Prasat Ban Noi lintel's arch, both ends are curved inside. The arch is decorated with three medallions which are ornamented with floral motifs both inside and outside. The arch is filled with floral and leaf designs, the borders are also beaded.

Underneath are garlands with a triangular leaf motif inside, intersected with hanging floral pendants. On top are leaf and two half floral motifs.

A swan takes a prominent place at the end of each side of the lintel. In its beak, which is facing outward, is a hanging floral pendant. A row of flowers connect two bases upon which the swans are standing. This lintel can again be reckoned as one of the nicest lintel, of the second half of the seventh century A.D., ever discovered in Thailand.

The four pre-Angkorian stone lintels, undoubtedly are some of Thailand's most beautiful discoveries. Their discoveries opened up new avenues for research, especially in the fields of art and history. Many queries are now being asked about the lintels and not the least is the question: *Why were swan figures so popular in eastern Thailand during the second half of the seventh century A.D.?*

Needless to say, a lot of studies and hard work still have to be done before any answers are made. The lintel discoveries are only the beginning of still more researches on Thailand during the pre-Angkorian period. ■