

A VISNU STATUE FROM SOUTHERN CAMBODIA

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LIKE many other countries in Southeast Asia, Cambodia had been very much influenced by the culture and civilization of the Indian subcontinent. Inscriptional and other archaeological finds discovered mainly during the first half of this century and their subsequent studies by various scholars have contributed to a large extent to the reconstruction of the early period of Cambodian history.

Over the last few decades, prior to the present political turmoil in the country, a fair amount of new material has been brought to light among which is a four-armed statue of Visnu from Phnom Thon Mon in the southern part of Cambodia.

The site known as Phnom Thon Mon is located in the province of Kandal, about 35 kilometres south of the capital Phnom Penh. It is a hill roughly 25 metres high on top of which stands a Buddhist monastery. This site was known to E. Aymonier¹ and H. Parmentier who visited it in the 1930s reported finding among other things, a small four-armed statue made of schist and a relief depicting the battle of a crowned monkey with a buffalo.²

At about 100 metres to the south of Phnom Thon Mon, a few mounds containing remains of at least two brick towers can still be recognized. It was from one of these mounds that, one day in 1966, a peasant while ploughing unearthed a four-armed male statue. Parmentier did mention a four-armed statue during his visit to Phnom Thon Mon. However, the statue which has just been discovered cannot be the one mentioned by Parmentier for two reasons. First, the new statue is made of sandstone and not of schist as Parmentier reported; second, aged monks in the monastery, who still remember Parmentier's visit in 1932, maintain that the statue he mentioned was taken away from the monastery after his visit by a French resident. During the present writer's visit to Phnom Thon Mon in 1966, fragments of a hand holding a conch were found on another mound at the foot of the hill. Judging from their size, they must have belonged to a life size image.

The new statue represents a standing Visnu with four arms. It is placed in a horseshoe arch which links the upper arms and the head of the god to a base which still has its tenon intact. The god wears a cylindrical mitre, the upper part of which is slightly larger than the base. The top of the mitre slightly protrudes upwards. Curved eye-brow, short nose and a large mouth with thick lips on an oval face and long-lobed ears give a rather strange facial expression to this image. The god is represented holding his usual attributes: *bhu*, 'earth' in the lower right hand, *cakra*, 'discus' in the upper right, *sankha*, 'conch' in the upper left and *gada*, 'club' in the lower left. He wears a short dress draped around the body and fastened by a filiform belt. White paint covering this part of the body makes a close examination of the dress impossible.

¹E. Aymonier, *Le Cambodge*, I, 1900, pp. 203–206.

²H. Parmentier, "Complement a l'art khmer primitif", *Bulletin de l'Ecole Francaise d'Extreme-Orient/BEFEO*, XXXV, 1935, p. 22.

Four-armed Visnu images have been found in many parts of Southeast Asia. Louis Malleret in his important work in the Mekong delta distinguished two traditions.³ The first one, the Khmer tradition, is the most frequently represented in Indochina. The god is represented holding in his upper left hand a conch and a discus in the upper right. The lower left hand holds a club and the lower right a ball or 'earth'.

The second tradition, according to Malleret, seems to have been introduced to Cambodia from the Malay Peninsula. It has Visnu holding a conch in his lower left hand while in the Khmer tradition, this attribute is held in the upper left hand.

The Phnom Thon Mon image clearly belongs to the first tradition which is popular in the preangkor period right through to the classical period of Angkor in Khmer statuary. It recalls by its appearance another Visnu statue from Tuy-Hoa in southern Vietnam.⁴ In his major study of *La Statuaire preangkorienne*, Pierre Dupont believed that the Tuy-Hoa image belongs to the end of the Kompong Preah style of Khmer statuary.⁵ Professor Jean Boisselier, when studying the statuary of Champa, attributed the Tuy-Hoa image to the ancient principality of Panduranga in Champa.⁶

The horseshoe arch of the Phnom Thon Mon image and that of the Tuy-Hoa are strikingly similar and so are the two supports under the lower hands and the way the four arms hold the attributes. However, the cylindrical mitre of the Phnom Thon Mon statue differs considerably from that of the Tuy-Hoa Visnu. Instead, it is almost identical with the mitre of a Visnu image from Pechaburi in southern Thailand.⁷ The dress of the Phnom Thon Mon image, despite the white paint covering it, appears to be comparable with that of a mutilated image from Prasat Pram Loveng in Cochinchina which Dupont grouped in a series of images belonging to the late phase of the Phnom Da style.⁸ Finally, the facial expression of the Phnom Thon Mon image with curved eye-brow, broad nose and thick lips recalls that of Cham statuary. If local traditions could be taken into account, it is worth noting that villagers in the area maintain that this statue represents a Cham god. This would not be surprising if one remembers that some dynastic links were established between rulers of Champa and Chenla.⁹

³L. Malleret, *L'Archeologie du Delta du Mekong*, I, 1959, p. 391.

⁴H. Parmentier, *L'Art Khmer Primitif*, I, 1927, p. 242 and p. 315; Fig. 108B.

⁵P. Dupont, *La Statuaire preangkorienne*, 1955, p. 186; Pl. XLI A.

⁶J. Boisselier, *La Statuaire du Champa*, 1963, pp. 72–74; Fig. 27.

⁷P. Dupont, "Visnu mitres de l'Indochine occidentale", *BEFEO*, XLI, 1941, Pl. XXVIII

B.

⁸Dupont, *La Statuaire preangkorienne*, p. 58.

⁹L. Finot, "Les inscriptions de Mi-s'on", *BEFEO*, IV, 1904, p. 34.

Whatever the historical context, the Visnu statue from Phnom Thon Mon belongs, stylistically, to the group Dupont called 'images tardives' of the Kompong Preah style of Khmer statuary in the second half of the eighth century A.D.¹⁰

As has been noted,¹¹ four-armed statues of Visnu found in various parts of Southeast Asia present strong affinities between themselves and further studies would undoubtedly help to focus on the different local artistic traditions of the area.

¹⁰Dupont, *La Statuaire preangkorienne*, p. 186; J. Boisselier, *Le Cambodge*, 1966, pp. 242–243.

¹¹Dupont, "Visnu mitres ...", p. 253.



Visnu from PHNOM THON MON KANDAL province, in southern Cambodia.