

# The Vat Phou museum and the archaeological collections of Champasak

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The archaeological collections of the museum of Vat Phou come from thirty or so sites in Champasak province, the principal ones being the monumental complex established on the western slope of the Mount Phou Kao and the Ancient riverside City that is thought to be the first capital of the Khmer dynasty of Chenla. The great majority of objects and vestiges conserved belong to the pre-Angkorian (5<sup>th</sup> c.-8<sup>th</sup> c.) and Angkorian (9<sup>th</sup> c.-13<sup>th</sup> c.) periods. Later Laotian Buddhist artefacts (17<sup>th</sup> c.-20<sup>th</sup> c.) make up part of the collections, as well as elements of a princely collection, now national heritage.

Enriched with some 1490-catalogued pieces (nearly 400 supplementary objects are to be entered in the inventory), the archaeological collections gathered together at Champasak are not all open to the public. The museum of Vat Phou, opened in 2004, shows a selection of 225 pieces representing various historical periods [fig. 1]. The rest are preserved in an adjacent store as well as in a warehouse in the town of Champasak. Some objects are on view in other museums, especially those of Pakse – provincial capital – and of Vientiane.

Over the last thirty years several inventories of Champasak archaeological collections have been attempted. The systematic survey of the pieces began only in 2009 however; it depends upon a computer database specially designed for the project.

The present study is the result of an initial examination of the data we have collected in the course of two missions assigned by the Vat Phou-Champasak World Heritage Site Office (WHSO) in charge of the classified site, the goal of which was a descriptive inventory of the collections and the enhancement of the value of the site museum.<sup>1</sup> Corollary to these tasks were the rearrangement of the museum's storerooms, the reorganization of the collections displayed and the training of local staff of the WHSO in the history of art, scientific inventorying techniques and the use of a database.<sup>2</sup> The programme of rearrangement of the collections displayed was run jointly with Bertrand Porte (EFEO), in charge of the sandstone workshop at the National Museum of Cambodia in Phnom Penh (NMC).

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1. These missions, carried out between August and December 2009, were organized in the framework of the activities of the Priority Solidarity Fund (FSP) for Vat Phou, a joint Franco-Laotian project undertaken with the technical assistance of Mr. Laurent Delfour, architect and town planner for the State. We take the opportunity to thank Mr. Thongsa Sayavongkhamdy, Director General of Heritage for the Ministry of Information and Culture as well as those in charge of WHSO, MM. Khankham Kenboutta and Bounlap Keokagna, for the support they have given to these projects, which will be completed in the near future.

2. The digital catalogue takes account of the information issued on the pre-existing inventory books, written in Laotian. These latter record the date of entry and the catalogue number of the piece, its dimensions, the material, and sometimes give the provenance as well as a brief description.



fig.1 : Museum of Vat Phou © C. Hawixbrock

M. Sok Soda (NMC/EFEO) completed this programme in 2011 with the training of staff of the Vat Phou Conservation Office in the restoration of stone pieces.

In this contribution, we shall begin by tracing the history of the constitution of the different archaeological collections from the region of Vat Phou. We shall then study their particularities, taking a selection of pieces as examples – classified by period and by iconographic type – which we shall attempt to place in the geographical and historical contexts of their creation.

## **Constitution of the archaeological collections of Vat Phou and the first inventories.**

### *The collections*

The objects making up the “collections of Vat Phou” were brought together under the supervision of the Laotian national authorities as of the end of the 1970s. A little earlier, Prince Boun Oum Na Champasak (1912-1980), heir to the princely house of the kingdom of Champasak and great lover of antiquities, made a personal collection of objects of diverse origin, of which the most remarkable (today disappeared) belonged to the monumental complex of Vat Phou and to the Ancient City. After the departure of the prince in 1975, these particular assets seem to have been, at first, left in his residence at Champasak. Next evolved into the “national collection”, the pieces were almost all moved to local administrative areas where they remained for a good number of years. Only the bulkiest archaeological remains (pedestals, threshold stones and big pre-Angkorian slabs) remained in the prince’s house: they were only recently moved to the Vat Phou museum. During an expert mission for UNESCO in 1986, Bruno Dagens identified four more storehouses of the sculptures: two in the town of Champasak – the municipal office and a warehouse – and two at Pakse – the museum of Liberation and the monastery of Vat Louang.<sup>3</sup> The pieces kept in the latter were transferred a few years ago to the Pakse museum, since renamed “Museum of the Historic Heritage of Champasak”.

With the beginning of archaeological research on the sites at Vat Phou and the Ancient City, in the 1990s (PRAL,<sup>4</sup> Leric Foundation; etc.), the Champasak collections were enriched with a number of

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3. Dagens 1986, p. 9.

4. Research Project in Laotian Archaeology. This joint Franco-Laotian project was directed by Marielle Santoni (CNRS, UMR 9993) and Viengkeo Souksavatty (Deputy Director of Heritage, Laotian Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism).

discovered lapidary elements. In 1999, they were moved to a bigger storage space, still in existence today. After the classification of Vat Phou on the UNESCO world heritage list in 2001, the site was given an organization with increased responsibility, the WHSO (or SAGV: Service d'aménagement et de gestion du Vat Phou-Champassak), which did not become fully operational until 2007. If its initial calling, similar to that of the APSARA<sup>5</sup> at Angkor, was of the heritage order (architectural restoration and archaeological research) some priority was, however, given to the touristic value of the site and to the socio-economic development that would result. With the surplus amount of a Japanese cooperation it was possible in 2003 to construct a building at the foot of the monumental complex to lodge the new administrative services of the Conservation. Very quickly, a part of the Champasak collections was moved there,<sup>6</sup> subsequent to the setting up of an exhibition hall and to the transformation of another hall for storage. The latter was soon filled up with a greater number of pieces, kept for the time being on the floor due to the lack of adequate equipment to bring them in. The difficulties from the constraints of the premises were increased by the protection made necessary by a series of thefts, of a number of remains left just where they were on the site of origin or in the monasteries (traditional conservators, themselves sometimes constructed on Khmer sites), as well as newly discovered pieces to be added to the museum collections. The problem was temporarily solved in the course of our 2010 mission. Thanks to storage apparatus optimising use of available space, a full functional rearrangement of the store was achieved.

### *The inventories*

At the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the conservators of Angkor made several visits to Vat Phou, notably Henri Parmentier in 1914 and George Trouvé in 1932.<sup>7</sup> H. Parmentier drew up a list of the outstanding remains he noticed on the site.<sup>8</sup> At that time, the sculptures were mostly gathered together on the upper terrace, around the main sanctuary (in front of the small south building known as “library”) or inside it, near the altar of the modern Buddha, installed in the hypostyle hall in sandstone or in the cella in brick. During his stay, G. Trouvé found none of the objects on the list established by H. Parmentier except for a single statue. It depicts an incomplete, standing, four-armed male divinity. This piece, which has since disappeared, seems to be a Viṣṇu of the Bayon period (end of 12<sup>th</sup>-beginning of 13<sup>th</sup> c.). Noting the poor state of preservation of the inscribed stele, the young conservator stamped several and asked the chief of the village at the foot of the temple to protect these documents from climatic ravages. Two of them were finally sent to the Phnom Penh museum: the very beautiful stele said to be “from Vat Phou” (K. 367), decorated on the upper border with the trident of Śiva, and a 9<sup>th</sup> century digraphic stele (K. 362) associated with the rule of the āśrama. Today, stored at the Angkor Conservation (n° CA 6835 and CA 6742), these particularly beautiful inscriptions may be admired by visitors to the Vat Phou museum on some stampings that adorn the entry wall.<sup>9</sup>

Most of the pieces viewed by H. Parmentier, if they were not recorded by G. Trouvé, have in fact survived and are conserved today at Vat Phou. Some, however, remain untraceable. It is the case of “a curious stone ornamented on each face with a *liṅga* under an arcature, three on each of the big sides and one on the two small ones”, with an inscription running along the base.<sup>10</sup> The architect compared this

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5. Authority for the safeguarding and development of the Angkor region.

6. In the course of moving from the Champasak storerooms, some pieces belonging to groups were dispersed, so that fragments of several sculptures are today distributed in both storages (these were assembled at the time of the last inventory).

7. Rapport pour la Conservation d'Angkor (RCA), 1932. Unpublished document.

8. Parmentier 1914.

9. These stampings were produced in 2010 by the restoration workshop of the Phnom Penh museum (NMC).

10. Parmentier 1914, p. 24, pl. XII, photo F, p. 56.

piece with a very narrow, elongated pedestal positioned nearby.<sup>11</sup> As measures had not been taken, this object remains unidentified.

In 1967, during her stay in Laos on a mission to inventory the royal collections of Vat Phra Keo at Vientiane, Madeleine Giteau was invited by Prince Boun Oum to make an expert evaluation of his Champasak collections.<sup>12</sup> Only two objects seem to have been photographed during her tour of the south: a pre-Angkorian mitred head of Viṣṇu in silver and a decorative Angkorian end butt in bronze, in the form of a three-headed *nāga* with raised hoods. Both these have since disappeared. Their precise dimensions are not known and neither is their exact place of origin (cf. *infra*).

Later on, during the 1980s and 1990s, other specialists attempted a descriptive inventory of the collections, but none was able to include the totality of objects.<sup>13</sup> In 1993, in the framework of the work of PRAL, we conducted a full photographic inventory, with the help of the photographer Christian Lemzaouda.

The first detailed inventory of the sculptures goes back probably to 1986, when the conservator, M. Bounlap Keokagna (assisted by M. Thongkouné Boriboune), was sent to Champasak by the Laotian Ministry of Information and Culture. At that time, only some objects collected from the main sites (Vat Phou, Nang Sida, Vat Louang Kao) and the pieces from the collection of Prince Boun Oum had an inventory number (a *K* or a *Kh* in the Laotian alphabet, followed by a number in Arabic numerals). A group of 279 pieces was thus listed. The collections being subsequently enriched by new objects, the inventory had to be revised. A supplementary number was added to the existing ones and, in the case of pieces from excavations, a code indicated place of discovery. For rather obscure reasons of enumeration, probably having to do with successive moves, other numbers were written on the pieces, sometimes very badly and with paints damaging to the stone. This latter system of reference, still in use, gives information in the following order: the initials of the site, followed by a Roman numeral indicating the material, then the number of the piece in Arabic numerals with a supplementary unit for each new piece. Each subdivision by material takes up the count at figure 1: for example, a piece with the number VP I (sandstone) 135 may be followed by a piece VP V (wood) 1 meaning the first object in wood to enter the inventory. The numbering having been entrusted to different people in the course of these last years, numerous errors and inaccuracies have resulted. For instance, sites of provenance are not always indicated by the same initials (to the site of Vat Louang Kao are attached the initials BMK, BWLK or VLK – the last being as well the initials that were used for Vat Lakhon). Objects of the same material do not appear systematically under the same Roman numeral. Statuettes in vegetable resin (*keson dok mai*) covered with gold or silver thus received the numerals II (metal), or III (precious metal), or V (wood) or X (vegetable resin). In addition, some objects were warehoused without having been registered and their origin is now forgotten. Furthermore, when the number of newly marked pieces is not reported at once in the inventory volume, duplications in the numbering may be produced. Cases of pieces that have not been given the same inventory number in the book as on the object also exist. Numerous confusions also result from the fact that the remains – of actually unknown origin – have been marked with the initials for the Vat Phou temple (VP), considering it includes a wide area. Of the 167 pieces marked VP, of which 87 are in stone, about fifty only are actually related to the monumental complex. The problem arises with regard to the ancient “Boun Oum collection” with the initials VP, except for some of the very big pre-Angkorian pieces (pedestals, steps, slabs) and the modern *bai-sema* recently transferred, catalogued with the initials HBO and HBH (*Heuan* Boun Oum/Houm). Lastly, errors occur

11. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

12. Giteau 1969, p. 64. See too, Art et Archéologie du Laos, 2001.

13. Dagens 1986; Michel Jacq-Hergoualc’h in 1998; John Guy in 2002.

when numbers partially or entirely erased were replaced; sometimes the new numbers do not correspond to anything at all, or to other objects.

In 2004, on the occasion of the installation of sculptures in the brand new museum of Vat Phou, Patrizia Zolese<sup>14</sup> and her team put together the first inventory in the form of a database. This recorded 400 objects.<sup>15</sup> Valérie Zaleski (Guimet museum) in 2008 created a new base under the Works format for the pieces on display. This work was resumed and completed by us as of 2009 – allowing for a change of support: David Bazin, computer scientist then transferred the database under the format Access. Especially because our aim was then to be exhaustive and to include all of the archaeological collections of the Champasak Province, the earlier mentioned incoherence of the manual inventories severely affected the task. After four months of the first mission (2009) it was possible to retrieve almost all the pieces as well as their numbers.<sup>16</sup> Out of nearly 1500 pieces inventoried, the collection comprised more than 950 remnants in stone, 309 objects in metal or comprising metal, 74 pieces in wood or vegetable resin and 160 in earthenware.<sup>17</sup>

The database is still being constituted. The integration phase of the most ancient collections has been completed. Now the inventories will be augmented with objects discovered in the course of the missions of PRAL (1991-1999), which will allow for reaching 2000 entries. Only objects coming from excavations carried out by recent archaeological missions other than those of PRAL were left aside for the time being, in the absence of documentation about the context of their discovery.

## The museum of Vat Phou

The single exhibition hall of [fig. 2-3] of the Vat Phou museum houses pieces from all periods from the late prehistoric to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The greater part of the space is, however, reserved for Khmer collections. These pieces are from the pre-Angkorian and Angkorian periods. Their presentation is thematic, the space allotted being insufficient for a chronological presentation of the objects. This choice dates from the first installation of the pieces in 2004 and was respected when the collections were rearranged in August 2010. The themes addressed are the following: epigraphy, Shivaism, Vishnuism, ancient Buddhism, architecture (pediments, lintels, small columns, antefixes, elements of roofing, etc.), divinities and animal guardians, daily life (domestic furniture in stone and ceramic), Laotian Buddhism. A secure showcase displays a small part of the objects and statuettes in precious materials (bronze, gold and silver), mostly results of excavations carried out by the PRAL between 1991 and 1999. Some important lapidary pieces are not yet exhibited since they would first require restoration. Those presented give, however, a good idea of their diversity and stylistic specificities. They attest of the potential importance of the archaeological remains yet to be discovered in the area (few excavations have so far been conducted) and allow for understanding part of its history. Pre-Angkorian pieces, especially statuary, are numerous. Many amongst these belong to the earliest period and bear witness to an original

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14. Director of archaeology for the Lerici Foundation, Politecnico di Milano.

15. The file, too old, could not be recovered, the obsolete computer park of the WHSO having since been replaced.

16. To mitigate various problems of numbering mentioned above, we have, for example, differentiated duplicates by adding a subscript. Numerous dispersed fragments were also reassembled.

17. The Khmer collections are made up of 734 pieces in stone and 43 in metal. Almost ten large-sized ceramics in good condition, dating from the Angkorian period, issue from the Boun Oum collection. The other ceramics entered in the inventory (a hundred or so fragments) come from excavations or from investigations carried out by various archaeological missions. Thousands of shards collected in the course of fieldwork will provide in due course a ceramic reference collection for the region.



fig. 2 : Exhibition hall after its rearrangement, August 2010 © C. Hawixbrock



fig. 3 : Exhibition hall after its rearrangement, August 2010 © C. Hawixbrock

style otherwise unknown in the Khmer world. As for the architectural elements shown, they go back mainly to the pre-Angkorian period and come for the most part from the temple of Vat Phou.

We shall present here the collections in chronological order. Without attempting to be exhaustive we shall consider several pieces exhibited, and also objects conserved in the storerooms, with particular scientific interest. The prehistoric period, the pre-Angkorian and Angkorian periods will first be tackled and then the collection of Laotian Buddhist art. The Boun Oum collections are characterised by a number of sculptures belonging to later local art, of which no example is shown. They will, however, also be dealt with for their originality and the questions they raise.

With respects to the collections relating to the Khmer world, we include in this presentation some pieces that, although disappeared, are known to us through photographs or descriptions. We shall as well refer to the few objects shown at Pakse or in more distant museums (Vientiane; Hanoi; Paris).

## The prehistoric period

Among the objects that may be dated to the prehistoric period, only two polished axes (BWLK I 671; PP I 672) and a scraper (VP I 514) are shown at the Vat Phou museum. These were all found during surface surveys. So far no preserved prehistoric site is known in the region. The scraper comes from the Vat Phou temple. However, the PRAL excavations made on the upper terrace, in the spring area (1991-1993) have shown that the ground under the rock shelter and in front of it was completely cleaned during the Khmer period and that these works would have destroyed all traces of a possible earlier occupation. The axe, from Vat Louang Kao (BWLK I 671), is incomplete, the extremity of the blade being broken [fig. 4]. Of substantial dimension (27,2 cm-long) and very well made, it was carved in dense sandstone perfectly polished. The object is sonorous when hit and could also be an element of a lithophone. Some other axes and scrapers coming from the Ancient City, from the temple and from Houay Tomo are exhibited at the Pakse museum.



fig. 4 : Polished axe BWLK I 671 ©S.Fradelizi/SAGV

About ten vases, pots and footed bowls of beige paste and decorated with motifs painted in red, typical of the Ban Chiang style, are conserved in the store of Vat Phou (VP VI 9, 28, 31, 33 à 36, 41). These objects, all complete and in excellent condition, were part of the Prince Boun Oum's collection. Their authenticity may be doubtful.

## The pre-Angkorian period

The first plastic and monumental forms from the Vat Phou region date back to the beginning of the pre-Angkorian period and thus constitute rare archaeological testimonies. We shall focus on them, for they relate to a still maturing art. Most of the pre-Angkorian pieces come from the Ancient City and the surrounding region. Some remnants were also found in the monumental complex of Vat Phou, up to now dated to the sole Angkorian period. These discoveries reinforce the hypothesis of a very long Khmer cultural occupation.

### ***The pre-Angkorian pieces belonging to the Ancient City and from the periphery of Vat Phou***

#### *The inscriptions*

Several inscriptions found in the Ancient City of Vat Phou are conserved in the site museum. The stele said to be “of Vat Louang Kao” (VLK I 736, n° of inscription K. 365) is the jewel: it is one of the most ancient testimonies in the Sanskrit language known until now in the Indochinese peninsula. Found at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century at the very heart of the Ancient City – at the mouth of the Houay Sa Houa stream or perhaps a little further south – on the lands of the Catholic mission, it is in the form of a quadrangular milestone, 1,80 m high, engraved with sixteen lines on each face, and extended by a long and wide square pillar with cut corners serving as a tenon. Dated paleographically from the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the inscription most likely commemorates the “foundation” of the Ancient City situated beside the Mekong. The *Mahārājādhirāja* (great supreme king of kings) Devānīka, “coming from far away”, would have created there a *Mahātīrtha* named Kurukṣetra, considered today to be that 4 km<sup>2</sup> area delimited by double earthen ramparts. Inside the enclosure, the remnants of more than thirty monuments can be seen, often associated with basins.<sup>18</sup>

Two more Sanskrit inscriptions (K. 1173 and K. 1174), kept today in the Champasak store room, are of major interest for the history of the region. Consisting of a few lines, they are engraved on two cubic pedestals found on the Houay Sa Houa 2 (HSH2) site, at Ban Vat Louang Kao, at the upper limit of the Ancient City. These are dedications dated by Claude Jacques to 590. Both mention erection of an image of the Bull (Nandin) by Prince Citrasena (the future King Mahendravarman), for the benefit of his father, Viravarman and his uncle Kṛtantapasa. These inscriptions seemingly confirm that the Vat Phou region is in truth the cradle of the dynasty that contributed to the foundation of the Khmer empire to which the Angkorian kings were keen to relate themselves. It is noted that the dimensions of the plinth of the pre-Angkorian Bull shown at the Vat Phou museum (VP I 369, cf. *infra*), from the same village, does not match either of the two pedestals.

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18. On these works accomplished in the Ancient City by PRAL between 1993 and 1998, see Santoni 2008 and Santoni *et al.* “The French archaeological mission and Vat Phou: Research on an exceptional historic site in Laos”, p.28, [www.vatphou-champassak.com](http://www.vatphou-champassak.com).

A little more recent, incomplete stele (PSE I 543, not shown) found on the Phon Sao-e, site beyond the surrounding wall of the village on the west side, presents an inscription hard to decipher, in which C. Jacques has nevertheless read the name of Jayavarman I. An inscription found 50 km south, on the two doorjambs of the door of the sanctuary of Houay Kadienne (Mounlapamok district), mentions this sovereign as well as the name Kurukṣetra. The territory of Vat Phou was thus still under the influence of the same Khmer dynasty at the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Other fragments of small sized inscriptions conserved in the store of Vat Phou bear some ancient characters or some truncated lines of little use.

### *The architectural elements*

Two pre-Angkorian lintels were found at Ban Vat Louang Kao, in the centre of the Ancient City. The one shown in the Champasak museum (VP I 419) was discovered in a rice field near the HSH2 site and belongs to the style of Sambor Prei Kuk [fig. 5]. The two *makara*, mounted by drummers, spit out together with the double curved arch the forepart of a horse. At the central inflexion point of the arc, a semi anthropomorphic *garuḍa* in an oval medallion holds a *nāga* in each hand. The other lintel, photographed in 1970 by Jean Filliozat on the grounds of the Catholic mission, is on show today at the Pakse museum. Its ornamentation is similar to the previous, but the tail of the *makara* – consisting of several rows of leaves (or feathers) – is emphasised. These two lintels, whose style seems to be peculiar to the region, may be amongst the oldest examples known in this category of such architectural elements.<sup>19</sup>



fig. 5 : Pre-Angkorian lintel, Vat Louang Kao VP I 419  
©S.Fradelizi/SAGV

A fragment of a lintel sculpted with flower garlands pendants under a curved arch decorated with curvilinear lozenges was seen under a house in the village of Nong Vienne and photographed by the PRAL in 1991, during the investigations of the Ancient City. It seems to have disappeared. Its iconographic characteristics suggest that it belongs to the series of lintels of the Sambor Prei Kuk period.

Other lintel parts of the same period are exhibited at the Pakse museum, one of them is probably from a later date since the *makara* is stylised.

A lintel with the stylistic characteristics close to the style of Prei Khmeng found on the surface of the mound of Nong Moung (Ancient City), was excavated in 2011 by the PRAL. It is broken and only two fragments have been found (at least one more fragment is missing). The flowerrets decoration of the medallions is entirely vegetal; the double curved arch is bordered with garlands.

19. Benisti 1974, pp. 154-155 and fig. 27; Le Bonheur 1988, pp. 73-74 and fig. 20.

Another lintel of the same type (Prei Khmeng style with reminders of the Sambor Prei Kuk style) was recently discovered in the ruins of the sanctuary of Phou Malong, located midway between Champasak and Pakse.

Seven pre-Angkorian *somasūtra* ending with the head of a *makara* were found at Vat Phou or nearby. One of these (HSH I 551, 1-2), put in the store, comes from the HSH2 site. Amongst the three pieces exhibited at the museum, one is originally from the Houay Tomo site, on the left bank of the Mekong.<sup>20</sup> Only the *somasūtra* of Koh Khong (VP I 465), brought back in 1986, is complete.

Part of a *somasūtra* bent at right angles has, furthermore, been found on the surface of the Nong Moung site, probably thrown there by temple looters. Although very much worn and incomplete, it does not seem to end in the head of a monster. It is the only water channel of this type known as of today.<sup>21</sup>

Some incomplete small, circular, perfectly executed columns apparently in the styles of Sambor Prei Kuk and of Prei Khmeng, are exhibited at the museum. Some bear rich garlands with multiple interlacing strands. The bare shafts are ornamented with flowerets rings. On the few preserved ends of the shafts, the bulb is quite well developed. A fragment of circular section, with a smooth shaft circled by a smooth ring lined with a thread in relief, was found on the southeast perimeter of the Ancient City. Another small embedded column in octagonal form and probably from a somewhat later date, belongs to Phou Lek (VP I 458).

A significant horn-shaped piece of accent (HSH I 607) came to light at HSH2. It is an original form never previously met with in Khmer art (not on exhibit).<sup>22</sup> Lastly, amongst the other architectural elements conserved at Vat Phou, seven pieces from the Boun Oum collection should be noted: three threshold stones of which one is in half-moon shape (HBO I 735) and two in “accolade” (HBO I 811, 812); three large flat slabs (HBO I 730, 731, 733), one pierced with two holes (door socket?); and a cubic pedestal in sandstone with a square central piercing (inv. n° lost). They date from the beginning of the pre-Angkorian period and were probably found in the Ancient City.

### *The Shivaite statuary*

Other than at the monumental complex of Vat Phou, few pre-Angkorian elements relating to Śiva have been found in the region. No statue of the god could be identified amongst the various bodies with two arms kept in the stores. He seems to be represented only under the form of the *liṅga*. Two of these pieces are on show: one comes from the summit of the Liṅgaparvata, the sacred mountain (PK I 487); the other, large sized, was discovered in the village of Ban Mouang Kang, beside the Mekong (BMK I 737). These two *liṅga* were sculpted from a monolithic block integral to the *snāṇadronī*. In both cases, the glans and the file are indicated in relief. In the Ancient City, pedestals with central circular openings were intended for *liṅga*.

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20. Parmentier 1927, t. I, p. 14 and fig. 1.

21. Another *somasūtra*, this one doubly bent at right angles, was found at Prasat Boran 321 near That Badom in the region of Stung Treng (Cambodia). Please, see Parmentier 1927, t. I, pp. 226-230. Vat Phou is some 150 km from the confluence of the Sekong where numbers of remnants of ancient monuments have been found. These two regions seem to have had contact with one another, as indicated by several lapidary elements in comparable style. On the importance of the Sekong, cf. Phon Kaseka, Tran Ky Phuong, Thonglith Luangkhot, “An archeological survey along the Sekong riverbanks in Southern Laos”, talk given at the EurASEEA 13<sup>th</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup> September-1<sup>st</sup> October 2010, Berlin.

22. Santoni 1998, fig. 14, p. 18.

We have mentioned above the couched Bull (Nandin) probably from the village of Vat Louang Kao (VP I 369) displayed at the museum. This large sized piece (H: 51, L: 108 cm), in very good conditions, is of faultless execution [fig. 6]. The forms are round; jewellery is absent.<sup>23</sup>

A very fine pre-Angkorian standing Gaṇeśa originating from the Vat Phou region is exhibited at the Vientiane museum.



fig. 6 : The Bull (Nandin) BWLK I 369  
©Marielle Santoni

### *The Vishnuite statuary*

Six pre-Angkorian statues linked to Vishnuite iconography - three Viṣṇu, one Devī and two Viṣṇu mounted on Garuḍa – are in the Vat Phou museum.<sup>24</sup> The three latter were found on the site of the monumental complex and will be presented below. The three Viṣṇu are fragmented and in a poor state of preservation. They are, nevertheless, recognisable either by the mitre, the mace, or the clothing. In all, more than fifteen pre-Angkorian Vishnuite images (including two images of Devī) were found in the region. They consist mainly in large sized statues in the round. One of the bodies shown (VTH I 526), previously conserved at Vat Thong [fig. 7], measures 138 cm, from the lower border of the skirt to the base of the neck; a head (VP I 210, origin unknown), is 42 cm in height. It has lost almost all details of the face due to the peeling of the sandstone. The god is always figured standing and provided with four arms. Clothing distinguishes two groups of representation: those dressed in a long Indian *dhoṭī* with median panel, and those wearing a short loincloth held up by a central knot, falling back as a pleated median panel that goes to the back of the body between the legs. In this case, the adjustment is not a criterion for dating, since the two traditions seem to have co-existed.<sup>25</sup>



fig. 7 : Pre-Angkorian body of a four-armed  
Viṣṇu VTH I 526 ©S.Fradelizi/SAGV

23. Cf. the notice by M. Santoni published in the catalogue of the Vat Phou museum, pp. 36-39 (Hawixbrock *et al.* 2012).

24. Notes regarding the body of Viṣṇu VTH I 526, the head VP I 210 and the Devī VP I 485 are published in the catalogue of the Vat Phou museum, pp. 22-29 (Hawixbrock *et al.* 2012).

25. See the pre-Angkorian Viṣṇu exhibited at the Phnom Penh museum (NMC), Jessup & Zéphir 1997 and Dalsheimer 2001.

Some pieces are unfinished, but distinguishable on two of them (VP I 37; VP I 78) is the mitre as well as the mace and the supporting arches, which suggest that they belong to the same period. Under a house near the Nong Vienne site was seen, along with the fragment of lintel earlier mentioned, the feet on tenon base of a statue broken at the ankles (disappeared piece). Traces of the tearing away of a circular instrument on the left side of the pedestal, probably a mace, suggest an image of Viṣṇu. A fragment, now disappeared, of Viṣṇu in a skirt (lower part of the body, from waist to knees) was found lying on the surface of the Nong Deunh site. Another was found near Pakse, some forty kilometres north of Vat Phou; it is kept in the store of the museum of the town. A rough-shaped statue of mitred Viṣṇu holding the mace and with supporting arches, from the Champasak region, is on exhibit at the Vientiane museum.

The magnificent head of Viṣṇu in silver with gilded lips photographed by M. Giteau in the house of Prince Boun Oum in 1967 – it has since disappeared – would complete this series. We do not know its exact dimensions, but it is described by Prince Doan Na Champasak as being of “life-size”.<sup>26</sup> M. Giteau dates it from the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. The presence of short lustrous curls coming out from the mitre at the temples, which is found on the most ancient Viṣṇu, allows for connects it rather with the first half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. It may be considered as evidence of the wealth of the region in the pre-Angkorian period but its exact origin is not, however, known. Prince Doan Na Champasak states that it must have been found in a pond in Champasak around 1962. According to the accounts of villagers, it may be considered to belong to site HSH2 and to have been unearthed during the digging of a tank for the military camp set up next to Vat Louang Kao in the 1970s. This tank has largely corroded the central building from where came the two pedestals of the Bulls (Nandin) bearing a dedication of Citrasena. The monument appears to be composed of three mounds that might correspond to three buildings. It is possible that one of the two other sanctuaries had been dedicated to the god Viṣṇu, which would not be incompatible with a Shivaite context; each temple could have sheltered one of the gods of the *Trimūrti*. This head in silver is the only statue fragment in precious metal known up to now in the Vat Phou region. A pedestal (PNT I 756 1, 2, 3) kept in the store of the museum [fig. 8] might be the second piece of evidence of the existence of statues in metal.<sup>27</sup>



fig.8 : Pedestal for a statue in metal with feet imprints  
PNT I 756 ©C. Hawixbrock

26. Na Champassak 1972.

27. It comes from the village of Phanon Tai, located in the southern outskirts of the Ancient City, near the Mekong. Smooth and of near cubic form it is made of friable grey sandstone (broken into three fragments). On the upper face, imprints of feet are sculpted in light hollow. A circular cavity shaped as an inverse cone is pierced at the center of each heel. These very deep cavities are extremely narrow and it is impossible to insert stone heels there. There is enough space for two metal tenons only, the imprints allowing to wedge the feet of an image of precious metals, also supported by a posterior tenon joint indicated by the angular mortise at the back, between the imprints. Their dimensions (23 cm long) suggest a statue about 1m high. The monastery of the village of Vat Phanon Tai, preserves in one of the buildings the rough-shaped statue of a mitred, standing, four-armed Viṣṇu. This temple is installed on an important pre-Angkorian site, considering the remnants visible on the surface under the modern buildings.

The Vishnuite statues found in the Vat Phou region show a high plastic quality. Unlike the older pieces found in the Mekong Delta – smaller and with quite flat anatomical forms – they exhibit a powerful musculature and sometimes a slight plumpness, as in the bodies VTH I 526 and VP I 407 [fig. 9]. They are also evidence for the significant worship given to Viṣṇu from the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> to the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, in a territory profoundly marked however by Shivaism (role of the Liṅgaparvata). Two pre-Angkorian inscriptions pay tribute to the god: one, the stele of Vat Louang Kao (K. 365), mentions erection of an image of Viṣṇu; another, a stele from the scree north of the temple of Vat Phou, dated from the reign of Jayavarman I, tells of the erection by a *svāmin* of an altar to Viṣṇu Nārāyaṇa (K. 1059).<sup>28</sup>

It would appear that at the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, Viṣṇu – the pre-eminently royal divinity (he wears the hairdo of the *cakravartin*) – was especially venerated by the Khmer kings. As a result of maritime trading, his image had been widely diffused in the coastal states of the Malay Peninsula.<sup>29</sup> Did the statues found in the Vat Phou region, even though some are more recent, participate in the same propagation of the cult of the god in all the Indianised areas?<sup>30</sup> Only in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, another period in which Viṣṇu was particularly honoured in the ancient Khmer world (he would have been the chosen deity of Sūryavarman II) is there mention at Vat Phou of the erection of images in his representation<sup>31</sup> (cf. *infra*).

Madeleine Giteau mentions another pre-Angkorian piece without precise provenance from the ancient Boun Oum collection; it has also disappeared.<sup>32</sup> It was a male two-armed, standing statue, beautifully crafted, but unidentifiable in the absence of attributes.<sup>33</sup> The countenance, with simply engraved eyes, is smiling. The hair is arranged in multiple rows of lustrous curls, which fall onto the shoulders. The earlobes are stretched and pierced, but do not bear earrings. The musculature of the naked upper trunk is indicated with care; a short smooth loincloth goes at an angle from the waist to cover the thighs. A long median panel, smooth, falls in front between the legs. According to M. Giteau, this statue dates from the 8<sup>th</sup> century and relates to the end of the Phnom Da style. But its iconographic characteristics, very similar to those of Paraśurāma n<sup>o</sup> 1641 kept in the national museum in Phnom Penh,<sup>34</sup> points to it belonging with the sculptures currently dated from the end of the 6<sup>th</sup>-beginning of 7<sup>th</sup> century.



fig. 9 : Pre-Angkorian body of a four-armed Viṣṇu VP I 407 ©C. Hawixbrock

28. Lintingre 1974, pp. 516 – 517.

29. Manguin & Dalsheimer 1998.

30. Cf. too the numerous Viṣṇu belonging to the art of Dvāravatī, found especially on the Dong Si Mahapot site in Thailand, a site to which the very big Vishnuite *cakra* we mention below also belongs (Brown 1996).

31. Cf. the inscription K. 366 (7<sup>th</sup> c.) that mentions the installation of several images of Viṣṇu and of Devī as well as a Harihara (Cœdès 1953, IC V, p. 288).

32. Giteau 2001, p. 63, fig. 15.

33. For the local and recent identification of this image, cf. Lintingre 1972, p. 216.

34. Dalsheimer 2001, pp. 74-76. The style of the curls in the hairstyles of the two statues is rather similar.

### *The Buddhist pieces*

Several pre-Angkorian Buddha were found in the area around Vat Phou. Six of them, fragmented, belonged to Vat Lakhon, a Laotian monastery of the town of Champasak. Three heads, one of monumental size (VLK I 530, height: 84 cm), are displayed at the Vat Phou museum; a fourth is presented at the Pakse museum. Two Buddha seated in meditation (VLK I 531 and VNK I 782)<sup>35</sup> are also distributed in these two museums. The pieces in the Vat Phou museum, studied by Valérie Zaleski, exhibit stylistic influences related to the art of Dvāravatī and may be dated to the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> or beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Two similar Buddha with rather flat plastic are kept in the storehouses (VP I 99, VP I 402). No excavation has yet been carried out at Vat Lakhon, even though traces of a brick structure are visible at the back of its domain, on the dirt road that serves the town on the field's side. The road widening in 2010 partly wiped out these traces. Nevertheless, several brick beds of a very large module were preserved at the sides of the road. An archaeological sounding was carried out later by Mr. Bounlap Keokagna. It indicated the existence of at least one monument of large size, undated as yet (the Buddha belong to another mound situated further to the west on lands belonging to the monastery). The size of the bricks and some architectural sandstone elements in the vicinity point to a pre-Angkorian date for the monument.

A date similar to that estimated for the Vat Lakhon pieces may be suggested for the body broken at the waist of a Buddha in monastic costume seated in European style (VP I 74) whose exact origin is unknown. The feet rest on an ovoid base. The absence of a throne is noted, suggesting that this statue would have been in a niche with a bench [fig. 10].<sup>36</sup> The hands are lost and did not rest on the breast since there are no visible marks of tearing. The very weathered body of a standing Buddha in monastic dress (VP I 414) whose vanished forearms were horizontal, dates most likely to the same period (8<sup>th</sup> c.?). Kept in the Vat Phou warehouse, it comes from Champasak province, but its exact origin is unknown [fig. 11]. A head, also of uncertain provenance (VP I 329), small and in a poor state is displayed on a wooden base at the museum. It has a hairstyle of big curls and may therefore belong to a pre-Angkorian Buddha.



fig. 10 : Buddha seated in European style  
VP I 74 ©S.Fradelizi/SAGV



fig. 11 : Standing Buddha in monastic  
dress VP I 414 ©C. Hawixbrock

35. VNK and VLK refer to the same monastery, whose name is indifferently written Vat Nakhon or Vat Lakhon.

36. Cf. the notice by V. Zaleski, pp. 62-63 (Hawixbrock *et al.* 2012).

Although no Buddhist piece was found in the Ancient City, excavations of the Nong Vienne site have revealed two circular coupled structures, which might be *stūpa*.<sup>37</sup> This complex grouping may date to the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century or to the first half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Only the substructures of the two circular structures in brick are partly preserved. The successively narrowing levels are decorated with repetitive recesses, a motif which recalls the architectural ornamentation of the *stūpa* belonging to Dvāravatī culture. Access to the higher platform was by axial stairs. The string-walls were decorated with sandstone panels showing edifices in reduction, bigger in size than those known elsewhere in the Khmer world. Three of these bas-reliefs were found *in situ* during the excavations (NV I 536-538) and two of them are exhibited at the Vat Phou museum. They are 1 m-high and show a monument seen from the front, with an avant-corps placed on a high moulded substructure. An axial stair leads to a door decorated with dice. The covering is not differentiated from the horseshoe shaped arch of the pediments. That of the avant-corps, the only one visible, is decorated with a half flower blooming in a fan shape with pointed petals, whose length is adapted to the form the arch. The base and back of the plaques is provided with a tenon joint. The style of these string-wall plaques, just like that with a sandstone motif visible on the surface of the Vat Sang'O site (to the north of the Ancient City), is close to that of the edifices in miniature that mark the substructure of some meditation cells of the Han Chei site, in Cambodia. They may be compared as well with some bas-reliefs sculpted on the façades of the brick sanctuaries of Sambor Prei Kuk and to those of the cornice of the sanctuary of Kuk Prah That (of Kompong Cham province, 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century). The substructure of the great *chedi* of Si Thep, recently cleared out, is also punctuated by niches surmounted by semi-circular arches – perhaps intended to shelter an image of a Buddha – which remind the general form of the string-wall panels of Nong Vienne. At Champa, fictive architectures also ornament substructures of temples and pedestals.<sup>38</sup>

### *The objects in relation to daily life*

A great number of objects from daily life – mortars and pestles, grinding stones and rolling pins, sandalwood graters – have been found in the Ancient City and on other sites in the region. They do not differ from those found elsewhere in the Khmer world. A selection of these objects with their variants may be seen at the museum. The most rare is probably a peṣanī rhinoceros-shaped from the village of Ban Kateuap (BKT I 467). This is to our knowledge the only zoomorphic grinding stone so far known. The rhinoceros's back forms the flat surface. The animal is realistically rendered, evidence of the technical mastery of the sculptor. Another existed, photographed by us in 1991 on the southeast perimeter of the Ancient City (it had been picked up by villagers during the ploughing of a rice field), but it has been missing for several years.

This presentation leaves pre-Angkorian ceramics aside. Represented by thousands of shards from excavations and explorations, their study has hardly begun.

### ***Pre-Angkorian pieces from the temple of Vat Phou***

The Vat Louang Kao stele (K. 365) engraved in the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century indicates that the Lingaparvata had been “known from antiquity”. The very early existence of a sanctuary on the mountain is, moreover, mentioned in the Chinese annals (*History of Souei*). Although no trace of a

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37. Santoni 1998.

38. Baptiste 2005, pp. 110-111.

primitive sanctuary is visible on the upper terrace, vestiges of probably pre-Angkorian monolithic cells in sandstone are present in its north part. Two soundings in this area dug in 1991 did not yield any convincing information. The entire upper terrace is far from having been excavated, but research around the spring shows that there is no point in hoping to find ancient structures there, since the rock was thoroughly cleaned during the building in the 11<sup>th</sup> century of architectural structures (small temple, covered walkway, etc.) and the devices for the captation of sacred waters. H. Parmentier saw in this brick cella of the main sanctuary a later reprise, and not a construction of the pre-Angkorian period.<sup>39</sup> The clearing by the PRAL on the north side of the building (1995) has confirmed that the bricks of the cella largely covered the connection to the hypostyle hall in sandstone. The present sanctuary may have replaced a more ancient one in the same position. Excavations of the interior of the cella may confirm this hypothesis. Pre-Angkorian vestiges found scattered on the site are numerous enough for hinting to the existence of architectural structures anterior to the buildings visible.<sup>40</sup>

### *The inscriptions*

Only two pre-Angkorian inscriptions were found on the Vat Phou site itself: the beautiful stele ornamented by the Shivaite trident – it mentions donations to a sanctuary on the Liṅgaparvata during the reign of Jayavarman I (K. 367, removed to the Angkor Conservation), and a fragment found on the surface in the hypostyle avant-corps of the sanctuary (K. 876, put into the Hanoi museum).<sup>41</sup> Others are the cave inscriptions in the scree of the rocks to the north of the temple (K. 1059) and in the Tham Lekh Cave (K. 723, 724) located on the mountain above the monumental complex.

### *The architectural elements and the religious implements*

Pre-Angkorian vestiges found at Vat Phou, architectural elements and cultural implements mostly, excavated by the PRAL (1991-1995) shared a context of re-use or rejection. Some of those pieces were reburied on site for conservation, including an element of the frame of a door decorated with small square dots.<sup>42</sup> Small columns (VP I 457, 461, 463) and a pedestal (Vientiane museum) were found broken on the north side of the sanctuary, during the 1995 excavations [fig. 12].

Two groups of decorative elements of exceptional interest were found either on the surface or in a re-use context (excavations PRAL 1991-1992). They are panels decorated all over with plant motifs, or ornamented with bas-relief faces under vegetal arcatures (*candraśālā* or *kuḍu*). An example of each type was found in the brick cella, without evidence it was its true original position.



fig. 12 : Pre-Angkorian small column VP I 463

39. Parmentier 1927, t. I, p. 231.

40. PRAL, campaign of excavations 1991 to 1995. Cf. Santoni *et al.* 1991, 1997 and 1998.

41. Cf. the chronicle of the *BEFEO* 37, p. 604.

42. Santoni *et al.* 1998, fig. 12, p. 17. A similar piece, also re-buried, was found on site HSH2.

The five panels with plant decoration in the Vat Phou museum belong exclusively to Vat Phou (VP I 106, 559 to 561, 585). One (VP I 559) had already been photographed by H. Parmentier [fig. 13], who identified it with an antefix.<sup>43</sup> It is today in poor condition. Their shapes are diverse: three look like lozenge flowerets (VP I 559 à 561), two are square (VP I 106, 581). Their heights vary between heights of 30 to 70 cm. All show the particularity of having been pierced near the centre. The decoration consists in scrolls of vegetal crosses spreading from the central orifice without any particular symmetry.

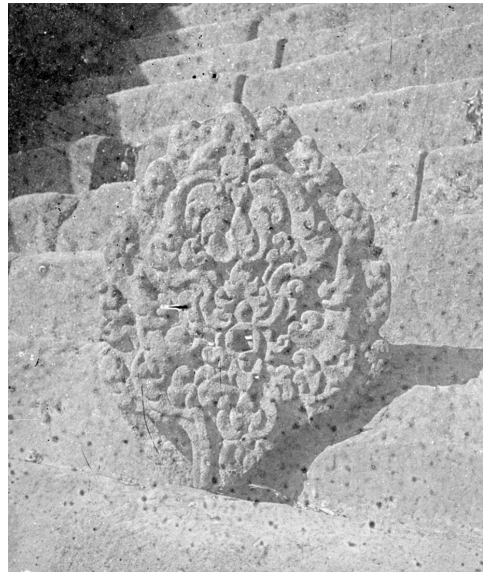


fig. 13 : Pannel with plant motifs VP I 559, photo EFEO, H. Parmentier collection ©EFEO PARH00464

The second group of decorative panels includes eight *candraśālā* of diverse provenance. Five are originally from Vat Phou, two were found on the surface of the site of the temple of Houay Tomo (including TM I 464) and one (VP I 728) is simply labelled as “from the region”, without additional precision. Four of these pieces are shown at the Vat Phou museum and two others at the Pakse museum. The panel VP I 583 was found re-used in a late paved area in front of the rock-shelter where the spring is dripping. Eroded and incomplete, the bas-relief faces are inscribed in a dormer, with full arches, bordered with foliated scrolls. Headdresses are of two types: some wear a conical bonnet smoothly rounded at the top [fig. 14], others a diadem with three to five points [fig. 15]. The only common feature in these faces, otherwise quite diverse, is their adornment: big circular earrings sometimes ornamented with an open flower. In their majority, these pieces are also pierced with a fixation hole; one is provided with an lower tenon.



fig. 14 : *Candraśālā* VP I 583 ©C. Hawixbrock



fig. 15 : *Candraśālā* VP I 197 ©C. Hawixbrock

43. Parmentier 1914, p. 24.

These remains of the pre-Angkorian period are hard to date precisely. There is no equivalent anywhere else in the Khmer world of pierced sandstone plaques as elements of plating. The faces beneath arcatures are however reminiscent of the ornamentation of Cham temples: they are also found in Dvāravatī art, as well as in that of central Java. At Sambor Prei Kuk, similar motifs figure on the “flying palace” bas-relief in brick of the sanctuaries: sculpted bas-relief figures display similar hairstyles, such as caps with curved points, and earrings very close in style to the Indian tradition. The decorated floral panels motifs look also like those of contemporary Cham and Dvāravatī art. In these two series, all sculptures differ considerably from one another in their general aspect and in size. They were probably meant to decorate the facades of brick monuments, without them being a repetitive motif. If they did not supply rhythm to the cornices and false doors of towers, as H. Parmentier assumed, they may have been centrally embedded, in the exterior walls of sanctuaries, like the bas-relief “flying palace” panels of the monuments in Sambor Prei Kuk.

Two large, thin, rectangular slabs of indeterminate function (VP I 547 and 548), ornamented at their centre by an open lotus, share the same sphere of stylistic influence, as well as an element of a cornice with vertical band sculpted with a frieze of Atlantes *gana* of the Cham type (VP I 415).

Two incomplete *somasūtra* were found at Vat Phou. One (head and beginning of channel) belongs to the principal sanctuary. It is displayed in Vientiane museum. The second (VP I 93) is on exhibit at the Vat Phou museum (only the head has been preserved).

No complete pre-Angkorian pedestal was found at Vat Phou, except for the one on display in the Vientiane museum. Only a pedestal deposit stone (VP I 601), almost cubic and of small size (14 x 16 x 16 cm), came to light in the spring area (PRAL 1993). The upper flat surface is decorated with an open lotus flower with a double layer of petals. The heart of the flower forms the central circular cavity, decorated on its circumference with vertically incised stamens. Eight square cavities are inscribed on the petals of the lotus.

A pre-Angkorian string-wall lion (VP I 84), standing on its (broken) four paws stood on the upper terrace of the temple. The mouth is wide open, the mane in marked relief forms four rows of pointed hair that pass under the ears and cover most of the nape. The curved tail is flattened along the spine. The style, especially the mane treatment, point to the pre-Angkorian period.

M. Giteau made the connection between a bearded harpist on a fragment of pediment (?) positioned till recently near the principal sanctuary of Vat Phou with a musician of a Sambor Prei Kuk lintel portraying Śiva dancing (NMC, n° 1748).<sup>44</sup> If it is indeed the piece now displayed at the Pakse museum [fig. 16], the style differs notably from that of the figures on the lintel at Sambor Prei Kuk. It evokes Cham art. In its clumsy execution, this bas-relief reminds one of the group of pieces of “late local art” in the Boun Oum collection (cf. *infra*). It does not look like an element of a pediment. Taking into consideration the shape and the slight thickness of the block (about 15 cm), it is probably a decorative panel.



fig. 16 : Fragment of pediment (?) showing a harpist (Pakse museum) © C. Hawixbrock

44. Boisselier 1955, pl. 16; Dalsheimer 2001, p. 184.

### The Shivaite statuary

Some *liṅga*, hard to accurately date, might belong to the pre-Angkorian period. Those shown at the Vat Phou museum were found around the small temple and under the rock-shelter during the 1991-1993 excavations. There are two bipartite *liṅga* and two *pancaliṅga*. The two former have a cubic base (VP I 566) and an octagonal base (VP I 567) respectively. The *rudrabhāga* is rounded with the glans in relief [fig. 17]. One of the two *pancaliṅga* is incorporated into the complete pedestal. The smooth dice presents curved sides, like the pedestal displayed in Vientiane. Five small *liṅga* are sculpted in quincunx inside the *snāṇadronī*, one in each corner, with the fifth and tallest at the centre. The other piece (VP I 597), 16 cm high, has a near-cubic shape [fig. 18]. The pedestal, guessed at from its moulded angles, is the backdrop to four peripheral *liṅga* sculpted in almost haut-relief at the centre of each of its vertical faces. The flattened *liṅga* at the top is in the round. It lacks a *snāṇadronī*. A pre-Angkorian *liṅga* in rounded form with the glans in relief (broken base) is, moreover, shown at Pakse.

Five couched Bulls in the round, were found on the site (VP I 86, 173, 278, 369, 563), outside their original context. Small (averaging forty centimetres both in height and in length), they are all incomplete and miss their heads. Difficult to date, they are not shown to the public.

Two Gaṇeśa from Vat Phou have also been identified (VP I 79, 757), one of monumental size. This last was lying on the ground, knocked over and in several pieces, on the south slope, at the level of the terrace that forms the first landing in the climb to the sanctuary. Although very incomplete (the face, the arms, the upper bust and the whole of the abdomen are missing) it should be possible to restore it. Only the smooth *sampot* is partly visible, especially at the back-side, where the median panel of the garment ends in a radiant pleated (end of 9<sup>th</sup> c.?).



fig. 17 : Bipartite *liṅga* VP I 566  
©S.Fradelizi/SAGV



fig. 18 : *Pancaliṅga* VP I 597  
©S.Fradelizi/SAGV

### The Vishnuite statuary

A pre-angkorian small body of Viṣṇu (65 cm high, feet broken), clothed in a *dhoṭī*, is shown at the Vat Phou museum (VP I 40). It misses the head and the four arms. It shares similar anatomical features (full, slightly plump forms) with the big statue VTH I 526.

Two pre-Angkorian Garuḍa are also in the museum. The first (VP I 80), – with wings and the body in an attitude of flight – was installed under the rock-shelter near the spring. Was it its original position? The second (VP I 167/214) carries Viṣṇu seated astride his shoulders (only the god's legs remain). In a very bad state, broken at the waist, it may be dated from the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> or beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

A pre-Angkorian statue of Devī (VP I 485) was recently dug up from the west dam of the north *baray* of Vat Phou [fig. 19].<sup>45</sup> This very beautiful, small-sized piece (58 cm high), incomplete (lower hands and feet missing) and broken into seven fragments, is made from fine-grained grey sandstone. The face bears a severe expression. The eyes, small and indicated only by incision, are sunken in their orbits. The particularly fleshy lips have no hint of a smile. The jaw is wide and square. With a mitred headdress that completely covers the hair; the deity is dressed in a *sarong* fitted high on the waist, which is notably fine. The smooth garment with long median panel is ornamented with a laterally pocketed covering with triple pleats. A smooth belt, worn at a slight angle, gives a little tilt to this statue, otherwise frontal. The supporting arch is attached to the mitre at the back. The two upper hands, alone saved, hold the *cakra* in the right and the conch in the left. The peculiarities of this image suggest the Prei Khmeng style.

A pre-Angkorian head of a deity, now on show at the museum (VP I 815) was found in 2010 by the Archaeological survey of India (ASI) team in the north quadrangular building, during the unearthing of a pile of rejects in front of the southwest angle [fig. 20]. Sculpted in a sandy golden sandstone, unfortunately it is quite worn. The hairstyle, indicated on the skull by vertical stria, ends at the summit in a small conical chignon with a flat top. A single row of looped strands falls on its periphery. The strands on the left temple are vertical. To us, the face with its square jaw appears as more male than female. It might depict a head of Śiva, but lacks other signs (third eye or crescent moon) that would permit a definite identification. Although no statue of Śiva from this period has come down to us, the rare preserved examples of Harihara show that he was usually provided with a *jaṭāmukūṭa* in a form very comparable to that of goddesses.<sup>46</sup>

A similar female head was found on the Ban Nong Sa site (BNS I 714). It is badly damaged. Only the posterior part of the head and the skull top remain, the face was deliberately sawn off [fig. 21]. The hairstyle is comparable to that of the previous head. The hair is arranged in smooth vertical bands on the skull, but with the high narrow chignon formed by two rows of anchor-shaped locks, on the visible anterior part. The wide posterior strand covers most of the skull above the nape. The lateral, anchor-shaped strands, not covered by the back strand, and the temple strands are vertical. M. Giteau photographed another female head near the main sanctuary in 1964 [fig. 22].<sup>47</sup> This piece, with its



fig. 19 : Devī VP I 485  
©C. Hawixbrock



fig. 20 : Preangkorian head of a deity VP I 815  
©C. Hawixbrock

45. Cf. the notice by Valérie Zaleski in the catalogue of the museum of Vat Phou, pp. 28-29 (Hawixbrock *et al.* 2012).

46. Boisselier 1955, p. 99.

47. Giteau 2001, p. 64, fig. 16. This piece had disappeared when the art historian returned in 1969.

simplified hairstyle, seemed to her to date a little later (8<sup>th</sup> c.) than the Devī of Koh Krieng (Sambor of the Mekong) conserved at the National Museum of Cambodia. M. Giteau dated the latter to the end of the 7<sup>th</sup>-beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. However, it is by now re-dated to the first half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>48</sup> It wears a big, tall chignon maintained by a double link with the base and at half-height with a double row of strands looped in front, and a quadruple row in the back of the skull. The hairstyle of the stolen Vat Phou head is much simpler. The smaller chignon had a more conical shape. No visible link supported the single row of looped strands, longer at the back than in front. The unsymmetrical lateral loops curved towards the front and passed under the posterior strands. Another difference, the parallel rows of strands – vertical on the sides of the head on the Koh Krieng – are oblique and bent in an ascendant curve towards the back of the skull on the Vat Phou head. The three pieces found on the monumental complex and at Ban Nong Sa belong to the same family. They are close enough in style to be ascribed to a joint local origin.



fig. 21 : Pre-Angkorian head of a female deity BNS I 714, detail of the hairstyle ©C. Hawixbrock



fig. 22 : Head of a female deity (disappeared), photo EFEO, H. Parmentier collection ©EFEO n°PARH01875

A fragment of a wheel in red sandstone (VP I 785), some 50 cm in diameter, was found in 2008 on the upper terrace of Vat Phou, perhaps near the modern *sala* to the north of the sanctuary [fig. 23]. Identified until now with the wheel of the Law (*dharmacakra*), it is exposed in the Buddhism section of the Vat Phou museum. Its *cakra* characteristics differ from those in Dvāravatī art. It shows a big hub, rounded and in strong relief, limited by two recessing mouldings. It may have been ornamented originally, at least on one face, with a motif that erased by wear and tear. From the hub come out very short rays, of which only five remain. The edge of the wheel bears a thin rim in relief decorated with triangular teeth, with outwards turned points. The same motifs are sculpted in the intermediate space between the rays, in two face-to-face series. Some *dharmacakra* indeed show these same triangular motifs on the perimeter and in the intermediate space between the rays, the resemblance ends there however: in those other

48. Dalsheimer 2001, p. 89; Jessup & Zéphir 1997, p. 170.

cases the hub conforms with that in other wheels of the Law.<sup>49</sup> The treatment of the hub differs markedly on the Vat Phou piece, with no indication of fictive piercing or of an axle in relief.<sup>50</sup> In fact, the overall aspect of this wheel resembles more that of the *cakra* held by pre-Angkorian Viṣṇu.<sup>51</sup> A *cakra* (17 cm in diameter) found by itself at Dong Si Mahapot (Prachin Buri province, Thailand) is similar.<sup>52</sup> At least in the most ancient periods, the disc of Viṣṇu has a rounded hub taking up most of the central space. The rays of the *cakra* are short with its outer periphery generally ending in a sharp ridge. The Vat Phou vestige, quite small for a wheel of the Law, is however too large for a Vishnuite *cakra* held in an upper hand by



fig. 23 : Wheel of the Law or *cakra* VP I 785  
©C. Hawixbrock

a deity in the round. We conjecture the existence of a monumental size Viṣṇu statue, though no image of this type has been found at Vat Phou, even as fragments. In fact, there is no indication that the site was indeed the place of origin of this wheel; it could have been brought there at an indeterminate date.<sup>53</sup> Or should we consider it an independent representation of the symbol? There exist at least two steles featuring abstract *Trimūrti*. One is conserved at the Guimet museum,<sup>54</sup> the other was found in a region not far from Vat Phou, near the Sekhaman River (Sekong province, Laos).<sup>55</sup> Both show Śiva at the centre in the form of the trident, Brahmā on the right in the form of the vessel and the rosary, and Viṣṇu on the left in the form of the wheel, raised to the top of a pillar. If large sized abstract figuration of the *Trimūrti* is unknown, on the other hand, pillars topped with an image of the Bull (Nandin) in the round do exist in the pre-Angkorian world.<sup>56</sup> This Vishnuite wheel was perhaps likewise placed at the top of a pillar.

To us, all the pre-Angkorian pieces found at Vat Phou seem to confirm the establishment of a very ancient sanctuary on the upper terrace, linked to the sacred spring. At the summit of the Liṅgaparvata itself, the remains of a built structure still exist: the discovery by the WHSO of bricks and of some cut sandstone blocks at the summit of this elevation, in January 2011, is consistent with an ancient arrangement. Of a very large size, the bricks may actually belong to the pre-Angkorian period. Only two pre-Angkorian pieces (shown at the museum) were found at the base of the rocky eminence, in 1994: the *liṅga* on the monolithic ablutions tank PK I 487 and a small base with dog-tooth angles (PK I 488).

49. Brown 1996, fig. 42. A fragment in terra cotta found in the Nakhon Si Thammarat province, shows, on the periphery of the Wheel, a series of triangular, pointed motifs. This author also reproduces a bas-relief belonging to Gandhara which illustrates the First Sermon, conserved at the museum of Calcutta (fig. 88). The four wheels depicted have the same type of motif, between the rays and starting from the wheel.

50. The three types of hubs known are reproduced in the catalogue of the Dvāravati exhibition, 2009, in Rungot Thamrungrueang, fig. 3, p. 85.

51. See the Harihara (MG 14910) of the Asram Maha Rosei (Ta Keo province) belonging in style to the Phnom Da and dated to the end of the 6<sup>th</sup>-beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> century in Baptiste & Zéphir 2008, p. 53; as well as the *cakra* of a Viṣṇu (MG 18860) from Prasat Rup Arak on the Phnom Kulen, belonging to the Kulen style, dated to the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, pp. 91-92.

52. Brown 1996, fig. 93.

53. This is the case of the *liṅga* detached from the rock of Khan Mak Houk which were moved near the main sanctuary of Vat Phou (cf. *infra*).

54. MG 24618, dated from the second half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, belonging to Tuol Komnap, Kratié province (Baptiste & Zéphyr 2008, pp. 48-49).

55. Cf. the unpublished communication of Phon Kaseka *et al.* (cited in footnote 21); Lorrillard 2013.

56. See also the Bull on a pillar of Angkor Borei which appears to have been placed at the entrance to the town. Today conserved at the Guimet museum (MG 14930), it is dated from the 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> centuries (Baptiste & Zéphir 2008, pp. 50-51).

## The Angkorian period: the monumental complex of Vat Phou

The Ancient City and its immediate environs have yielded nothing but stone elements dating from the pre-Angkorian period, though ceramic shards suggest a probable later occupation. Angkorian period constructions seem to be limited to buildings that form the present monumental complex of Vat Phou flanking the mountain, and to those a little further south, on the plain, such as the temples of Hong Nang Sida (12<sup>th</sup> c.) and of Thao Tao (chapel of the hospital of the reign of Jayavarman VII, end of 12<sup>th</sup>-beginning of 13<sup>th</sup> c.).

If there are few temples in the complex, they are nevertheless somewhat better documented than the pre-Angkorian sites. The origin of the Angkorian pieces is generally known, even if not very accurately. A city was probably associated with these monuments. Earthen walls and canals are visible on aerial photographs.

### *The inscriptions*

Inscribed steles from the Angkorian period were found at Vat Phou. Some of these need restoration prior to being exhibited. Thanks to the observations by D. Soutif and of J. Estève fragments of one of them (VP I 149 and 452) could be reassembled.<sup>57</sup>

A piece hard to decipher had been unearthed at Vat Phou in 1901 more than 2 m underground (VP I 150, K. 477).<sup>58</sup> More than 3 m-high, it is a long, quadrangular block with a rounded top, set with a tenon joint. The four faces are inscribed; the lines cover almost all the surface. The text is near-totally erased from the stone having served to sharpen knives.

### *Architectural elements*

Most of the architectural elements are in the main typical of the styles of Baphuon and Angkor Vat (11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> c.). The current inventory counts 47 pieces in sandstone coming from Vat Phou, together with a few pieces from Houay Tomo and Hong Nang Sida. No vestige of the hospital chapel of Thao Tao has yet been catalogued. An efficient cleaning of the slopes of the mountain around the Vat Phou temple would probably bring up numerous other lapidary elements.

Architectural elements that had long been left *in situ* are now shown at the onsite museum. A part of the pediment (VP I 128) is from the south quadrangular building [fig. 24], as well as a lintel from its north porch (VP I 24). It is sculpted with foliage, at the centre of which is the figure of a male deity crouching and holding the mace (Viṣṇu, Kubera?). The second piece will be put back in place under architectonic conditions (restoration project WHSO/FSP/EFEO). A pilaster base only, sculpted with two *ṛṣṭ* on the dice (VP I 113), is of unknown origin.

Lintels and parts of the rampants from the triangular pediments of the quadrangular building and of the principal sanctuary (stylistically similar to those of Prah Vihear) are kept in the storeroom. The museum exhibits other pieces from Vat Phou: an element of the capital (VP I 20), angle pilasters of octagonal section (VP I 162, 120 and 279), a crowning motif open lotus-shaped form (VP I 136) and one dice of door decorated with a fully open lotus with a double row of petals, found on the surface in 1995 near the main sanctuary (VP I 615).

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57. Cf. Estève & Soutif 2013.

58. See the chronicle of the *BEFEO* 1, p. 162.



fig. 24 : Element of pediment VP I 128  
©S.Fradelizi/SAGV

Almost all sandstone elements meant for constant bathing of the main sanctuary *liṅga* by the spring waters were re-buried after their unearthing during the PRAL campaigns. This adduction system is one of the most original features of the Vat Phou sanctuary. The sacred waters were conducted through sections of canalisation with coverings, supported by small columns, to the main *liṅga*. The waters entered the cella through an opening made in the west wall. Only two canalisation coverings are conserved in the onsite museum (VP I 442 and 613),<sup>59</sup> they are not shown to the public. Topped by sort of a ridge, their vertical sides are decorated with a row of lotus petals. As a whole, it may represent the body of a *nāga*.

From 31 antefixes found at Vat Phou, three are on view at the museum (VP I 55, 56 and 405) and one at the museum of Vientiane. Most of these pieces feature a standing ascetic holding the shaft of a trident, whereas several depict unidentifiable male deities. Many are in poor conditions. Those on view at the onsite museum show an ascetic armed with a trident (VP I 405); Indra mounted on monocephalic Airāvata (VP I 55); and a male divinity seated astride the shoulders of another male person (VP I 56): Viṣṇu on Garuḍa in human form or Nirṛṭi riding the *yakṣa*. A Yama riding a buffalo (VP I 9) is kept in the Champasak store. These antefixes had to be placed on the towers according to their cardinal orientation. As for the acroterion, they all figure polycephalic *nāga* and belong to the north and south quadrangular buildings. Some could be replaced in their original settings.

Two fragments of a red sandstone superior deposit-stone (VP I 534 and VP I 519) are also from Vat Phou. Comparable to others found elsewhere in the Khmer world, the thin, square slab seem to have been divided into four quarters, each carved with cavities of various shapes (circular, spearheads, squares, etc.), one is in the shape of a bow. A fragment of circular foundation deposit stone with two square cavities remaining (VP I 570), found in 1992 in the area of the spring, may have been placed underneath the crowning motif of a tower.

### *Cultural implements*

Some pedestals of Angkorian type, with circular or square openings, are kept in the stores. None is complete, since the ablution basins that were found (some very large) do not fit those different pedestals.

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59. Santoni 1991.

Numerous foundation deposit stones for Angkorian cubic pedestals, of various sizes and with multiple square cavities, were found. Six pieces in good condition are shown at the museum.

Five offering stones (*balipīṭha*) were found, out of their original context however. One comes from Nang Sida, the other four from Vat Phou. Two are displayed (VP I 111 and VP I 130). Varying in height, they are ornamented with a fully open lotus flower with a double row of petals carved in bas-relief on the upper surface of the stone.

Amongst the other elements of cultural furniture, two sandstone vats are noteworthy. One, shown at the museum, comes from Nang Sida (HNS I 492); the other, discovered in 2010, is still *in situ* at Vat Phou. It was lying on the side of the slope of the mountain to the northeast of the *dvārapāla* revered by Laotians under the name of *Vraḥ* Khammathan (the mythical king builder of the temple). In both, only the lower part survived. On the Nang Sida vat, the lower median hole pierced on one of the long faces is inside the open jaw of a lion's mask [fig. 25]. On the Vat Phou vat, it could be a representation either of a Rāhu or of a *kīrtimukha* with arms around the drainage hole, since the lone preserved motif is an arm bent at a right angle, decorated with an armband.



fig. 25 : Vat HNS I 492  
©S.Fradelizi/SAGV

### *Architectural ceramics*

Numerous tile shards were found around the north and south quadrangular buildings and in the area of the spring, and as well within the walkway with woodwork covering that connects the shelter under the rock to the west enclosure wall of the temple. A partial restoration of the Angkorian roofing carried out by Pierre Pichard (EFEO) and Laurent Delfour (technical assistant of FSP) is exhibited at the onsite museum. It shows the arrangement of the “canal” shape tiles and of the joint-covering ones. Also shown are some finials in terra cotta, with various shapes and materials, as well as roof end-tiles. Most of the latter feature a lotus petal; some are decorated with five sinuous vegetal spikes. An original tile shows two horses in profile, facing one another on each side of a vertical axis. Another tile, decorated with a stylised face with large almond-shaped-eyes is shown at the Pakse museum. If the cartel is to be trusted, it was found on the pre-Angkorian Nong Saphang Yai site at the northeast angle of the Ancient City.

This face-showing tile may be linked to a sandstone block of false roof end-tiles (VP I 555) found in 1995 to the north of the main sanctuary (PRAL) and currently presented together with the *candraśala* in the Vat Phou museum [fig. 26]. The only one of its kind as well, it bears three busts of male characters under a vegetal pointed arcature. The central figure is the only complete one, the other two are cut off at the edges of the block. The one on the left, larger than the other two, is maybe testimony that a set of motifs had broken the monotony of the edges of the roofs. The heads wear leafy diadems, large circular earrings and a bead necklace; the faces bear moustaches. The style is very close to

that of a ceramic roof end-tile, found during our excavations of the temple of Phanom Van (11<sup>th</sup> century, northeast Thailand) in 1993.<sup>60</sup> The same model may have been produced in both stone and terra cotta. The other stored sandstone blocks of roof end-tiles come from the two quadrangular buildings and are decorated with lotus petals. They are provided with a bench for posterior laying, whereas the above cited has inferior tenon joints. Having most likely been integrated into masonry, this one may have decorated the cornice of a brick building.



fig. 26 : False roof end-tiles VP I 555 ©S.Fradelizi/SAGV

The onsite museum also holds a timber-work nail made of iron (VP IV 4), as well as a double T-shaped anchor, also in iron (VP IV 3), found during excavations in the area of the spring, which has retained its lead covering. Such anchors served to hold together two sandstone blocks inside a horizontal row of stones.

### *Guardian divinities of buildings*

Many images of divinities can be identified as *dikpāla*, “guardians of the space”. Seated in Javanese style and leaning on stele-shaped backrests, they were brought in the storerooms. Eight among the better preserved are shown to the public. One of them (VP I 43), without necklace but wearing a diadem, triple chignon, earrings and a bracelet on the right wrist, holds an elongated object in the left palm, a book perhaps. The garment bares the right shoulder but completely covers the left arm. On the left shoulder a scarf is folded above the garment. An ulterior re-carving may have occurred to transform this guardian deity into a Buddhist deity. It stood indeed for a long time on the Buddhist altar installed during the late Laotian period in the Vat Phou sanctuary. Another piece (VP I 42) includes the pouring spout of the ablution basin. It is then a complete pedestal that has been sculpted, instead of the moulded base on which the guardian divinities are usually seated.

Those divinities that still have their heads wear three-pointed hairstyles and a diadem. They mostly wear abundant jewellery: earrings and necklace, chains on the breast, bracelets and armlets. The backrests are usually decorated on the border of the two faces and on the median part of the posterior face with vegetal and beading motifs. None of these deities is identifiable, most of them having lost their hands and their attributes.

A beautifully carved body seated at royal ease stands out from probable *dikpāla*. Unlike the latter, always leaning on a backrest, it is sculpted in the round. The bust is naked, the only garment is a short smooth *sampot*. The right hand rests on the raised knee while the left lies flat on the back of the thigh, in a well-observed pose. In the absence of attributes, identification is out of question. This piece, in the Bayon style, may represent a human rather than a divinity.

The other guardian figures are animals. Pieces shown to the public are an elephant (*dinnāga*?) in the round, its neck decorated with a rich necklace made of multiple rows and bells (VP I 81) – and four big string-wall lions, two of which open the visit to the collections in the exhibition hall (VP I 388 and 389); two others are positioned at the entrance to the *sala* facing the museum (VP I 13 and 14).

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60. Pottier 1997.

Some balustrade ends with polycephalic nāga heads are conserved. A single one, with five heads, is shown at the museum (VP I 64). Another piece was found in 2010 by Indian team of ASI in the same pile of rejects as the above-mentioned pre-Angkorian head. Of a much bigger size, it is constituted of seven heads. Restored and placed in front of the north quadrangular building, it immediately became an object of worship for the Laotians. It is possible that it was originally on the side of the walkway that accesses the two quadrangular buildings.

### *The Shivaite statuary*

Other than the central figure of the *Trimūrti* carved in bas-relief on a rock to the northeast of the cella of the main sanctuary (12<sup>th</sup> c.), no Śiva image in human form was identified until now at Vat Phou apart on a double-faced stele showing on one face Śiva with five heads and ten arms (Sadāśiva) and on the other face, a deity with eight heads and sixteen arms. Of unknown origin, in poor condition, an inscription of several lines difficult to read is engraved on one of the lateral sides. The Indian restoration teams of ASI dug up (January 2011), at the west end of the north gallery of the north quadrangular building, a middle-sized image in the round (50 cm long), illustrating Śiva and Uma riding the Bull (VP I 912). The top of the laterite walls had collapsed inside and buried this unique piece. Carved from a friable golden sandstone, the sculpture is incomplete and eroded. The face of the Bull is broken (only a fragment of the forehead remains) as well as its feet. The rendering of the Bull is rigid, with flat shaping. The head, slightly turned to the side, looks toward the same direction as the deities. On its forehead the animal bears a large jewelled band decorated at the centre with a diamond-shaped floweret and tied with a string of pompoms, going between the horn and the left ear. Its neck is decorated with a row of pearls. Both deities are broken at the waist. Śiva, shown from the front, seats at royal ease on the shoulder of his mount, while Uma kneels on the rump, the lower part of her body shown in profile. The right leg of Śiva is folded back, his left rests against the flank of the Bull, his left hand placed flat on its thigh. The short sampot, held by a smooth belt, shows a lateral pocket on the left. An almost erased lateral panel is visible on the smooth sarong of Uma. This sculpture can be dated to the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> or beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century (Banteay Srei style). To our knowledge, the only other piece in the round of this type currently known is at Prasat Thom of Koh Ker (of bigger size). One will recall that the pediment of the oriental false door of the south gallery of the north quadrangular building bears exactly the same iconography (Baphuon style).

A small bust (head and arms missing), found on the floor of the cella of the principal sanctuary of Vat Phou, is shown at the onsite museum (VP I 594). Lacking any decoration, the piece is hard to identify or date. Given that the right breast is slightly flatter than the left, it might be a bust of Śiva Ardhanarīśvara, the androgynous form of the god. This type of figuration, quite rare, belongs mostly to the Bayon style.<sup>61</sup>

Few *līnga* of the triple section Angkorian type were found at Vat Phou. An incomplete example, sculpted in very sonorous sandstone of excellent quality came to light in 1991 (VP I 568). At an unknown time, it was rejected (or placed) in front of the lintel of the small temple presently lying on the ground. Four fragmentary *līnga* came from the area of the spring (VP I 566, 567, 610 and 612); two others are marked “VP” without other information about the location of their find (VP I 494, 511). The main *līnga* of the sanctuary was not found, but a sizeable tripartite piece still lies on the ground of the modern *sala* of the upper terrace. Two tripartite *līnga* from the region (VP I 260 and 261), in very fine sandstone (or diorite?), are also shown at the museum. None of these remnants was found together with its original pedestal.

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61. Boisselier 1966, p. 289.

Almost a hundred small *liṅga* come from the Khan Mak Houk rock on the Mekong, across from the Houay Tomo temple, at the point of the Dong Deng Island. They were carved straight on the flat of the rock in groups of various sizes. At some point, some people deliberately tore them off and threw them into the surrounding waters. From those found, 25 are on display at the Vat Phou museum. They are small – 5 to 7 cm-high on the average, with an equivalent diameter – but some are a little bigger and reach 15 cm. The purpose of the scenes sculpted on the rock was to sanctify the river waters.<sup>62</sup> The *liṅga* – traditionally supposed to number a thousand – ornament the flat surface of the rock, while a number of Vishnuite scenes (sleeping Viṣṇu, Viṣṇu Kūrma, etc.) were sculpted in bas-relief on the west face of the rock, the only accessible one. As in the bed of the Siem Reap River, at Keal Spean at Kulen (Cambodia) these sculptures were meant to transform the water of the river into that of the Gaṅgā. The very eroded reliefs have suffered the same damage as the *liṅga* – the deities were also deliberately defaced. From the style of the remaining ornaments, these reliefs may be dated from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> century. A couple of *liṅga* and a *liṅga* provided with a tenon joint (KMH I 643) were separate pieces inserted into the mortises cut on the flat surface of the rock.<sup>63</sup> Six – five small (VP I 265 to 269) and one bigger (VP I 264) – undoubtedly coming from Khan Mak Houk, were found at Vat Phou, to where they were brought at an unknown date.

A very beautiful pedestal in bronze (sides of 15 cm) supporting a green stone *liṅga* (KMH II 51) was found in the water near the rock. It is in a state of perfect preservation and is on show at the museum.<sup>64</sup> The colour green seems to be favoured at Vat Phou for numerous stone artefacts having to do with water. During the excavations carried out in the area of the spring (PRAL 1991-1993), we had already noticed that several remnants – *liṅga*, duct sections for conveying water from the spring, slabs, etc. – were cut from a clear green sandstone. Similar observations were made at Khan Mak Houk on a couple of detachable *liṅga* on a base (KMH I 586).

The *mukhaliṅga* [fig. 27] that was lying in the southeast *gopura* of the Houay Tomo temple (TM I 790) has recently been moved into the museum of Vat Phou with other pieces from the same site (lintels, *somasūtra*, etc.).<sup>65</sup> With its particular rendering, unique of its type, it was until now deemed pre-Angkorian but may in fact be from a later time. Instead of showing a small head of Śīva at the base of the hemispheric section, as is the case in the other known examples, this *mukhaliṅga* shows, at the end of a long quadrangular tenon joint in the form of an obelisk with



fig. 27 : *Mukhaliṅga* TM I 790

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62. Santoni & Hawixbrock 1998 and notice by C. Hawixbrock in the catalogue of the museum of Vat Phou, pp. 48-53 (Hawixbrock *et al.* 2012).

63. Santoni & Hawixbrock 1998, fig. 9.

64. Cf. the notice by C. Hawixbrock and V. Souksavatdy on the Vat Phou museum catalogue, pp. 50-51 (Hawixbrock *et al.* 2012). A piece, similar although smaller, with a *liṅga* of milky quartz, is displayed at the National Museum of Cambodia (n°3557). Another one (*liṅga* lost) coming from the Angkor region, almost identical to the one of Khan Mak Houk, is conserved at the Guimet museum, n°18187.

65. The temple of Houay Tomo is the only known Angkorian sanctuary in Champasak province that is installed on the left bank of the Mekong. Built near the mouth of the Houay Tomo, it possesses a stepped wharf giving access to the river. Badly ruined and submerged in vegetation, it was partially cleared out in 1997-1998 by Oscar Nalesini who also did the mapping. The site seems to have been through several periods of construction, judging by various ancient vestiges (ceramics, lintels, *candraśālā* and *somasūtra*) found on the surface. The structures in laterite and sandstone visible today dating at least to the 11<sup>th</sup> century, may have been implanted on a pre-Angkorian temple.

truncated corners, two large faces on each large side. Those faces are flanked on one of the lateral sides by a *liṅga* on a pedestal, in bas-relief. The other lateral side, narrower and deteriorated, bears no trace of a second *liṅga* as a pendant of the first one. Those moustached and bearded faces belong to ascetic Śiva, but the head bears a high conical headdress, whose vegetal motifs recall the art of Cham or of Dvāravatī.<sup>66</sup> The beard, ornamented with scrolls on one face, is circled by a row of beads, the rosary perhaps, attribute of Śiva, as god of ascetics (*ṛṣi*). The curious iconography of this piece, its clumsy treatment, as well as the general shape of the block, perhaps re-cut at one extremity seeing the flatness of the images, suggests the reworking of a stone that was originally an architectural element. The flat treatment of the faces is comparable to that of a bas-relief of the same type (found in the Champa citadel of Cha-Ban to the north of Binh Dinh) also showing an ascetic moustached Śiva, seated and holding a rosary,<sup>67</sup> which suggests a later date for this sculpture. Several inscriptions in the region, amongst which the digraphical stele (K. 362) dated from 889 found at Houay Tomo, mention the existence of Shivaite hermitages (*āśrama*) in the mountains near the Vat Phou sanctuary. Could it be that the *mukhaliṅga* was taken from a rock-carved sanctuary, which might serve to explain its unusual iconography?

### The Vishnuite statuary

As already said, the inscription K. 366 found in the hypostyle avant-corps of the main Vat Phou sanctuary, mentions the erection of images of Viṣṇu during the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Apart from the *Trimūrti* in bas-relief on the rock, few images in stone of this god from the Angkorian period have yet been discovered. We can quote only two figures in the round, seemingly from the Bayon style. The first, today disappeared, is the standing four-armed Viṣṇu that H. Parmentier and G. Trouvé had seen in the hypostyle avant-corps of the sanctuary and that was later photographed by André Louis Lochard [fig. 28 and detail].<sup>68</sup> The second is a bust exhibited at the Vientiane museum.



fig. 28 : Hypostyle avant-corps of the principal sanctuary; lower right one Angkorian Viṣṇu (disappeared), photo EFEO, André Louis Lochard collection ©EFEO n° LOC00263 Four-armed Viṣṇu (detail)

66. Cf. the high head-dress of a head of a *deva* in stucco belonging to Prah Pathom or Neun Hin in Thailand, photo EFEO 1939 (THA23736).

67. See the chronicle of the *BEFEO* 1, fig. 75, p. 412.

68. Pictures taken between 1914 and 1933.

The iconography of the principal Vat Phou sanctuary, in Baphuon style, like in many other Angkorian Shivaite temples, makes anyway broad reference to Viṣṇu on the frontons and lintels. The god is represented standing on Garuda. His avatar Kṛṣṇa is represented twice (tearing apart a demon and the serpent Kāliya). The Sleep of Viṣṇu and the Churning of the Ocean of Milk are also shown, together with episodes from the Ramayana.

A Viṣṇu on Garuda (VPI 1) dating from the end of the 11<sup>th</sup>-beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, shown at the onsite museum, stood on the upper terrace of Vat Phou. It was still complete in 1957 when H. Marchal photographed it.<sup>69</sup> The upper part of the body of the god has since vanished, together with the tips of the wings of his mount. A rough-shaped statue of Garuda 1.87 m-high (VP I 21) is now on show in front of the onsite museum, dating probably from the Koh Ker period.

Two small Viṣṇu in bronze were found under the rock-shelter, behind the small temple (PRAL, 1992). The god is shown standing and has four arms. The first image (VP II 54), in Baphuon style, is complete and has retained all his attributes: the disc in the upper right hand, the conch in the upper left hand, the Earth in the lower right hand and a long fine horn-shaped attribute (the mace?) in the lower left hand. The second image (VP II 57), in the style of Angkor Vat, holds only three of these objects in the same arrangement since the lower right hand is lost. The statuettes were accompanied by a small female divinity, unidentifiable in the absence of any attributes (VP II 55). They are displayed at the Vat Phou museum, together with the lower part of the body of a male deity in bronze (VP II 53), of great size (35 cm-high from base to waist). The latter was found inside the small temple, wedged under a large green sandstone fallen slab. The upper part of the body, still accessible after the accident, was later torn out. This piece shows great technical mastery. Particular care went into ornamentation of the sampot and adornments, especially the belt decorated with spearhead pendants.

### *Brahmā*

Brahmā is little represented here. Other than the depiction on the rock of the *Trimūrti*, only two images are known. The first, in stone, is very damaged (VP I 248). The god is carved in bas-relief, seated on a lotus, with three heads and four arms. The rear of the block shows evidence of tearing, consistent with detachment of this sculpture from a rock carving. It may belong to a vanished group featuring the Sleep of Viṣṇu. The second is a small head in gilded bronze with four faces (11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century), found out on the ground in the area of the spring (VP II 58).

### *Other divinities*

A hunch-backed divinity wearing a diadem tied at the back (VP I 47), with an intentionally sawed face, is kept in the warehouse at Champasak. The same type of representation occurs mainly in Bayon art. It may be a figure of Kubera. A rough-shaped hunch-backed divinity of quite large size (83 cm-high), in a seated position with one knee raised, is moreover presented at the onsite museum (VP I 399).

The various pieces in Bayon style (end of 12<sup>th</sup>-beginning of 13<sup>th</sup> c.) – comprise the two big *dvārapāla*. They were placed under the kiosks on each side of the axial walkway leading to the upper terrace. They testify to the attention Jayavarman VII gave to Vat Phou. The covered portico that closes the west side of the upper terrace, behind the main sanctuary, is probably an addition made during his reign. Some fragments may belong to some Avalokiteśvara of that period, amongst which three hands – one holding

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69. Marchal 1957, p. 28.

the rosary (HNS I 525, stored at Vat Phou) and the two others the flask (site museum [VP I 518] and Pakse museum). A small statue in sandstone of Buddha seated in meditation on the *nāga* (VP I 426, only the lower part is left) is characteristic of the style. As one will recall, hospitals of Jayavarman VII were put under the protection of the compassionate Bodhisattva. No statue has been located at Thao Tao, but the monument, very ruined, has hardly been cleared out.

### *Metallic artefacts*

The prehension handle in bronze of a small ritual bell (VP II 56, body disappeared) ornamented with two confronted dragonheads was found behind the small temple, together with the aforementioned small statues in bronze. It may date from the end of the Angkorian period.

A small tube-shaped reliquary with a cover, made of a rolled sheet of gold, was found beneath the west wall of the small temple. It enclosed two small polished yellow stones (VP III 65). A second reliquary (VP III 64), made of three sheets of gold folded into a horn, contained a clear polished blue stone, a sapphire perhaps.

A small silver model of a sanctuary tower (MK II 52) was found on the outskirts of the Ancient City, in the Mekong, caught by a fisherman's net [fig. 29]. This piece of handicraft, among known examples of the same type, displays the greatest wealth of details. Only the first false-floor remains, the upper part of the tower is lost (height: 20 cm). This miniature shows the architectural characteristics of stone Angkorian sanctuary towers. On a square plan, it is raised on an open base made of twelve thin and decorated legs, it opens on all four sides with a door, the threshold of which is decorated with lotus petals. The pediments of the floor and of the false floor are ornamented with vegetable motifs. Only one of the four antefixes of the corners was conserved. The tower contains a moulded pedestal with a spout and with two opposing sharp points welded on the upper border, whose function remains unknown. Pierced with a circular hole, it must have been intended for a *liṅga*. Particular care has been taken over the pedestal. Taking on the characteristics of real stone pedestals, a foundation deposit cube is set inside, in the axis of the opening meant for the base of the idol. On its upper face it has eight alveoli forming a circle around a ninth, central, one. A small, square, detachable panel acts as a covering, engraved on its upper face with an open lotus surrounded by a vegetal crook pattern. The complexity of the arrangement is consistent with a consecration ceremony having been performed, probably during the placing of the foundation pieces and the idol.



fig. 29 : Small sanctuary tower model MK II 52

©S.Fradelizi/SAGV

Two bronzes belonging to the end of the Angkorian period, coming from Vat Phou, have gone to foreign museums. The handle of an inscribed mirror ornamented with a dancing Śiva dating from the reign of Jayavarman VII is kept at Guimet museum.<sup>70</sup> A beautiful ring of a palanquin [fig. 30] brought to the Louis Finot museum at Hanoi (n° I 25377), is on show today at the National Museum of Cambodia (n°E.1363). Also to be remembered is the chariot pole-but in bronze, ending in the head of a tricephalic *nāga*, now disappeared, which was part of the Boun Oum collection. A comparable object is exhibited at the National Museum of Cambodia (inv. n°. 5737),<sup>71</sup> two others in the Guimet museum (n° MG 18888 and 18889).<sup>72</sup>

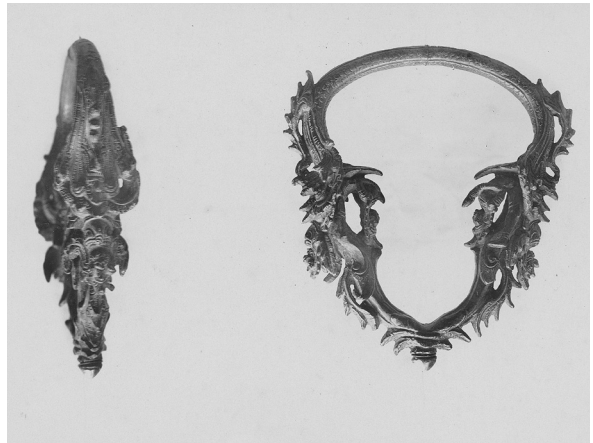


fig. 30 : Ring of a palanquin NMC E.1363, photo EFEO, Cambodia collection ©EFEO n°CAM20391

We have just heard of the discovery by the Indian team of ASI of a gold ring enclosed with an ammonite fossil in a small, circular box with a cover, in undecorated white porcelain, of Chinese origin. It came from underneath fallen blocks outside, the northeast angle of the porch, of the north gallery of the north quadrangular building. The ring holds on its upper almond-shaped side a polished black oval stone held by four claws. The granulated decoration covers the entire almond-shaped space around the stone. It belongs to the Angkorian period from about the 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century.

### *Utilitarian ceramics*

About ten large Angkorian ceramics were part of the Prince Boun Oum collection. The best-preserved pieces are on display at the Vat Phou museum, the others were moved to the Pakse museum. Banister vases and jars with grey or brown covers, with or without glaze, are typical of the end of the Angkorian period. The exact origin of all these pieces has been lost.

A fragment of a zoomorphic vase in the shape of an elephant's head (BNS VI 126), several lenticular vases and some covered pots complete the series of ceramics shown. They have been chosen from amongst the best preserved. Many were found during the surveys carried out in the area at the foot of the mountain, south of Vat Phou, and around the Nang Sida temple. Although none can be identified with certainty, urban establishments had a connexion with Vat Phou during the Angkorian period. This is borne out by the collections of ceramic objects made in the region. In the Ancient City moreover, Angkorian ceramics have come to light in such numbers to attest to reoccupation.

Ceramics found around the chapel of the hospital of Thao Tao are shown at the Pakse museum (lenticular vases, covered pots).

70. Baptiste & Zéphir 2008, pp. 372 – 373. The exact provenance of the object (n° EO 801) is unknown.

71. Dalsheimer 2001, p. 279, photo 157.

72. Baptiste & Zéphir 2008, pp. 358 - 360.

## Laotian art collections

### *Buddhist pieces*

Buddha from the collection of Prince Boun Oum make up a substantial fraction of the Lao art collection in the Vat Phou museum. Posterior by several centuries to the Khmer pieces, they must have been first conserved at Vat Thong monastery where the *that* of the princely family of Champasak are built – and then entered in possession of the Champasak princess.

Aside from some handsome originals – such as the sandstone stuccoed Buddha taking the Earth as witness, whose curls are treated in points (VP VI 14, 19<sup>th</sup> c.?) – others seem to be copies of more ancient pieces. Some of these statues are in stone (soapstone?) covered by bronzing (for example VP II 9). Three standing Buddha in bronze, of poor quality, come without any doubt from the same mould (VP II 3, 4 and 35) – only the position of the added hands varies. They are presented in monastic costume, the drape of the garment being directly inspired by the art of Dvāravatī. It is likewise with the other statues of Buddha seated in meditation or taking the Earth as witness. Four paired statues, two Buddha seated in Western style (VP I 344 and 345) and two seated Buddha taking the Earth as witness, are especially curious [fig. 31]. They are made in laterite (the technique of their fabrication is reminiscent of moulding) and they are covered with black lacquer that has been gilded.<sup>73</sup> Difficult to date, they also recall the art of Dvāravatī.



fig. 31 : Seated Buddha in laterite VP I 344  
(face, back, profile) ©S.Fradelizi/SAGV

A *Buddhapāda* in stone of unknown origin (VP I 486), incomplete and broken into several fragments, is conserved in the Champasak store.

The Buddha in wood are in general very recent and are of no particular interest, most of them being crudely shaped sculptures. Amongst the exceptions, there is a fine standing Buddha in lacquered and gilded wood (VP V 1), of almost human size (131 cm high), which seems to date from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Dressed in monastic costume, he is in the attitude known as “calling the rain”, the two arms are dangling away from the body and extend into outstretched hands with curved fingers. The image is to be displayed after restoration.

The most beautiful pieces in this collection are actually those with exact documentation of their origin, from having been found recently. They come in part from the under the rock-shelter behind the small temple, and for the other part from the foundation deposit of the Houay Sa Houa I monastery (HSHI) – north of the mouth of the small Houay Sa Houa stream – revealed when the bank of the river collapsed, which led to a salvage excavation (PRAL, 1992).

Eight of the Laotian Buddha found with the Angkorian bronzes behind the small temple are shown at Vat Phou (VP II 73, 81, 82, 84, 85, 96, 106 and 107). Also to be mentioned is a bronze Kaccāyana (VP II 80) which, thanks to an engraved line on its pedestal, may perhaps be dated from the 17<sup>th</sup> century [fig. 32].

73. According to Pierre Pichard, such fine molding of laterite would be very difficult, even impossible (personal communication). More likely, it could be laterite mixed with added clay. This technic was used to shape bricks during the pre-Angkorian period, at least in the region of Vat Phou. A few examples of this type were uncovered during our excavations.



fig. 32 : Kaccāyana VP II 80 (face, back, profile)  
©S.Fradelizi/SAGV

These pieces had been put there by Buddhist pilgrims. Numerous votive tablets usually called “Holy Imprints” accompany these statuettes. They depict the Buddha seated, taking the Earth as witness or in meditation. Three are made of gold (VP III 55, 57, 58). Others are in lead (?) covered with white primer. Several hundreds, in vegetable resin (*keson dok mai*), are also kept. They were in such numbers as to have covered the floor under the rock-shelter.

Almost three hundred statuettes of Buddha – of which four are in bronze (HSH II 59, 63, 67, 69) and the others in vegetable resin covered with gold or silver worked in repoussé –, come from the foundation deposit of the Buddhist monastery HSH 1 dated to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The cache containing them is a buried small chamber built in bricks covered with a re-used sandstone slab, probably from the pre-Angkorian period. Fifteen such images are shown in the Vat Phou museum. Most show the Buddha seated on very high thrones engraved with vegetal or geometrical motifs [fig. 33]. The *mūdra* are a bit monotonous: calling the Earth to witness dominates, followed by the Meditation. The Charity is represented by some examples. A great number of votive statuettes in *keson dok mai* show a dedication: name of the donor, object of the donation, and date of the gift. From the dedications the oldest of these images are from the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the most recent from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>74</sup> Several “Holy Imprints” formed of a gold or silver stamped plate were also found. Two of them are also shown at the onsite museum. A very fine double-faced example (ex HSH1 92-35), with a vegetal resin core containing within its base a small gold counter, is shown at the Kaisone



fig. 33 : Buddha en vegetable resin (*keson dok mai*)  
HSH X 35 (face, profile) ©S.Fradelizi/SAGV

74. Cf. Hawixbrock 2000 and notices by C Hawixbrock in the catalogue of the Vat Phou museum, pp. 98-101 (Hawixbrock *et al.* 2012). A selection of the most beautiful of these statues is exhibited at the Vat Phou museum.

museum in Vientiane. Four images of Kaccāyana, two of bronze (HSH II 65 and 70) and two of silver alloy (HSH III 14 and 15), complete this holy deposit.

More statues of the Buddha, of the same *keson dok mai* type but probably a little posterior, were found in a jar buried at the foot of one of the brick towers built on the intermediate terrace of the Vat Phou temple.

Several large-sized *bai-sema* from the Boun Oum collection, decorated by the slender *stūpa* image characteristic of later models (19<sup>th</sup> c.), complete these collections of Laotian Buddhist art.

### *Peculiar pieces from the Boun Oum collection*

The Boun Oum collection is interesting as much for its strangeness as for the questions it raises. Some 200 heteroclite pieces – made out of stone, metal or wood – constitute it. M. Giteau, when she met with the Prince of Champasak, seems to have interested herself only in three authentic Khmer pieces – now disappeared – and not to have commented on the rest of the collection. Does it mean that only these three objects were of interest to her? That is highly likely, given the hardly normative characteristics of these statues. It may be assumed that the objects visible today constituted only one part, more or less significant, of the collection the prince had made. Amongst the peculiar pieces kept in the storeroom, two groups may be distinguished.

### *The “imitation” pieces*

Careful examination of some Khmer style statues that have remained at Champasak, all in excellent condition, shows that they are copies, even fakes. This is the case with a female divinity (VP I 239) and with an Avalokiteśvara (VP I 178), whose aspect is reminiscent of pre-Angkorian images [fig. 34].<sup>75</sup> To these pieces must be added two decorative sandstone plaques: the first presents the Birth of the Buddha (VP I 235); the second represents in Angkorian style Viṣṇu mounted on Garuḍa (VP I 177), a subject repeated in a bronze statue (VP II 1), also a fake. Some of the above mentioned Buddhist pieces, actually copies inspired by the Dvāravatī style (VP II 3 and 35), may be added to that group.

### *The pieces belonging to a “later local art”*

Out of the 129 sculptures in stone (sandstone and an unidentified black stone [basalt?]) that make up the Boun Oum collection, 121 make up a group that B. Dagens labelled “later local art”.<sup>76</sup> Given that they represent a significant part of the Vat Phou collections, we devote a chapter to their study.



fig. 34 Avalokiteśvara VP I 178  
©C. Hawixbrock

75. In the case of the Avalokiteśvara, this must be the statue considered as pre-Angkorian described by B. Dagens in 1986 (p. 9). Valérie Zaleski, in the note she drafted for the database, shows that this image is directly inspired by a piece known and exhibited in Thailand.

76. Dagens 1986, p. 9.

The majority of these pieces are inspired by Khmer or Cham art, from an iconographic as well as from a stylistic view point. They portray Buddhist characters and scenes (Buddha, *bodhisattva*, Earth goddess) and those of Hinduism (dancing Śiva, Gaṇeśa, Viṣṇu sleeping or emerging from a conch, Brahmā, female divinities). Their actual treatment often involves reinterpretation not to mention errors: inversion of Buddha's gestures, confusion of gods attributes, etc. Hanuman is represented in diverse attitudes, for example hugging the mountain or carrying Sītā in his arms (VP I 354) [fig. 35]. Amongst the less personalised figures, a Shivaite ascetic was recognized, some *dvārapāla* and an *apsara*.

Others, less numerous, are of musicians or illustrate local legends still known today, such as those of Nang Sida<sup>77</sup> or of the Dame Malong (a young girl seduced and abandoned with her new-born child).

A series of sculptures in cruder style represent small, stylised orants, human or animal (monkeys) [fig. 36]. Their bodies (30 cm high on the average) are reduced to a more or less cylindrical shape with a conical top, indicating the cranium; only the face and the hands, in relief, are indicated. There are also some animal representations, such as elephants, a mongoose enclosing a snake and a rather well done couched crocodile (VP I 358).

Even though no piece from this group is shown at the Vat Phou museum, they are certainly worth presenting elsewhere, as representing the more recent local art. The Pakse museum shows some of them including orants, a flute player and a female personage. To our knowledge there is no known sculpture of this type outside the Champasak province. Their origin remains a mystery: it is not impossible that Prince Boun Oum himself commissioned them; if not, it must be assumed that he acquired them in batch. The crafting of these pieces, most often clumsy, points to the inexperience of the sculptors and suggests a common place of production, i.e., a single workshop. One can assume they were carved in the region, since some of them refer to local legends. The rest of Prince Boun Oum's collection is made of heteroclite pieces: Vietnamese jars in white and blue porcelain, decorated with dragons or floral scenes; caramel-brown glazed ceramics with moulded appliqué decorations and small contemporary domestic items in copper or bronze (trays, teapots, cooking pots, gongs); etc.



fig. 35 : Hanuman carrying Sītā VP I 354  
©C. Hawixbrock



fig. 36 : Orant VP I 194  
©C. Hawixbrock

77. See details of the legend in Aymonier 1901, vol. 2, p. 172.

## **Conclusion**

Study of the archaeological finds from the Champasak province, especially those collected around Vat Phou conserved today in the museum and storerooms of the site, confirm a long and continuous occupation of the area by societies having undergone Indianisation. From the beginning of the pre-Angkorian period, the Khmer artistic productions of South-Laos are characterised by technical mastery and a potent stylistic originality, as shown by the numerous vestiges that were found. This regional feature is mostly evident in the lapidary artefacts that demonstrate a notable practice of Hindu cults, together with the mark of evolved Buddhist traditions. The study of the style shows, in addition to strictly Khmer elements, a combination of influences from neighbouring regions: the Dvāravatī culture, to the west and that of the Cham country to the east. The Vat Phou sanctuary had obviously long been the meeting point between these different cultural and political areas. This is due to its exceptional geographical situation: on one hand, adequacy between the physical nature of the site and the properly religious dimension (presence of Liṅgaparvata), and on the other hand, position by the Mekong. The River was undoubtedly an axis of privileged communication reinforced on its two banks, upstream as well as downstream, by a network of affluent rivers as important as the Se Mun and the Sekong, themselves swollen by several sizeable tributaries.

The archaeological collections of Vat Phou effectively testify, by the number, diversity, size and artistic quality of the pieces, whether of the pre-Angkorian or Angkorian periods, to the economic prosperity of that region over a long period, and beyond, of the political power of the authorities that controlled it.

The outline of the Khmer road that, in the Angkorian period (as of the beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> century?), connected the sanctuary of Vat Phou to Angkor is known. However, no earlier overland route has yet been traced. The richest of the pre-Angkorian sites located in the Mounlapamok district were all built on the bank of the Mekong. A road perpendicular to the river can be traced for just a few kilometres, marked by the position of ancient sites spotted in the hinterland,<sup>78</sup> but this route hardly seems to go beyond a territory probably controlled by the communities on the banks of the Mekong. When Mahendravarman, one of the first great founding kings of the Khmer empire (end of the 6<sup>th</sup> c.), left Vat Phou to conquer territories to the west, before turning to the south and to Sambor Prei Kuk region in Cambodia, he marked his advance by inscriptions, several of which are situated near the Se Mun river. It may thus be that at that time, fluvial communication routes were favoured. On the west side, towards Champa, mountain passes may have served to reach the great Cham sites such as My Son. These regions are still insufficiently investigated for this to be asserted. Even though we still lack enough precise archaeological information, these initial reflexions on the collections assembled at Vat Phou confirm the region's essential importance to the understanding of the birth of the ancient Khmer world.

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78. Santoni & Hawixbrock 1999.

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