

Reflections on Khmer Influence in Upper Laos

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Abstracts

The Lao historiographical tradition places the introduction of Buddhism with the newly created Lan Xang kingdom in the middle of the fourteenth century CE, through a religious mission that travelled from Cambodia to Luang Prabang. Critical analysis of the chronicles, as well as new awareness of the extent of pre-Angkorian, Mon and Angkorian influences in the Middle Mekong Valley, however, lead us to profoundly review this assertion. Early Khmer remains found scattered around Luang Prabang appear to be singularly isolated, and their presence in upper Laos requires further explanation.

ประวัติศาสตร์นิพนธ์กระแสหลักของลาวระบุว่าพุทธศาสนาเข้ามาสู่อาณาจักรล้านช้างที่เพิ่งสถาปนาใหม่ช่วงปลายพุทธศตวรรษที่ 19 ผ่านสมณทูตจากกัมพูชาที่มาถึงหลวงพระบาง การวิพากษ์พงศาวดาร ตลอดจนความรับรู้ล่าสุดเกี่ยวกับขอบเขตของอิทธิพลเขมรสมัยก่อนเมืองพระนคร มอญ และเขมรสมัยเมืองพระนครในบริเวณลุ่มแม่น้ำโขงตอนกลาง ช่วยให้เราทบทวนคำยืนยันนี้อย่างลึกซึ้ง ซากโบราณสถานศิลปะเขมรยุคต้นที่กระจายตัวโดดๆ อยู่ทั่วหลวงพระบางและปรากฏในลาวตอนบนควรได้รับคำอธิบายเพิ่มเติม

The question of the northern limit of expansion of early Khmer culture in the Middle Mekong Valley has so far hardly been addressed. A number of pre-Angkorian sites have been detected in southern and central Laos up to the mouth of the Bang Fai River (ᦞᦲᧁᦷᦟᦲᦋᦲᦟ), and these ancient settlements probably extended even further north, at least up to the present Laotian province of Khammuan (Lorrillard 2013 and 2014). Certainly during the Angkorian period, and particularly during the reign of Jayavarman VII (ca. r. 1181–1218), the Vientiane plain and adjacent Thai areas on the right bank of the Mekong River were under Khmer control, judging from architectural remains (Lorrillard 2016). In the same region, however, a large number of Mon remains can also be seen. The discoveries made at certain rock sites and in Vientiane even raise questions about the nature of the contacts that took place, at the turn of the second millennium, between the Mon Buddhist culture that spread outward from the Khorat Plateau and the Angkorian Buddhist culture that had been transplanted far to the north of Isan (northeast Thailand). Knowledge of ancient Khmer hegemony beyond these flatlands becomes much more sketchy.

The city of Luang Prabang (ຫລວງພຣະບາງ) has often been considered as having been subject to Khmer influence. The perception of this influence is, however, still imprecise, especially because it has long been biased by the uncritical acceptance of the Lao historiographical tradition relating to the semi-legendary reign of King Fa Ngum (ຟ້າງຸ່ມ; ca. r. 1353–1373?), the alleged founder of the unified kingdom of Lan Xang (ລ້ານຊ້າງ) in the mid-fourteenth century. The Luang Prabang chronicles—in a long account devoted to this monarch which contrasts with the very sparse available information on the later reigns—report that he was taken in and educated by the ruler of Nakhon Luang or Inthapatthanakhon (i.e. of the Khmer kingdom or Angkor) who gave him his daughter as wife and an army, then sent him a religious mission to spread Buddhism in the Lao country. It is said that this mission, composed of famous monks, specialists in the various sciences and craftsmen, also carried precious objects, including the famous buddha statue of Phra Bang (ພຣະບາງ; literally "the buddha made of alloy").

Detailed philological studies, however, show that this account actually originated in the hagiographic tradition of the Phra Bang first known as the *Aḍḍhabhāgabuddharūpanidāna*. The text was written in Pali in the sixteenth century and, while it presented a fabulous past for this buddha image, it also sublimated the reign of Fa Ngum.[1] For this ancient period (prior to the fifteenth century) of which the late historiographical tradition renders only a partial if confused view, the testimony of material culture therefore becomes important. About fifteen Khmer-style sculptures dating from the first half of the second millennium have in fact been found in Luang Prabang, the first capital of the Lan Xang kingdom. Practically all these remains have already been reported by Louis Finot (1915), Paul Lévy (1940) and Madeleine Giteau (1972, 2001), yet they long were (and sometimes still are) inaccessible to the public and have largely been overlooked. A few other testimonies have furthermore







Figures 1a–c. Viṣṇuite stele from Wat That Luang (Photos: © Finot & Batteur 1914–1917)







Figures 2a–c. Seated bejeweled buddha from Wat That Luang (Photos: © a) Finot & Batteur 1914–1917; b) Lévy 1940; c) Lorrillard 2003)

recently been identified: of lesser quality or very damaged, they were until now among the neglected materials of some temples, in particular Wat Wixun (ວັດວິຊຸນ). All such objects should be brought to light, in order to flesh out our knowledge of the Khmer heritage in Laos; and as well because they are likely to support further analyses and thus help introduce new perspectives for historical research in this region.[2]

The Viṣṇuite Stele of Wat That Luang

Of all the ancient Khmer artifacts found at Luang Prabang, doubtless the most surprising and remarkable is the broken four-sided Viṣṇuite stele that Louis Finot identified (1917: 171–172) and for which Paul Lévy also published a photograph (1940: pl. 39). This sculpture was not subsequently mentioned and even seemed to have disappeared. However, in 2011 an investigation located it in a storeroom of the old Palace Museum in Luang Prabang, where it lies (again) on the ground in several fragments. Finot reported a local testimony according to which the stele was still standing in the early twentieth century **[Figures 1a–c]**, before it was knocked down by a falling tree, at the presumed site of the ancient Wat Pho Langka (ວັດໂພລັງກາ).[3] The main pieces of the broken stele were later collected and kept at Wat That Luang (ວັດທາດຫລວງ), but Finot was able to find a small fragment at the original site that confirmed the information he had been given. Once reconstructed, this stele was placed at the foot of the great stupa that gives the temple its name.

Only two steles of the same type seem to be known. The first one—originating from Preah Khan of Kompong Svay in Cambodia, and currently kept in the Musée Guimet in Paris—has been discussed by Thierry Zéphir, who avers that no specific study has yet been carried out on the subject (Baptiste & Zéphir 2008: 236–240; Zéphir & Jessup 1997: 265–267).[4] The second stele is kept at the National Museum of Cambodia in Phnom Penh and apparently comes from Wat Khnat, near Angkor. Like the example discovered in Luang Prabang, these two steles each consist of a sandstone parallelepiped, whose four faces are sculpted with rows of small Viṣṇu figures. The upper part forms a pediment for each face decorated on each side with a multi-headed *nāga* that rises at the corners. The iconographic treatment seems identical for the three pieces: the Viṣṇus are standing, have four arms and hold attributes of which the mace (*gāda*) is the most recognizable. The only noticeable difference is the number of Viṣṇu figures, since the Luang Prabang stele has about 860, the Phnom Penh stele 960 and the Guimet stele 1020. The last-named shows undeniably superior quality in workmanship. Zéphir has dated it to the end of the Angkor Wat style; that is, in the third quarter of the twelfth century. This dating can similarly be applied to the Luang Prabang stele. Given the rarity and similarity of the three pieces, it is inconceivable that the evidence found in the ancient northern Lao capital could have been produced on site. It is obviously a piece brought back from afar (Cambodia?)—a conclusion that should be kept in mind when dealing with the other artifacts.

Bejeweled Buddha Images

Finot observes that, in addition to the Viṣṇuite stele, a "stone statue representing Nārāyaṇa on the *nāga* with *mukuṭa*, necklaces, bracelets, the palm of the hands adorned with the *cakra*" **[Figures 2a–c]** was discovered in practically the same place. It was also brought to Wat That Luang to be placed near the base of the stupa. It is currently preserved inside the shrine.

The misidentification of the sculpture as Nārāyaṇa (a form of Viṣṇu) is clearly due to the immediate parallel established with the iconography of the stele cited above, as well as to the misreading of a Lao inscription preserved at Wat Wixun, where a reference to this god was thought to be found. Lévy corrected this by identifying the image with a buddha. He also mentions its resemblance to an image preserved at Wat Sangkhalok (ວັດສັງຄະໂລກ; see below) and a "greater carelessness in the workmanship", notably with "the *mukuṭa* and the face [which] are of a less distinctly Khmer form" (Lévy 1940: 414). Indeed, the lack of well-marked features could equally be the result of poor workmanship or stone deterioration, or could even be that the work had never been completed.

In any case, it is a bejeweled buddha seated in meditation on a *nāga*, whose hood shows traces of only four heads, but which certainly had five originally. The pectoral necklace—consisting of a double row of claw-like pendants—is the most visible of all the jewelry. The left arm (now gone) was adorned with an armband, while the wrists carry a bracelet and the ankles a ring, and the ears are distended as if from the weight of pendants. Lévy was embarrassed by the shape of the face, which does not show the square outline marking other fine examples of Angkor Wat style art in the first half of the twelfth century. Oval face contours, however, are not absent from the Angkor Wat style, and we find in our Luang Prabang image other facial features that are characteristics of this style such as a ridged protruding brow, a straight nasal bridge, a developed lower jaw, and thick lips, among others (see Dalsheimer 2001: 148). The problem is more acute for the diadem since it reveals almost no ornamentation, probably due to the erosion of the stone. The top-knot cover has disappeared as a result of the breakage of the entire upper part of the carving, as has the top of the crest, which was oval. The treatment of the *nāga* heads—more visible in older photographs—shows that the style was indeed that found in twelfth-century Khmer works.

Lévy noted that Finot's "Nārāyaṇa" resembled, in posture, body proportions and jewelry, the meditating bejeweled buddha **[Figures 3a–c]** which he himself had discovered with two other Khmer buddha images at Wat Sangkhalok in 1940. This sculpture, currently housed in the Royal Palace Museum (in the same room as the Phra Bang[5]), differs, however, in the apparent absence of the *nāga* and the more compact treatment of the hairstyle, which is a "conical *mukuṭa* composed by the fusion of the ancient diadem and the conical top-knot cover". The most striking feature of this hairstyle, however, is its posterior extension, until it forms a rectilinear block that descends towards the back. To explain this particularity, Lévy reports that the sculpture "must have been leaning against a background [...] or perhaps a multi-headed *nāga*" (1940: 415). The overall composition of the image is in any case extremely close to that of a statue on the altar of Wat Si Muang (ວັດສີເມືອງ) in Vientiane (Lorrillard 2013: 73), and there is no doubt that these two works belong to the same art style and the same period, probably dating to







Figures 3a–c. Seated bejeweled buddha from Wat Sangkhalok (Photos: © a–b) Lévy 1940; c) Lorrillard 2022)



Figure 4. First head found at Wat Mahawan
(Photo: © Finot & Batteur 1914–1917)



Figure 5. Second head found at Wat Mahawan
(Photo: © Finot & Batteur 1914–1917)

the beginning of the twelfth century.[6] The only noticeable difference is in the back, since in the second case the visible fragments seem to show that the image had been leaning against a *nāga* hood.

Perhaps also related in style is a small "sandstone head crowned with a conical *mukuṭa*" discovered by Finot (1917: 173) in the middle of a pile of bricks, on a site where a temple had once stood, to which the name of Wat Mahawan (ວັດມະຫາວັນ) was attached. This sculpture is no longer visible today, and it seems that only three photos from the early twentieth century still shows its appearance **[e.g., Figure 4]**.[7] Finot thought that it might have come from a *dvārapāla* statue and recognized a purely Khmer style, even if the workmanship seemed "soft" to him—an indication of a late production. This head clearly reflects the style of Angkor Wat—more precisely, its final period of around the third quarter of the twelfth century, judging from the median band of the diadem which is decorated with flowers in full bloom, that is characteristic of the transition to the Bayon style (Boisselier 1952: 243). The other features of the diadem adornment such as the lotus-petaled lower band, upper frieze of conjoined leaves, parallel bands of leaves on the *mukuṭa*, as well as those seen on the broad face—straight and sharp eyebrows, protruding eyes and thick lips—are found on many other statues of the first half of the twelfth century, both Hindu and Buddhist (Baptiste & Zéphir 2008: 226–229; Dalsheimer 2001: 146–147, 152–154; Zéphir 1997: 262–264, 269–270). This head may actually not have belonged to a male figure, since a female deity, kept in the Musée Guimet, presents strong similarities with this piece (Baptiste & Zéphir 2008: 232–235). Another head of a deity which is tentatively identified as a buddha offers another very close example (Woodward 1997: 74, 96–97). Interestingly, it was acquired in Lopburi, although it may not have been produced there.

Finot's study presents, next to the photograph of the vanished sandstone head from Wat Mahawan, another, more damaged head **[Figure 5]**, together with a note indicating that it had been "found in the same place, but [that it is] less characteristic and probably more modern" (Finot 1917: 173). Like the first head, it went to the Hanoi Museum (ex-Musée Louis Finot, today Vietnam National Museum of History; see note 7). A record in the École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) archives in Paris associated with the same photograph states that this head is in stucco. While it still evokes certain aspects of Khmer art, it retains its stylistic character only in a crude manner and is more likely to be a late reinterpretation of a lost model. As its eyes are represented half-closed, this image may also be classified in the category of adorned or bejeweled buddha.

Ascetic Buddha Images Seated on the *Nāga*

During the first half of the twentieth century, along with the two or three bejeweled buddha images just mentioned, three Khmer-related images of a buddha seated on the *nāga* in his more traditional representation of the ascetic were discovered around Luang Prabang. These three sculptures are currently kept in the old Palace Museum, in





FIGURES 6a–b. Seated ascetic buddha on *nāga* from Wat Mahawan (PHOTOS: © a) Finot & Batteur 1914–1917; b) Lorrillard 2022)





FIGURES 7a–b. Seated ascetic buddha on *nāga* from Wat Sangkhalok (PHOTOS: © a) Lévy 1940; b) Lorrillard 2022)

the same room that houses the Phra Bang, to the right and left, along the side walls. Behind those in the right row is a still unpublished statue of a very similar character. Another unpublished sculpture belonging to the same iconographic group has recently come to light at Wat Wixun.

Among these five Khmer ascetic buddha images carved in stone, the first to have been mentioned is the one discovered by Finot in 1914 together with the "head of *dvārapāla*" on the grounds of the former Wat Mahawan **[FIGURES 6a–b]**. Previously, this sculpture also found a home at Wat That Luang, next to the Viṣṇuite stele and the first bejeweled buddha already discussed. Finot singles it out "because of its probable age [...], although it otherwise offers nothing remarkable" (Finot 1917: 173).[8] Lévy provides some additional information, specifying, for example, that the sculpture had been "disfigured by hammering the face and restoring the nose and chin with cement" (Lévy 1940: 414). This damage is clearly visible in the photograph by Charles Batteur. However, Lévy also emphasized the resemblance between this sculpture—notably regarding the hood of the *nāga* and the garment—and the smallest (80 cm high) of the three Khmer buddhas which he discovered at Wat Sangkhalok in 1940 **[FIGURES 7a–b]**. Some of his descriptions of this image are telling, such as that of the top of the head with "a very flattened cone-shaped *uṣṇīṣa* and a fishnet hairstyle in which the curls are almost indistinct"—or that of the garment, "a cloak imprisoning the left arm, the right arm being free and currently broken. The rectangular-ended scarf [*saṅghāṭī*] reaches below the breast" (Lévy 1940: 417).

These remarks are important because they highlight the stylistic and iconographic differences between these two sculptures of ascetic buddhas and the preceding group of bejeweled buddhas. One can also clearly measure how much they differ from the Khmer images observed in Vientiane, which belonged either to the earlier transition between the so-called Dvāravatī and Lopburi periods, around the tenth century[9]—or to a later period, the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, with characteristics that clearly belong to the Bayon style. As noted earlier, the bejeweled buddha images and the Viṣṇuite stele from Luang Prabang appear to be more closely related to the Angkor Wat style, i.e. the mid-twelfth century. This may also be true for the two ascetic buddhas; in any case, they are mainly reminiscent of Khmer art that was produced in what now is Thailand, in such areas of the northeast as Prasat Hin Phimai (ปราสาทหินพิมาย), as well as in the central plains of the Chao Phraya River, near Lopburi. This link with the workshops of the former western reaches of the Khmer empire has been strongly emphasized by Lévy (1940: 417), who pointed to a possible date in the twelfth century. However, the thirteenth century is more likely for this type of representation. Insofar as this type has not been found in Vientiane, it could have been a direct and later import from the Lopburi region, via Ayutthaya. The as yet unpublished Khmer buddha from the Phra Bang room belongs to the same stylistic group, although later unfortunate modifications, especially to the head, have caused it to lose much of its original appearance **[FIGURE 8]**. It is then the *nāga*, both in its lower and upper parts, that best testifies to its origin. The hood especially shows similarities to that of the first image of this group.

Luang Prabang, however, offers another, even more exquisite example of a seated ascetic buddha protected by a *nāga*. This piece of Khmer art is the third discovered by Lévy (1940: 416) at Wat Sangkhalok **[Figures 9a–b]**. For this exceptional image, let us reproduce his precise description:

> Ascetic buddha well bent and seated in *paryaṅkāsana* and *dhyānamudrā* on the seven-headed *nāga* with four heads decapitated. The broken *uṣṇīṣa* has been cemented, which led to elevate it. Hairstyle of small, slightly flattened spiral curls edged with a thick spiky border at the temples. [...] Eyes [are] also obliquely arranged and emptied of the jewels which were to simulate the eyeball, the iris and the pupil. Nose slightly arched. Moustache and beard rendered in braced lines [...]. Folds in the neck, the widest of which still simulates the edge of the collar of the monastic cloak covering the two shoulders, a detail that is not understood here, where one arm is represented free and the other engaged in the stone, although the bust appears naked to the belt visible on our piece [...]. There is the beginning of a scarf on the left shoulder [...]. The *nāga* is coiled three times on itself, but its scaly folds are sagging and widened like the cushions of a sofa. The heads, carefully treated in a very naturalistic manner, do not extend their muzzles in the general direction of the crest as in so many other representations of this kind, but stand horizontally in the threatening attitude of the cobra ready to attack. *Cakra*s adorn the throats (Lévy 1940: 416; my translation).

Lévy felt that this image shares stylistic features with a buddha kept in Phnom Penh, but he especially saw in it the marks of a provincial school of Khmer art. He perceived the sculptor's concern to represent the eyes and the nose in "a type that is anthropologically different from the Cambodian type". He also discerned that the treatment of the *nāga* is distinct from that which was familiar to the Khmers of Angkor. Referring to the Khmer-related art of Lopburi, he dated this seated ascetic buddha to the twelfth century. Further study may help in identifying more precisely the models that inspired this sculpture; in the meantime, Lévy's conclusions offer an encouraging relevance. In Cambodia itself a few examples have surfaced that could possibly be related to the Luang Prabang sculpture, such as two buddhas that belong respectively to the Bayon art style (late twelfth to early thirteenth century) and to the post-Bayon period (first half of the fourteenth century). The first-named, however, differs particularly in the treatment of the (flat) curls of the hair and in the heads of the *nāga*, which are presented in traditional profile. The second one, whose beautiful face has not been "typified" like that of earlier productions, lacks the hairline; and the *nāga* heads have disappeared.[10]



Figure 8. Seated ascetic buddha on *nāga*, unknown origin (Photo: © Lorrillard 2022)





Figures 9a–b. Seated ascetic buddha on *nāga* from Wat Sangkhalok (Photos: © a) Lévy 1940; b) Lorrillard 2022)



Figure 10. Seated ascetic buddha on *nāga*, unknown origin (Photo: © Lorrillard 2022)

In the former western provinces of the Khmer empire, in today's Thailand, stylistically similar productions can be found. However, contrary to what Lévy wrote, that one of the neck folds represents the collar of the monastic cloak covering the two shoulders, and that the *saṅghāṭī* is really visible, are not at all obvious. The model for the Luang Prabang image, therefore, does not necessarily come from Lopburi.[11] In contrast, an image preserved in the Phimai National Museum, and another one from Wat Mahathat in Ayutthaya (Piriya 2012: 279, 282–283, figs. 2.241, 2.245 and 2.247) share many stylistic features with our image from Wat Sangkhalok. The latter example has been dated by Piriya Krairiksh to the mid-eleventh century, while the others belong to a later period.



Figure 11. Seated ascetic buddha on *nāga*, unknown origin (Photo: © Lorrillard 2022)

In January 2022, while making a last survey in some monasteries of Luang Prabang, I found at Wat Wixun, among pieces long discarded because of their condition but currently on display, a buddha image whose head and armless bust remain, together with part of the *nāga* hood of which all the heads have disappeared **[Figure 10]**. It is obvious that this buddha is most closely related to the above-mentioned type from Wat Sangkhalok. Although not as finely crafted, the same stylistic characteristics in it are recognizable. The head, although damaged, shows an equivalent modeling; we find the accolades representing the moustache and the wide mouth with strongly arched lips; the eyes have similarly been emptied of their precious stone; the hairstyle also shows small curls and a border made of a thick edging on the temples. What remains of the *nāga* heads, at the level of the throat, also shows a *cakra* made of concentric circles decorated with buttons. The two images must therefore have originally been closely associated. In the same group of these ascetic buddha images sitting on *nāga*, I am tempted to include the lower part, also very damaged, of another image recently exhibited at Wat Wixun **[Figure 11]**.

Various Buddhist Stone Images

The last piece of Khmer art found in Luang Prabang by Lévy concerns a rare type of sculpture, kept at Wat That Luang in 1940 and believed to have disappeared afterwards, but which is in fact located in the locked storeroom of the Royal Palace Museum along with the other five images mentioned above **[Figure 12]**. This sandstone piece, about 60 cm high, consists of a "highly bent buddha, head raised, seated in *paryaṅkāsana* and *dhyānamudrā* on a rectangular throne, decorated with stylized lotus petals and provided with a backrest whose arcature is formed by the body of a multi-headed *nāga*" (Lévy 1940: 418). Lévy added that this "*ronde-bosse*" (*sic*) is reminiscent of bas-reliefs from Khmer Buddhist temples and cites Phimai lintels in particular, which leads him to propose a dating of the early twelfth century. It is clearly not a bejeweled buddha, since he is dressed in monastic costume, leaving his right shoulder bare, with a rectangular extremity of the outer robe (*saṅghāṭī*). However, Lévy recognized a tiara and a diadem (rightly so), as is the case for lintels from Prasat Hin Phimai. The Phimai

National Museum retains another example of a buddha in bas-relief under an archway which resembles the Luang Prabang sculpture to a greater degree. An even closer model is located in the Ramkhamhaeng National Museum in Sukhothai, among the Khmer art pieces (Piriya 2012: 330, fig. 2.330). At Phimai and Sukhothai, however, we may have a representation of Bhaiṣajyaguru, the Buddha of Medicine, recognizable by the small waterpot resting on one of his hands, a detail that seems to be absent from our image from Wat That Luang. They both belong to the art of the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, a dating that could also apply to our sculpture.

After Lévy's study, three other pieces of Khmer art were identified in Luang Prabang by Giteau during her missions in the 1960s. The first is a possible representation of Vajrapāṇi or Vajradhāra from Wat Wixun that we have already mentioned above **[Figure 13]**; it is indeed almost identical, including its breaks, to the one preserved at Wat Ho Phra Kaeo (ວັດຫໍພຣະແກ້ວ) in Vientiane (inv. no. HPK I/67).[12] It can therefore be dated to the late twelfth or early thirteenth century (Bayon style). It should be noted that the presence of this image in Luang Prabang is probably related to the sculpture mentioned earlier and could belong to the same type of Mahāyāna iconography (see also Sharrock, this volume).



Figure 13. Vajrapāṇi or Vajradhāra (?) from Wat Wixun (Photo: © Lorrillard 2003)



Figure 12. Seated buddha on a throne from Wat That Luang (Photo: © Lorrillard 2022)

Bronze Buddhas

Two other pieces of adorned buddhas, sitting in meditation on the *nāga*, were studied by Giteau (1972: 92–93) as part of an expert mission on the royal collections and are still kept in the old palace, which has since become the Luang Prabang Museum. It was recently possible to identify them, thanks to a previously unpublished photograph from her personal collection **[Figure 14]**.



Figure 14 Seated adorned buddhas on *nāga* from That Mak Mo (Photo: © Giteau 1968)



Figure 15. Phra Bang Buddha, around 1950
(Photo: © EFEO no. 21.332)

They are displayed in a large showcase in the left wing of the former throne room, together with other objects found inside the That Mak Mo (ທາດໝາກໂມ), or so-called "watermelon stupa", after its collapse in 1914. The significance of these pieces is that they are made of bronze, unlike all the other Angkorian remains identified so far in this essay. Having been buried in a stupa for a long time—apparently since the early sixteenth century—explains their longevity. Giteau comments on them as follows:

> These are two small statuettes of a buddha adorned, sitting in meditation on the coiled body of a seven-headed *nāga*. Both are badly corroded, yet they have retained some traces of their ancient gilding. Both statuettes are of Khmer art. By the triangular shape of the crest of its *nāga*, by the type of hairstyle and the shape of the buddha's body, image no. 86 seems to be the oldest and can be dated to the twelfth or early thirteenth century; piece no. 87 is more likely to be from the thirteenth century. It is obviously impossible to say whether these images originated in Cambodia or whether they were cast in a provincial workshop in Laos (ibid.: 92–93; my translation).

Similar bronze statuettes of the adorned buddha protected by the *nāga* have been found in fairly large numbers, but always outside Laos. Examples can be found in Thailand, especially around Lopburi and Phimai, but Cambodia seems to have been the greatest center of production. Some images are distinguished by the fact that they hold, on the palm of their right hand, a kind of waterpot that invites identification with Bhaiṣajyaguru (for a different identification, see Sharrock, this volume). They would therefore generally be dated to the late twelfth or early thirteenth century. The two buddha images kept in Luang Prabang, however, do not hold such a vessel and are more closely related to the statuettes of the Angkor Wat style. Statuette no. 87, which Giteau considered later than statuette no. 86, shows great affinities, especially in the treatment of the head and the *nāga* crest, with an image apparently from Cambodia that Hiram Woodward dates to the mid-twelfth century (1997: 94–96). The two Luang Prabang buddhas appear to be contemporary.

The Phra Bang Buddha

Finally, we must mention the unique case of the Phra Bang Buddha. Curiously enough, although it has been on display for centuries to devotees, it has never been the subject of a study. Undoubtedly, the reason is because of its profoundly sacred character—the Phra Bang was considered the palladium of Lan Xang and is the namesake of Luang Prabang—which has prevented any close and careful analysis **[Figure 15]**.[13] The few words that Giteau devotes to the Phra Bang testify to this gap in research, since she does not clearly identify either the material of the statue or its origin.[14]

According to the Lao historiographical tradition itself, the Phra Bang is said to have come from Cambodia.[15] We have already mentioned the source of this tradition—the Pali *Aḍḍhabhāgabuddharūpanidāna*—which was written in the sixteenth century, probably during the third quarter. That would coincide approximately with the time the *Amarakaṭabuddharūpanidāna* was written, the story of the various whereabouts of another famous buddha image, the Phra Kaeo (ພຣະແກ້ວ) or "Emerald Buddha", from northern Thailand till its arrival in Vientiane around 1560. These two hagiographic texts conform to a literary model well known in Lan Na, and probably earlier in Sukhothai, which has been the vehicle for transfiguration to sanctity of many religious objects and statues of purely

T(h)ai manufacture. Apparently, however, the Cambodian origin ascribed to the Phra Bang in the religious chronicle is based on awareness of its having come from a cultural sphere very different from that of northern Thailand. This awareness is equally linked to the very appearance of the statue—peculiarly standing with both palms facing outwards in the *abhaya* (fearless) hand gesture—but also to a still vivid local memory of the last real places where the statue had been worshipped. It is indeed significant that, according to the *Aḍḍhabhāgabuddharūpanidāna*, the statue was not brought to Luang Prabang until the reign of King La Saen Thai (ຫລ້າແສນໄຕ), sometime after 1486, after having been in Vieng Kham (ວຽງຄຳ), near Vientiane, for some one hundred and forty years.

We have seen in a previous study that this region of the Nam Ngeum River (ນ້ຳງື່ມ) had been very much steeped in the Mon and Khmer Buddhist cultures, the latter having undoubtedly supplanted the former to produce, by the turn of the second millennium, a synthetic regional art of which numerous testimonies remain. It is clearly distinguished from the imported traditions that dominated the Middle Mekong Valley under the reign of Jayavarman VII (Lorrillard 2016). To this regional art of the Vientiane plain belong other stone images of a standing buddha, stretching forward one or both forearms, in the gesture of *abhaya* (fearlessness) or *vitarka* (preaching). The large sandstone Mon buddha image from Ban Thalat (ບ້ານທ່າລາດ), dated to the end of the first millennium, provides a good example of this type (Lorrillard 2016: 93). The Phra Bang does not differs fundamentally in its workmanship from this model.[16]

The iconographic type of a standing buddha with two palms facing outwards, however, was also very popular in post-Angkorian Cambodia, and a truly Khmer origin for the Phra Bang cannot yet be completely excluded.[17] Most mentioned images from the Middle Mekong Valley and post-Angkorian buddhas from Cambodia are stone sculptures. The original Pali tradition itself records that the Phra Bang was cast with various metals, viz. gold, silver, and diverse bronze alloys, that men and gods had offered; hence the very name given to the statue as *aḍḍhabhāga*, meaning "shares of wealth".[18] As with other precious statues, the original designation of the Phra Bang thus evokes the material of which it was made of, and as with some of them, this material is overvalued, if not wrongly identified such as the Phra Kaeo (Morakot) or "Emerald Buddha" which is actually carved of jade. In any case, the Phra Bang is distinguished from other metal statues by its patina, particularly that on the face, probably due to gilding. The fact that the head is usually covered with a tiara does not, again, facilitate its stylistic analysis.

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In the foregoing pages, we have seen that the city of Luang Prabang has harbored a small number of buddha images of obviously Khmer workmanship, most of which are very different from those observed downstream in the plains of the Mekong, in particular around Vientiane. Some of them, such as a Vajrapāṇi image and perhaps adorned buddhas from the twelfth or thirteenth century, as well as a few crude pieces that seem to belong to an even earlier Mon–Khmer regional art, may yet have come from this region where similar images have been found. That is probably not the case with the Viṣṇuite stele and the images of ascetic buddha seated under the *nāga*. These artifacts belong to a different art style. The question of their origin and arrival in Luang Prabang appears much more problematic.

They certainly did not come from Lan Na, which was nevertheless the real center of influence from which Lao Buddhism could develop in the sixteenth century, and it is unlikely that they came from any territory in the upper Chao Phraya Valley, even if it had previously been subject to Khmer influence, as with Sukhothai. Stylistic similarities as well as geographical considerations suggest the importation of artefacts from the vast territory directly controlled by Lopburi and Ayutthaya, through the natural communication corridor of the Pasak River (แม่น้ำป่าสัก) Valley and the famous Dansai pass (ช่องด่านซ้าย; in the Thai province of Loei), where the sovereigns of Lan Xang and Ayutthaya engraved in stone a treaty of alliance in 1563. Through this same route and connections made in the present provinces of Phetchabun and Chaiyaphum, communication could have been established with the Phimai region, also rich in Khmer Buddhist remains.

These imported objects likely arrived in Luang Prabang before Vientiane was granted status as the new capital in the mid-sixteenth century, at a time when the influence of the northern Lao city was already spreading far beyond its own territory from the mid-fifteenth century onwards, or perhaps even earlier, since no Thai production related to the art of Ayutthaya itself has been found in Luang Prabang. The story of the Phra Bang statue differs, from

the other narratives in the northern Thai hagiographic tradition to which it belongs, in the importance it gives to the Khmer world. Perhaps the text relating to the story of the Phra Bang bears witness to an ancient collective consciousness specific to the populations of the Middle Mekong Valley which still yields material evidence left by the Mon and Khmer Angkorian cultures. Lao culture developed in part from this astonishing substratum, of which the historiographical tradition has preserved a sublimated memory.

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Endnotes

1 For a first presentation of the *Aḍḍhabhāgabuddharūpanidāna* and the Lao vernacular texts derived from it, see Lorrillard (2021). On the historical relationship between the Khmer and Lao countries, see Lorrillard (2001).

2 Finot, Lévy and Giteau had each discovered five, four and three images, respectively, not counting the Phra Bang. They successively tried to integrate these Khmer sculptures into a narrative that could accommodate the traditional historiography which relates to the introduction of Buddhism in the Lao kingdom, even if that meant accepting certain inconsistencies. Finot wrote that this textual tradition "seems to us to have to be accepted as authentic" (1917: 173; my translation). As knowledge of Lao archeology was very sketchy at the beginning of the twentieth

century, and the chronicles had not yet been submitted to textual analysis, his interpretations are incomplete, even faulty, in seeking to accommodate the contradictions. Lévy opted for a more precise approach on stylistic grounds and was more cautious with historiographical sources, which enabled him to avoid hasty conclusions. Finally, Giteau relied heavily on chronicle texts, which led her to include certain anachronisms in her analysis.

3 Finot gives too much credit to this oral tradition which also places Wat Pasaman (ວັດປາສະໝັນ) and Wat Kaeo (ວັດແກ້ວ) in close proximity. That was obviously a contemporary extrapolation of what is reported in the late chronicles. The Viṣṇuite stele was at that time called the "Maha Pasaman stone", named after the famous monk, preceptor of Fa Ngum, who is said to have introduced Buddhism into Laos in the fourteenth century.

4 Zéphir recalls Parmentier's reference in 1919 to another stele at Prasat Kok Po, similar to that of Wat Khnat (near Angkor); we do not know whether it still exists. In any case, it cannot be confused with the stele that is being kept in Phnom Penh.

5 Two identical images of Phra Bang are preserved in the former Royal Palace. One is kept in the museum itself, in a room closed to the public, with six of the Khmer statues that are discussed in these pages. The other is inside the adjoining building called Ho Phra Bang. Neither of these two images can be viewed closely, so it is difficult to determine which is the original.

6 Giteau thought that the image of Wat That Luang "belongs to a post-Bayon Khmer style, end of the thirteenth and beginning of the fourteenth century" (2001: 145), because of the treatment of the hands (which are very rough) and the shape of the almost cylindrical tiara. However, she never questionned the tradition relating to the introduction of Buddhism in Laos under Fa Ngum around the middle of the fourteenth century and her conclusions were very much influenced by it.

7 The *BEFEO* chronicle of 1914, which mentions Finot's mission to Laos and Cambodia between May and September, also notes that objects from Luang Prabang joined the collections of the Hanoi Museum, among them a "stone *dvārapāla* (?) head, in purely Khmer style". This head clearly seems to be our piece under discussion.

8 This discovery was in fact linked to a disappointment, that of not having found another image in the same attitude, smaller but of supposedly much higher quality, which a Lao guide had described.

9 This assertion must be toned down following the recent display at Wat Wixun of a dozen or so rough stone sculptures, including two headless seated buddhas and a small head, which resemble the majority of locally produced Mon–Khmer pieces found on the Vientiane plain.

10 See Baptiste & Zéphir (2008: 278–281, inv. no. MG 18 126; and 404–405, inv. no. MG 18 893). A very fine head (2008: 406–407, inv. no. MG 17 486), standing alone, closely resembles that of the third buddha of Wat Sangkhalok, but it is dated to the fourteenth or fifteenth century.

11 See for example the buddha protected by a *nāga* illustrated in Woodward (1997: 112 and 2003: 75 A–B). Plate 74 of Woodward (2003) shows an image with no apparent upper garment, but which is very different in hairstyle and *nāga* hood.

12 Giteau (2001: 65) mentions these two statues in passing.

13 There are a number of photographs of the Phra Bang, but they have usually been taken from a distance and show the image dressed in a costume and tiara that prevent detailed examination. There are also copies of the Phra Bang in different materials. Some of them appear to look almost the same as the original, but differ in some particular detail, such as the length of the fingers.

14 With regard to the material, Giteau writes: "this statue, made of gold according to tradition" (2001: 147). It is probable that she does not believe in this possibility, but she has given no alternative. Concerning the ultimate provenance, she has never questioned the tradition relating to the Khmer religious mission under Fa Ngum; but she imparts in a note this surprising assessment: "However, as the Phra Bang is based on a Khmer model, the influence of Lopburi is obvious, even if one neglects the recent relationship between Laos and Khorat" (ibid.).

15 In the historiographical tradition, Cambodia is considered a stopover, since the statue is supposed to have originally been cast on the island of Sri Lanka and to have arrived by boat to Inthapattha (the Thai-Lao name for the Khmer capital) only in 218 of the Little Era, equivalent to 856 CE.

16 Giteau discusses the buddha of Ban Thalat and the Phra Bang in two different chapters (2001: 60 and 146); but, significantly, she describes the two statues in much the same way, without mentioning a connection between them. Yet this helped to explain the Dvāravatī influence that she herself perceived.

17 See for example the images in Baptiste & Zéphir (2008: 398–408), Zéphir (1997: 334–339), and Dalsheimer (2001: 274).

18 The *Aḍḍhabhāgabuddharūpanidāna* ends with what may be a telling clue, that of the weight of the statue which is given as 44,500; but no unit of measure is specified. That will need to be inferred by comparing units provided elsewhere for other images.