

A Brief Overview of Dvāravatī Art and Iconography with Special Reference to Seated Buddha Images

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บทคัดย่อ

ทวาราวดีเป็นหนึ่งในอารยธรรมที่เก่าแก่ที่สุดทั้งทางด้านศาสนาและศิลปะ (ประมาณคริสต์ศตวรรษที่ 7 และ 8) ซึ่งพบร่องรอยในภาคกลางของประเทศไทย บทความนี้จะเริ่มด้วยการบรรยายภาพรวมของอารยธรรมทวาราวดี จากนั้นผู้เขียนจะพูดถึงอารยธรรมนี้ในเชิงศิลปะและประวัติศาสตร์วิทยา เช่น การศึกษาพระพุทธรูปปางต่างๆ โดยเฉพาะพระพุทธรูปประทับนั่งห้อยพระบาท หรือที่เรียกว่า “ปรลัมพปาทาสนะ” (Pralambapādāsana) โดยผู้เขียนจะนำเสนอแนวทางใหม่ในการศึกษาพระพุทธรูปปางนี้

Abstract:

This paper is about Dvāravatī, one of the oldest religious cultures and artistic periods in central Thailand, circa 7th–8th centuries. After reviewing the state of our knowledge on different historical aspects, we will discuss briefly the iconography of Buddha images and other objects including the “Wheel of the Law” sculptures. This paper will then specifically deal with a peculiar posture found in the art of Dvāravatī, Buddha images seated in the so-called “European fashion” (skt. *pralambapādāsana*), and attempt to give new perspectives on its spread throughout Southeast Asia.

A brief history

The collapse of the Funan entity in the mid-sixth century A.D. permitted the emergence of many independent “states” throughout Southeast Asia. In Thailand, one of these entities was apparently called *Dvāravatī* and its centre appears to have been in what is now central Thailand. The main cities were Nakhon Pathom, Lopburi and U-Thong. The first appearances in literature of what was identified as a “kingdom” called “Duoluobodi” (To-lo-po-ti) in Chinese or “*Dvāravatī*”¹ in Sanskrit is found in the travel accounts of the Chinese pilgrims Xuanzang (Hsuan-Tsang) and Yijing (I-Tsing or I-Ching) of the 7th century A.D. (BEAL [1884] 1981: 200; TAKAKUSU [1896] 1998: xlix, li, 10). A few coins (or medals) were also inscribed in Sanskrit with the words *śrī dvāravatī* (WICKS 1999).

Unfortunately, little is known about the political organization or the geographical extent of *Dvāravatī*. What we do know derives mainly from the vast amount of superb sculptures which have been preserved. Therefore, the term *Dvāravatī* is often used for convenience by scholars to describe an art style or a period that flourished in Thailand from about the 7th to the 11th century A.D (COEDÈS 1968; BOISSELIER 1975). Nonetheless, most of the finds dealt with in this paper may be dated stylistically around the end of the 7th or the early 8th century.

¹ It is best to avoid calling *Dvāravatī* a “kingdom” as it probably consisted of a group of cities loosely linked together by cultural and economic ties around the ancient coastline of the Gulf of Thailand. See Phongsri WANASIN and Thiva SUPACHANYA 1980; also MUDAR 1999. For a recent overview of *Dvāravatī* studies see SKILLING 2003. In spring 2009, an exhibition – the biggest ever on the topic – was held in the Guimet Museum, Paris (“*Dvāravatī : aux sources du bouddhisme en Thaïlande*”, February 11 – June 22, 2009); the exhibition came back to Thailand at the National Museum Bangkok (“*Dvāravatī Art: The Early Buddhist Art of Thailand*”, August 14 – October 09, 2009). All our Chinese references are indicated after the Pinyin transliteration system followed by the Wade-Giles or others forms of Romanization (where relevant).

The majority of the people of Dvāravatī were probably Mons and the language that they used was Old Mon to which the Nyah Kur dialect still spoken in the North-East of Thailand is related (DIFFLOTH 1984). Judging from the materials, the main religion of the Mons was probably an early form of Buddhism.² However, it cannot be ruled out that some form of Mahāyāna was also practiced and some finds of Hindu sculptures indicate that Hinduism was followed too (Nandana 1999; Phasook 2004). In this regard, a fine low-relief carving still *in situ* from a cave in Saraburi is hard to interpret because it shows the Buddha preaching to Śiva and Viṣṇu being worshipped by a *ṛṣi*. (BOISSELIER 1993). (fig.1)

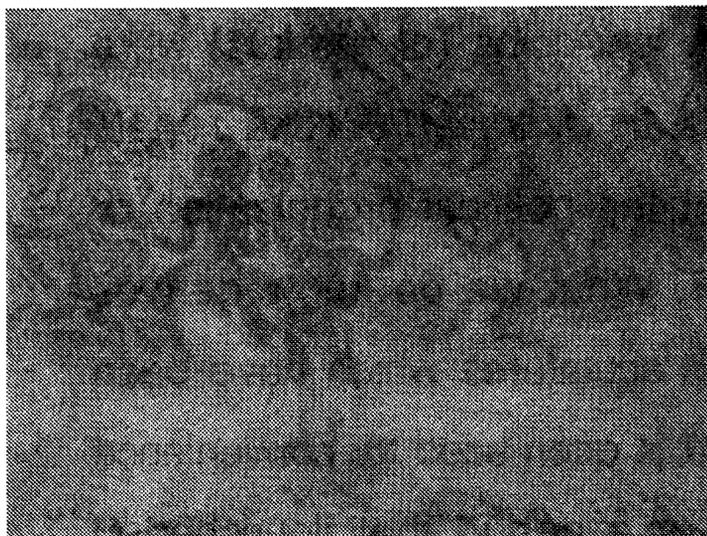


Fig. 1: Tham Phra Pothisat, Saraburi province.

Originating in the lower Chao Phraya River valley, the Mon-Dvāravatī culture seems to have extended, or at least have left an imprint, westward to the Tenasserim mountain range and southward to the Isthmus of Kra – perhaps as far as Songkhla (JACQ-HERGOUALC'H

2002: 190). The most northerly site of Dvāravatī influence was Hari puñjaya (modern Lamphun), which persisted until the late 13th century A.D. when it was absorbed by the Thai kingdoms. Subjugation did not, however, mean extinction.³

² So-called Hīnayāna or Śrāvakayāna. However, we cannot ascertain that the Mon-Dvāravatī *saṅgha* was that of the Theravāda only for there may have been different *nikāya*, such as the Mūlasarvāstivāda or the Dharmaguptaka, living side by side at the same time and/or in the same areas. For the case of the Chula Pathon Chedi in Nakhon Pathom, see Piriya 1974 and Nandana 1978; also REVIRE (2009).

³ Despite political domination, the Mons in their turn became the teachers of their conquerors, the Khmers, the Burmese, and the Thais. These conquerors were probably influenced

The burden of “indianization”

In the existing literature, there are chiefly two interpretations relating to the formation of the art of Dvāravatī. One is “indianization”⁴: in other words, the art of Dvāravatī derives directly from Indian models (BRIGGS 1945). The other is “indigenization”; that is, the inhabitants of Dvāravatī created their works mainly by themselves (QUARITCH WALES 1969). This paper adopts a perspective different from the two above. It finds indeed that although the art of Dvāravatī may have been eventually influenced stylistically by that of India, it may also have been influenced by other cultures, e.g., Zhenla, Java and China. It probably synthesized those influences and created an original style.

Wheels of the Law and the question of “Aniconism”

One of the distinctive contributions of Dvāravatī sculpture is the large free-standing Wheel of the Law or *dharmacakra* (fig. 2), an “aniconic” symbol of the Buddha’s First Sermon.⁵ The Buddha is known as the “Wheel-Turner”: the One who sets the cycle of teachings in motion and consequently changes the course of destiny.

Decorated with floral patterns very similar to pre-Angkorean period carvings, these wheels were probably erected on high pillars and placed in temple compounds. At least, one moulded tablet suggests this arrangement. These wheels have important features:

somehow by Mon culture on matters such as writing systems, art forms, government, religious terminology, and scholarship. See BIZOT 1993: 13.

⁴ The problem concerning the process of “indianization” of Southeast Asia has been reassessed in recent times, particularly in MABBETT 1997.

⁵ These wheels were often associated with a reclining pair of deer that may refer to the Buddha’s preaching in the Deer Park at Sarnath, India.

they are carved in the round and are rarely found in India as such. In fact, their occurrence in Southeast Asia, in such a form, is limited to Dvāravatī areas. Sometimes they bear Pāli inscriptions of Buddhist formulas (BROWN 1996).

Now, it is worth remembering that during the early centuries of Buddhist art, no anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha were made, and the Buddha was evoked by various symbols such as the *dharmacakra*, the *bodhi*-tree (fig. 3), the Buddha's footprints, etc.⁶ However such “aniconic” symbols have been in use for a long period of time in Buddhist art up to the present day Thailand (BOISSELIER 1988). Hence, for the art of Dvāravatī, we cannot talk *stricto sensu* of an “aniconic period” that would have preceded an “iconic period”, for such representations could sometimes be used

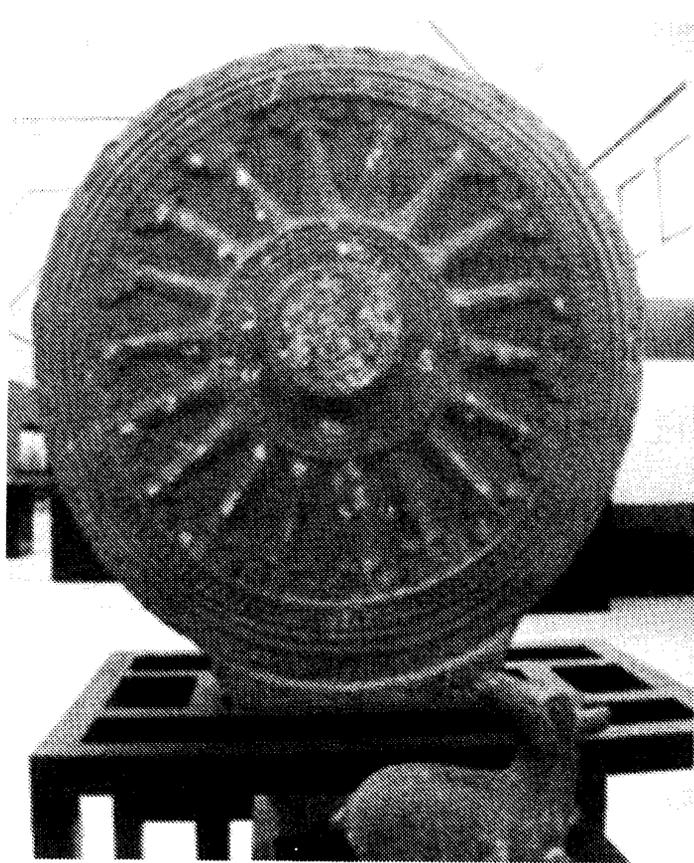


Fig. 2: Wheel of the Law and crouching deer, National Museum Bangkok.

side by side, as demonstrated by the abacus from Nakhon Pathom which supported a *dharmacakra* and displays in low-relief an enthroned Buddha on its four faces (fig.4 and 4 bis). Interestingly enough, Lucien Fournereau, the French pioneer in the archaeology of Siam, who saw Wheels of the Law and this particular abacus, thought they were: 1. “The wheels of the chariot of some deity” and

⁶ For a further discussion on the theory of “aniconism”, see in HUNTINGTON 1990 and DEHEJIA 1991. So far, there is only one *buddhapāda* (footprint) found near Dong Si Mahapot



Fig. 3: Bodhi Tree, National Museum Bangkok.

2. “The fragment of a sculpture in sandstone of the same nature, which (...) may have belonged to the supposed chariot, [is representing] a King seated on a throne [and] speaking to an audience”. Obviously, Fournereau could not yet identify the Wheels of the Law and the episode of the Buddha’s First Sermon (HENNEQUIN 2006: 7-8).⁷

Dvāravatī Art peculiarities

The Mons were highly skilled artists who excelled in stone sculpture, stucco and terra cotta architectural decoration, and to a lesser degree, in bronze work. Many scholars have shown that their art style – at least in the initial stage – was very similar to that of the Gupta and Post-Gupta which flourished in northern and western India between the 4th and 8th centuries A.D. (DUPONT [1959] 2006: 121-123; BOISSELIER 1974: 76).

which an inscription claims to date from the 8th century. See BROWN: 59-61; fig.57. On the other hand, Boisselier seems to be very cautious about the attribution of the fine *bodhi*-tree which entered the collection of the National Museum Bangkok in the Dvāravatī room. In one of his publications (1974: 213; fig. 163), it is ascribed as a late work of the Ayutthaya school ca. 17th-18th century. A careful examination and comparative study of this object remains to be done.

⁷ “Le fragment de sculpture sur grès (...) représente un roi assis sur un trône et parlant à des auditeurs”. FOURNEREAU 1895: 121.

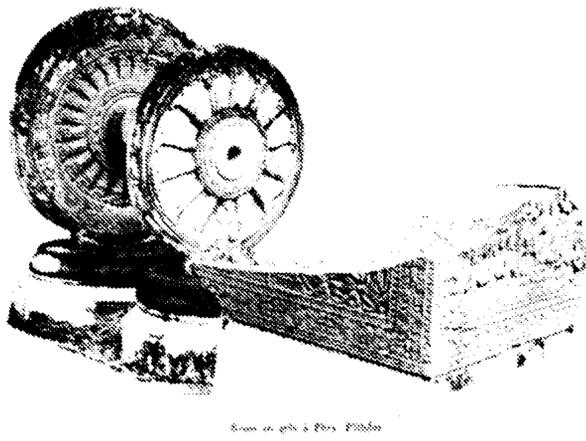


Fig. 4: Wheels and stone relief (old photograph by Lucien Fournereau).

Fig. 4 bis: Low relief with enthroned seated Buddha, Phra Pathom Chedi National Museum.

However, the facial features of Dvāravatī Buddha images exhibit pronounced native elements – a large face, curved eyebrows joined at the bridge of the nose, prominent eyes partly closed, a broad nose, thick and well-defined lips. The hair is usually in large spiral curls with a cylindrical *uṣṇīṣa* or cranial protuberance (fig.5) Moreover, in contrast to the Gupta style which displays a *tribhaṅga* or triple flexion curve of the body, standing Dvāravatī images commonly exhibit rigid symmetry that is more reminiscent of Chinese art and which is an “antithesis to the Indian aesthetic sensibility” (Piriya 1982: 22).⁸ The body stands in erect posture with the feet firmly planted on a lotus pedestal; both hands perform the same gesture;⁹ the outer robe covers both shoulders and clings closely to the body, giving an impression of nude asexuality; both sides of the robe are identical. (fig.7)

Besides the numerous standing images, there are a few reclining Buddha images (fig.8) left from this period and some seated Buddhas.

⁸ Dr. Piriya interpret the standing Buddhas mounted on a monster (fig.6) with both hands executing the same gesture and flanked by two bodhisattvas as the representation of the descent of the Buddha Amitābha to welcome the soul of the dead to the Pure Land of Sukhāvātī. (Piriya 1982: 23) However this identification has no real solid ground because it is not supported by any inscriptions and therefore is purely speculative.

⁹ Some scholars are reluctant to use the Sanskrit vocabulary and other “mudrā” terms because

Seated Buddhas “in Majesty”

Seated Buddha images are few compared to the standing ones. This is true at least for the stone and bronze statues because the number of stucco or terra cotta images is not known. They were either seated crossed-legged (fig.9) or with both legs pendant – the so-called “European posture” or *pralambapādāsana* in Sanskrit.¹⁰ Both terms are rather misleading and I propose instead the label “in Majesty” because it is more consistent – I believe – with the royal symbolism of these images (REVIRE 2008: 124–126). The Buddhas seated “in Majesty” were found in several sites and in different materials such as bronze (fig.10), terra cotta, stucco and in low-relief. But probably the most outstanding ones are the five colossal statues (fig.11) reported to come from Wat Phra Men, Nakhon Pathom (Dhanit 1967). These images are seated with the feet hanging down and are all doing the teaching gesture with the right hand except for the one from Wat Na Phra Men, Ayutthaya (fig.12) which was heavily



Fig. 5: Buddha’s head,
National Museum
Bangkok.



Fig. 6: Buddha triad,
National Museum
Bangkok.

they are not indigenous and are not known to have been used in Dvāravatī (or Gandhāra, Bhārhut, Mathurā, etc.). As Dr. Peter Skilling says: “To use them might suggest that there was a standardized use of manuals or concepts of iconography – which remains to be demonstrated. The “mudrā” terms (including the term “mudrā” itself) are from Pāla or post-Pāla “sādhana” texts known in Northeastern India and translated into Tibetan. Of course, the terms may be used as reference but not, for me, as primary categories. In this I may go against “art-historical” traditions.” (Private communication)

¹⁰ See REVIRE 2008 and Chotima 2009.

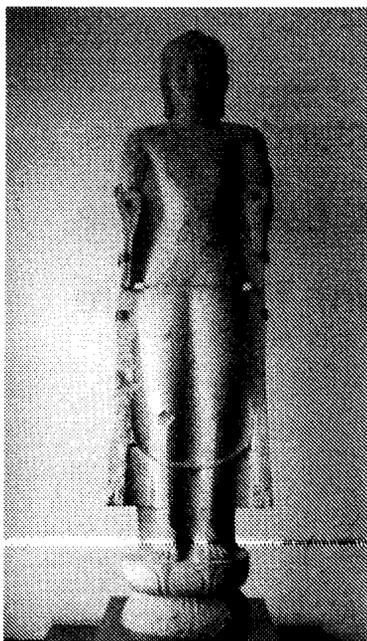


Fig. 7: Standing Buddha,
National Museum Bangkok.



Fig. 8: Reclining Buddha, Tham Fa To, Ratburi Province

restored.¹¹ With little archaeological context and no inscriptions at hand, it is very difficult – I argue – to determine if they represent the historical Buddha Śākyamuni, the past and future Buddhas such as Maitreya or the *pañcājina* with Vairocana at the center (fig.13) At first sight, they may look similar to images in the same posture from Ajaṅṭā, Ellorā and other western Deccan caves (fig.14 and 14 bis) However, the images from India are always depicted in the gesture of “Turning the Wheel of the Law” with both hands (*dharmacakra mudrā*). In contrast, the seated Buddhas from central Thailand appear with the right hand making a significant gesture, the teaching gesture (*vitarka mudrā*), while the other rests on the lap or the knee. In fact, this iconographic trend seems to have been also popular in Java (WOODWARD 1988; fig.12), in China, around the early Tang period (SIRÉ N [1925] 1988) (fig.15), or in Japan during the late Asuka or Early Nara periods (WONG 2008: 144; fig. 5.13 and pl. 13, 16, 17).

¹¹ The fifth image from Wat Na Phra Men, Ayutthaya, is obviously made of a different stone. There are also many problems with this statue regarding its provenance, its style and iconography. See DUPONT [1959] 2006: 197-98; pl. 500. See also my thesis for a longer discussion (REVIRE 2008: 98-102) and my forthcoming article 2010.

Among the large number of East Asian evidence there is a seated Buddha type from Longmen caves – the so-called Udayana type – (fig.16 and/or 16 bis) which shows similarities with some South East Asian specimens. Hence, the image from Son-Tho, Southern Vietnam (MALLERET 1963: 178-79; pl.XXXIV.), and another little bronze from Thailand, said to have come from U-Thong (Pal 1978; fig.76) share striking affinities especially when considering the hand postures and the drapery.¹² There may well have been other Chinese prototypes for this particular set of characteristics.

Moreover, some clay tablets displaying an enthroned Buddha with legs-pendant and a right hand raised are found in Thailand (Pattaratorn 1997: 22-23) (fig.17), in Burma (MOORE 2007: 198), in West-Java (MANGUIN & INDRAJAYA 2006: 249-250, fig. 23.6) and Champa (BAPTISTE & ZÉPHIR 2005: 69, fig. 4). They seem to belong to a Southeast Asian “regional type” of the 7th century rather than just a “Mon-Dvāravatī type”.¹³ Yet again, it is surprising that some tablets from Tang China and Japan *circa* the 7th century show a similar posture as those discussed above



Fig. 9: Clay tablet with a seated Buddha, National Museum Bangkok.



Fig. 10: Bronze seated Buddha, National Museum Bangkok.

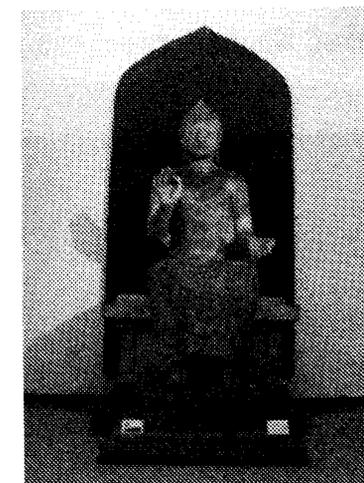


Fig. 11: Colossal seated Buddha, National Museum Bangkok.

¹² I am very grateful to Dr. Dorothy C. Wong (University of Virginia) and Dr. Hiram Woodward Jr. (Walters Art Gallery) who have both shared their opinions and photographs with me on this matter.

¹³ Dr. Piriya thought this kind of tablet shows Sakyamuni’s apotheosis between bodhisattvas from the *Lotus sūtra* (Piriya 1980: 33).



Fig. 12: Enthroned seated Buddha, Wat Na Phra Men, Ayutthaya

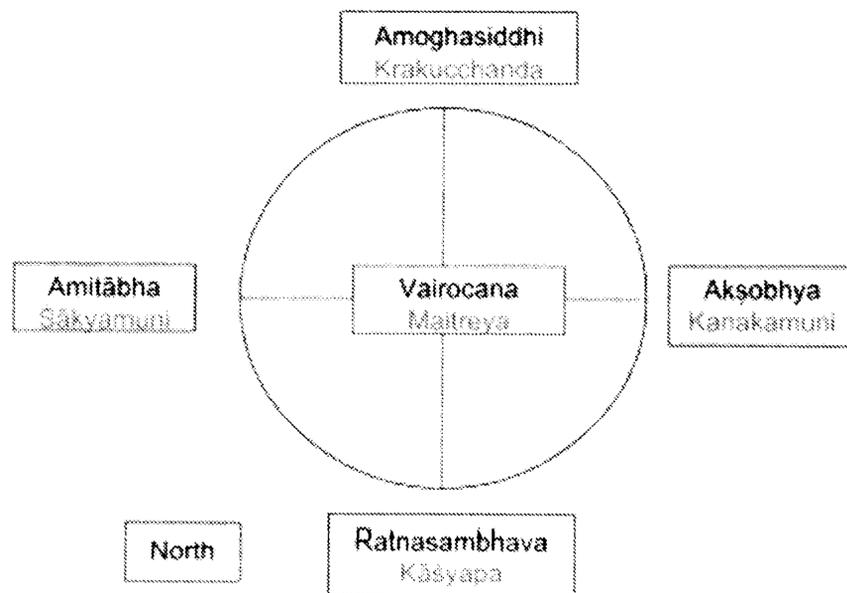


Fig. 13: Buddha maṇḍala

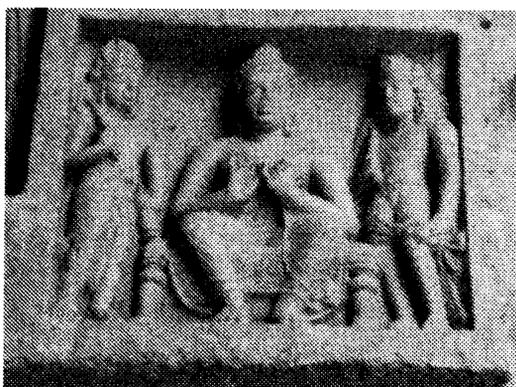


Fig. 14: Seated Buddha in high relief, Kaṅherī cave, India



Fig. 14 bis: Preaching Buddha, Aurangabad, cave 3, India

(WOODWARD 1988; fig.9). These tablets may provide an evidence of contacts between Dvāravatī with neighboring countries by way of land or sea routes.

The Tang connection?

All these testimonies raise intriguing questions as to how this iconographic idiom – the Buddha seated “in Majesty” with the right hand in the teaching gesture – travelled to Southeast Asia and Dvāravatī around the 7th–8th centuries. I tend to think that it was part of a “cosmopolitan Buddhist art style” at the time, in the wake of the traffic on the Silk Road – both mainland and maritime.¹⁴ Can

¹⁴ For a similar opinion *vis-à-vis* Tang iconography, see WONG 2008: 132-135.



Fig. 15: Seated Buddha, Datong, China

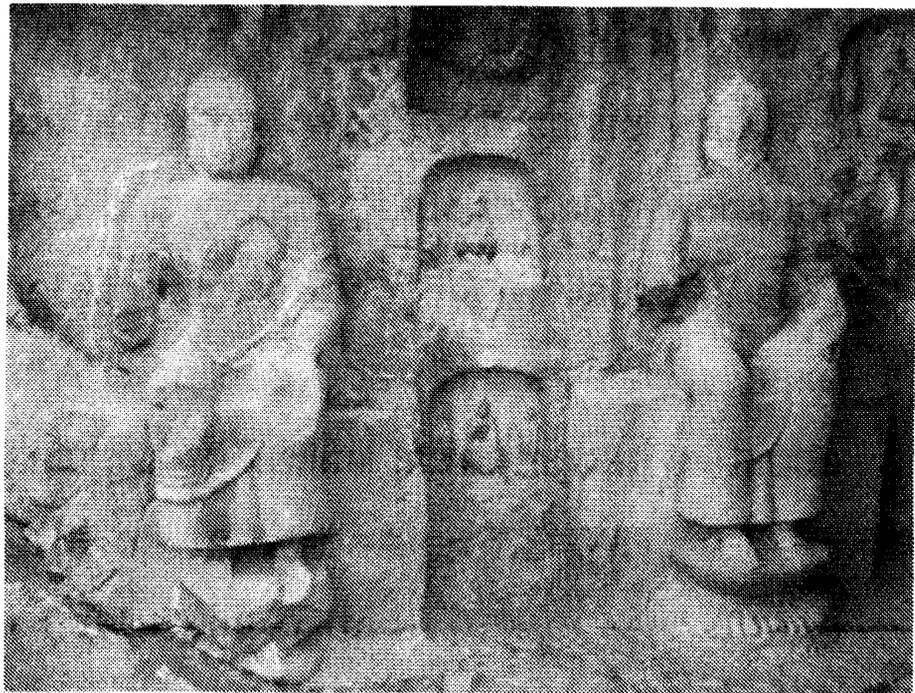


Fig. 16: Seated buddhas, Longmen caves, China

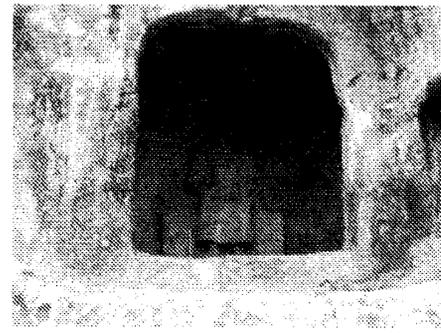


Fig. 16 bis: Seated Buddha, Longmen, China

we suppose that the “Dvāravatī people” were inspired by some of the Chinese or Japanese sculptures, paintings or embroideries (fig.18) during their visits to Far East Asia? The Tang annals mention the sending to China of two Dvāravatī “embassies” with tributes in 638 and 649 (YAMAMOTO 1979). Or else some Chinese pilgrims may have passed through Southeast Asia with some models which have not yet been discovered, have been destroyed or lost. In this view, clay tablets, small bronzes, cloth paintings¹⁵ and so on would have been a wonderful medium for spreading new iconographic idioms. Yet with no surviving Dvāravatī paintings or tapestries, this iconographic trend can only be hypothesized. But as one scholar states: “it seems probable that there was at least some Chinese role in its genesis, and in the years around 700.” (WOODWARD 2003: 74).

¹⁵ On the matter of portability and mobility of cloth paintings, see SKILLING 2006: 234.

Concluding remarks

Many things have been written about Dvāravatī. But we still do not know much about its history and civilization except for its name. Was it actually a kingdom or a confederation of city-states? When exactly was its birth and decline? What does one actually know about its geographical limits? Its population? Its religious practices?

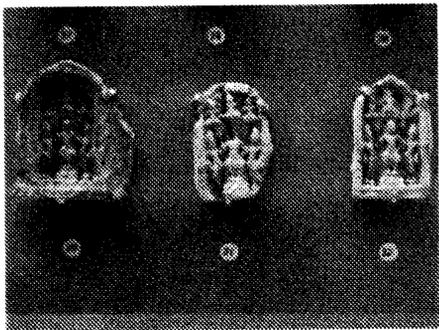


Fig. 17: Clay Tablets, National Museum Bangkok.

And what do the archaeological artefacts can really teach us? There are still many questions left unanswered for further studies. This paper is a preliminary examination of a largely unexplored field and an attempt to put the so-called art of Dvāravatī in a wider and international “Buddhist” perspective across

Asia. The amount of artistic and historical interactions between Central and Eastern Asia with central Thailand around the 7th-8th centuries, as opposed to the relationship with India and Sri Lanka, is rather surprising and should not be neglected. Likewise past research in this area should deserve a re-evaluation in the light of modern scholarship and new archaeological discoveries. We hope that this preliminary paper will be followed by others in the same direction. 

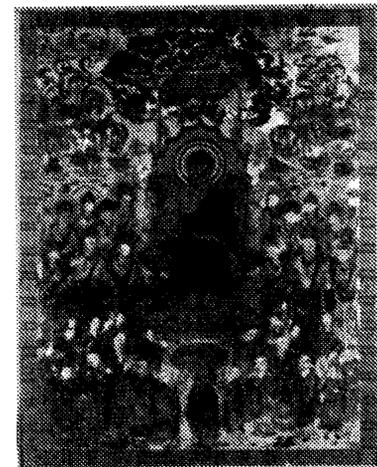


Fig. 18: Embroidery, National Museum of Nara, Japan.

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