

A New Date for the Phnom Da Images and Its Implications for Early Cambodia



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SCHOLARS FAMILIAR WITH SOUTHEAST ASIAN ART HISTORY are well aware of a confusing chronology for early Cambodian sculpture. One reason for this situation is obvious. For nearly fifty years, Cambodian art history has been wed to the work of George Coedès. Praised as the dean of Southeast Asian history, he was a member of an elite group of French scholars who worked in Cambodia for decades before World War II. In 1944, he wrote *Histoire ancienne des états hindousés d'Extrême-Orient*, in which he established a chronological framework for early Southeast Asian history based on an interplay of Chinese texts and indigenous inscriptions. Most Southeast Asian historians readily admit that “his book remains the basic source for early South East Asian history, and while much recent research, based upon new inscriptional evidence or re-readings, modifies some of Coedès’ specific conclusions, the structure remains his” (Brown 1996 : 3).

Such a singular dependency on Coedès had a stifling effect on Cambodian art history. When Jean Boisselier, carrying on the work of Philippe Stern and Gilberte de Coral-Remusat, made a comprehensive attempt to set in order Cambodian sculpture, the French art historian fitted the works of art into Coedès’ ready-made chronology. Unfortunately, this all happened as if it were preferable to adjust Cambodian sculpture to a preconceived notion of history rather than questioning the model. In this way, some basic mistakes have been made, and these seriously affect the chronology and interpretation of early Cambodian sculpture.

Early Cambodian sculpture is made up of five art styles (Table 1). The earliest known Cambodian sculpture is a group of seven stone images of the Hindu deity Viṣṇu or one of his *avatāra* from the sacred mountain of Phnom Da (Fig. 1), after which the whole style received its name. On epigraphic evidence, Coedès (1942 : 155) proposed that the Phnom Da images represent the genius of Rudravarman, the last king of Funan, who supposedly reigned in Angkor Borei from approximately A.D. 514 to 539. The details of this alleged association will be discussed below, but for the time being, it is sufficient to say that Pierre Dupont, who studied in detail early Cambodian sculpture, championed Coedès hypothesis by making the Phnom Da style to persist some 100 years. Dupont divided the

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TABLE I. EARLY CAMBODIAN ART STYLES

STYLE	DATE	KING
Phnom Da	A.D. 514–539	Rudravarman
Sambor	A.D. 617–637	Īsānavarman
Prei Kmeng	A.D. 638–681	Bhavavarman II
Prasat Andet	A.D. 657–681	Jayavarman I
Kompong Prah	A.D. 681–770	(?)

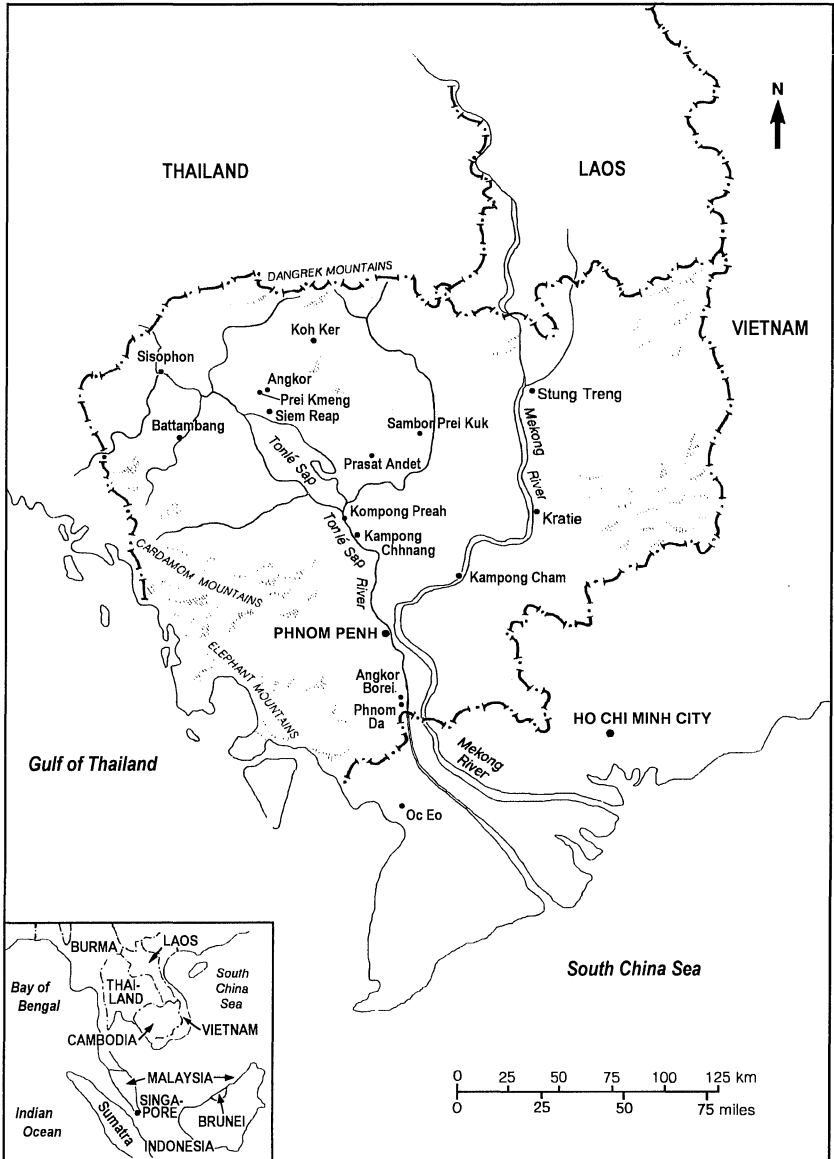


Fig. 1. Map of Southeast Asia showing major sites mentioned in the text or dating to the first and second millennium A.D.

Phnom Da style into A and B and added on a *prolongement*, out of which the next style emerged in the early to mid-seventh century.

The Sambor style is named after the ancient capital of the ruler Īśānavarman, who reigned at Sambor Prei Kuk (Fig. 1) from c. A.D. 617 to 637. This early Cambodian style seems less problematic when it comes to architecture, but not so for sculpture. Dupont pointed out that “an absolute date for the Sambor style is poorly fixed because the two most important images, Harihara and Uma, come from the North group of Sambor Prei Kuk and not the South group for which we have a much better idea of age” (Dupont 1955: 150). He, nonetheless, set aside his own reservations by assigning the images of Harihara and Uma to the Sambor style.

The Prei Kmeng style follows the death of Īśānavarman with the rule of his son Bhavavarman II, who reigned until at least A.D. 656. The style is named after the small temple of Prei Kmeng (Fig. 1), in which “the most characteristic works of this type were found” (Groslier 1962: 77). The Prei Kmeng style spans most of the seventh century. Its first phase is contemporary with the last phase of the Sambor style. Its main development is associated with Bhavavarman II, after which the last phase is contemporary with the succeeding Prasat Andet style. If this overlapping is not sufficiently confusing, then matters become even worse when we come to realize that the Prei Kmeng style primarily applies to architecture, with little or no application to sculpture (Dupont 1955: 156).

Bhavavarman II was succeeded on the throne by Jayavarman I, whose reign began before A.D. 657 and lasted until at least A.D. 681. The small temple of Prasat Andet (Fig. 1), in which was housed an image of Harihara, reputedly the most remarkable male sculpture in early Cambodian art, has named the whole style. Even so, the Prasat Andet style applies to only a small group of fairly homogeneous images, with little relevance to architecture. Groslier (1962: 78) justifies this shortcoming by explaining that “the architecture of this period is a direct continuation of the Prei Kmeng style, of which it is merely the second phase, and, as already mentioned, both phases existed at the same time.”

After the reign of Jayavarman I, Cambodian history has no names of reigning kings until the appearance of Jayavarman II in A.D. 770. The small temple of Kompong Preah (Fig. 1) names the whole style, to which images of mediocre technical expertise are usually relegated based on Coedès’ notion that eighth-century Cambodia witnessed anarchy, fragmentation, and the absence of strong rulers.

The sculpture, mostly dating from the first part of the 8th century, . . . is a direct continuation of the Prei Kmeng and Prasat Andet style. . . . There are not very many statues, perhaps because . . . the country was in decline. . . . Anyhow the degeneration is clear. . . . A few very mediocre works date from the second half of the 8th century, and there are still traces of the same style in works from the beginning of the 9th century. But by and large the vein has been worked out. (Groslier 1962: 80)

A NEW APPROACH

This paper challenges the widely held belief that the earliest known Cambodian sculpture from Phnom Da represents the genius of Rudravarman, the last king of Funan, whose reign in Angkor Borei is dated to A.D. 514 to 539. It is my intention to call into question the hypotheses put forward by Coedès and Dupont

upon which the foundation of early Cambodian sculpture rests. In its place, I offer new artistic evidence that supports a mid-seventh-century date for the earliest known Cambodian sculpture, from which a new chronology for early Cambodian sculpture can be established.

The earliest known Cambodian sculpture is from the sacred mountain of Phnom Da, located about 3.5 km south of Angkor Borei in the lower Mekong Delta. It consists of seven stone images of Visnu or one of his *avatāra*, of which a stylistically homogeneous group of four includes Visnu with Eight Arms; Balarāma; Rāma; and a torso identified as either Kṛṣṇa Govardhana or Trivikrama (Pl. I, II, III, IV).

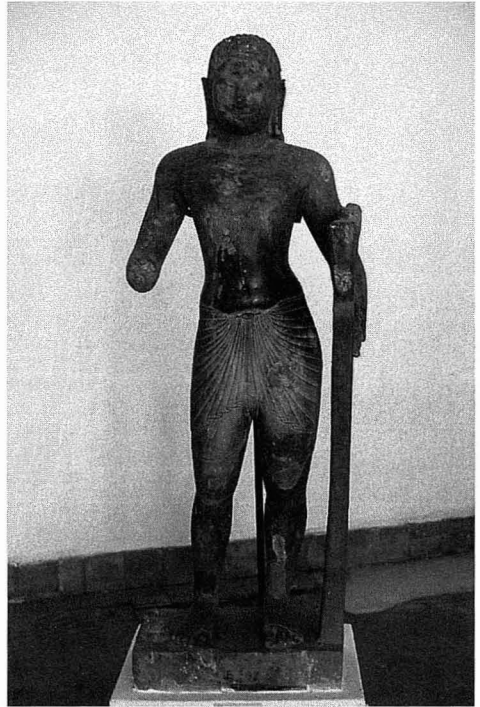
These four images are deemed earliest, based on a lifelike modeling of anatomical features and costume. A broad, oval face is highlighted “by perhaps the best rendered eyes in all of Khmer art” (Boisselier 1955 : 162) with eyelids, tear ducts, irises, and even pupils skillfully indicated. A distinctly aquiline nose and a mouth in smile complete the facial picture. A heavy neck flows into the broad, muscular shoulders of a slender torso marked by an unexplained band of raised flesh running from navel to mid-chest. Below the waist is a fleshy abdomen caused by a tightened *sampot* made up of raised convergent pleats. Well-modeled feet have a second toe noticeably longer than the first.

Coedès hypothesized that the Phnom Da images represent the genius of Rudravarman, the last king of Funan. Of critical importance is that the foundation of his argument rests on a Phnom Da inscription, dated on epigraphic evidence, to later than the twelfth century, commemorating the installation of Hari Kambujendra in a cave by a king named Rodra (Coedès 1942 : 155–156). Coedès (1942 : 155) readily admits, “We do not know, at this time, a king named Rodra or Rudravarman.” But, nonetheless, he advances a hypothesis that this late inscription referred to an event in the distant past to which he then associates the last king of Funan, since he was “the only Rudravarman known to us” (1942 : 155). This conclusion fits well with Coedès’ preconceived notion that Funan was a fully fledged state in which the self-validation of rulers supported the first appearance of temples, sculpture, and inscriptions.

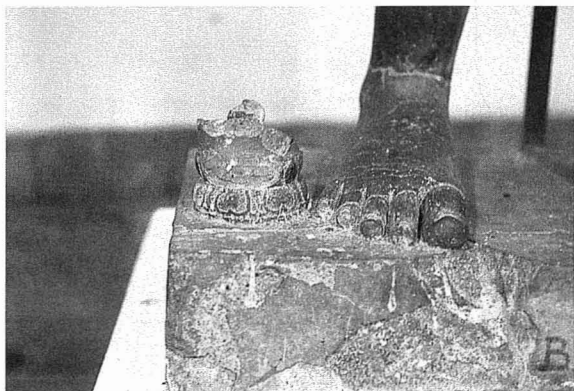
New artistic evidence indicates that Coedès erred in his attempt to fit the Phnom Da images into his historical narrative. This is demonstrated by examining the statue of Viṣṇu with Eight Arms (Pl. I). This Hindu deity stands approximately 3 m tall; surrounded by a horseshoe-shaped arch, the figure has three pairs of upraised hands sculpted in high relief, the lower pair upheld by curved supports. Of particular importance is the baton the image holds in its second raised right hand on which appears a jeweled band pattern (*la bande à chatons*) characterized by alternating oval and rectangular forms with each form duplicated within itself (Pl. V).

Mirielle Bénisti (1970) has studied in detail *la bande à chatons* in India and Cambodia. This pattern first appears in Indian Gupta art and becomes increasingly popular in post-Gupta for monument decoration and personal ornament.

One can see [the pattern] on the tiaras, collars, bracelets, and belts at Aurangabad Cave 6 and 7; Ellora Cave 21, 22 and 29; Elephanta Cave, Badami Cave 1 and 3; the Aihole temples of Durga and Hutsapaya; on the pillars of Badami Cave 2 and 3; on the Badami temple walls of Malegetti and Lower Sivalaya; on the border panels of the Aihole temples of Hutsapaya and no. 5 etc. (1970 : 54–55)



Pls. I-IV. Images from the site of Phnom Da, Cambodia, mid-seventh century A.D. National Museum of Cambodia, Phnom Penh. Pl. I: Viṣṇu with Eight Arms. Pl. II: Balarāma. Pl. III: Rāma. Pl. IV: Kṛṣṇa Govardhana or Trivikrama.



Pl. V (at left). Detail of *la bande à chatons* on the baton of Viṣṇu with Eight Arms. National Museum of Cambodia, Phnom Pehn.

Pl. VI (above). Detail of lotus base from Balarāma image. National Museum of Cambodia, Phnom Pehn.

As for Cambodia, Bénisti has demonstrated that *la bande à chatons* first appears toward the end of the Sambor style, in the mid-seventh century.

In Cambodia, one sees *la bande à chatons* ornamenting jewelry and architectural decoration. . . .

The first is very rare, cf. *supra*—the head gear of Lokesvara of Rach-giaand Surya of Thai-hieo-thanh. . . .

In architectural decoration, one does not see the motif on the Sambor Prei Kuk monuments. But one finds it on Sambor style reliefs: a Phnom Thom lintel and a lintel and column fragments from Tuol Ang Srah Theat. Of special interest is that: (a) the Tuol Ang Srah Theat inscription is dated to *sāka* 573 or A.D. 651 [and] (b) P. Dupont . . . dates the Tuol Ang Srah and Phnom Thom lintels to the end of the Sambor style. (1970 : 55)

Bénisti (1970 : 56) went on to observe an early-eighth-century variation in *la bande à chatons* in which the oval form became pinched in the middle. This led her to conclude that the jeweled band pattern is short-lived in early Cambodian art, datable between the mid-seventh century to the second decade of the eighth century.

That the statue of Viṣṇu with Eight Arms holds a baton ornamented by a jeweled band pattern datable to at least the mid-seventh century suggests that the earliest known Cambodian sculpture is unlikely to date to the early sixth century and argues in favor of a more serious consideration of a mid-seventh-century date.

When we examine in detail what Dupont wrote about the Phnom Da style, it becomes apparent that these images were never securely placed in time. Dupont (1955 : 26) agreed with Philippe Stern that these earliest known Cambodian images displayed a stylistic affinity to post-Gupta art from the sanctuaries of Auranabad, Deogarh, Ellora, and Bādāmī, for which Cave III has an inscription dated to A.D. 578. But, even so, Dupont (1956 : 26) was seriously troubled by

differences in sculptural technique. He noted that post-Gupta art is mostly sculpted in high-relief on the rocky walls of caves, while the Phnom Da images are, no matter how imperfectly, realized in the round (*en ronde bosse*). These technical differences suggested to Dupont that the high-relief tradition of post-Gupta art had to precede the Cambodian images *en ronde bosse*. This led him to conclude that post-Gupta art had been wrongly dated to the sixth century and should be earlier, at least in part (Dupont 1955: 26).

Let us, for now, sidestep Dupont's attempt to safeguard a sixth-century date for the Phnom Da images and highlight some important facts. Dupont and Stern both agreed that the Phnom Da images display a stylistic affinity to post-Gupta art. Of further significance is that Bénisti observed that *la bande à chatons* became increasingly popular in post-Gupta temples and caves, citing several post-Gupta monuments mentioned by Dupont and Stern as well.

Pinpointing the dates for the post-Gupta temples and caves cited by Dupont and Bénisti is especially informative. Although we are primarily dealing with relative dates, the chronology indicates that the Indian source of inspiration for the earliest known Cambodian sculpture dates between the mid-sixth century and the eighth century (Table 2). Of crucial importance is that this mid-sixth-century date demonstrates that the inception date for post-Gupta art is 10 to 30 years after the reign dates for Rudravarman, the last king of Funan. It is noteworthy that 10 to 30 years is a conservative estimate, with no allowances made for the possibility of a later inception date despite a securely dated inscription from Badami Cave III to A.D. 578.

This evidence indicates that no reason remains for dating the earliest known Cambodian sculpture to the early sixth century. Yet this conclusion falls short of a mid-seventh-century date for Viṣṇu with Eight Arms and, by extension, the other three associated and similar images of Balarāma, Rāma, and the torso of Kṛṣṇa Govardhana or Trivikrama.

Turning to the image of Balarāma, we find other artistic evidence that supports a mid-seventh century date for the Phnom Da images. To the side of Balarāma's right foot is a damaged lotus base, sufficiently distinct to have chronological significance. The flower is equally divided into two sections: an alternating sequence of large and small tapering petals above an alternating sequence of large and small heart-shaped segments of calyx leaves (Pl. VI).

The Balarāma-type lotus base seems to be datable in early Cambodian sculpture. It does not appear on the earliest known lintels and columns from Preah Theat Kuk or Asram Maharosei or Thala Borivat (Dupont 1952: 37; Bénisti 1968: 85–102). Instead, it first enters Cambodian art in the Sambor style dated between A.D. 617 and 637, for which a lintel from the outskirts of temple 7 of the south group at Sambor Prei Kuk is a finely preserved example. This lintel has a polylobed arch decorated with vegetal patterns and three medallions, the central one depicting Indra astride his elephant Airāvata positioned on a Balarāma-type lotus base. Directly below each medallion, the very same lotus hangs upside down from a jeweled pendant.

The Balarāma-type lotus base is prominently featured on other early Cambodian lintels and stelae throughout the seventh century. The Vat Eng Khna lintel, dated to the mid-seventh century, has a flattened arch decorated with vegetal patterns and three medallions, the central one depicting a *linga* positioned on a

TABLE 2. POST-GUPTA MONUMENTS IN INDIA CITED BY DUPONT AND BÉNISTI

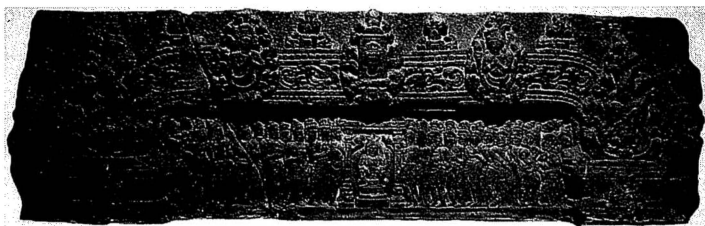
TEMPLE	DATE	DUPONT	BÉNISTI
<i>Aihole</i>			
Durgā Temple	Late 7th to early 8th century		•
Hutsapaya	Late 7th century		•
<i>Aurangabad</i>			
Cave VI ^a	Mid-6th century	•	•
Cave VII ^a	C. A.D. 560	•	•
<i>Bādāmī</i>			
Cave I ^a	C. A.D. 575–585	•	•
Cave II ^a	Late 6th century	•	•
Cave III ^a	A.D. 578	•	•
Malegetti Śivālaya	Late 7th century		•
Lower Śivālaya	7th century		•
<i>Deogarh</i>			
Daśavatāra Temple	Early 6th century	•	
<i>Elephanta</i>			
Śiva Cave	Mid-6th century		•
<i>Ellora</i>			
Cave 1	7th century	•	
Cave 2	7th century	•	
Cave 3	7th century	•	
Cave 4	7th century	•	
Cave 5	7th century	•	
Cave 6	7th century	•	
Cave 7	7th century	•	
Cave 8	7th century	•	
Cave 9	7th century	•	
Cave 10	7th century	•	
Cave 14	Early 7th century	•	
Cave 21 ^a	Late 6th century	•	•
Cave 22 ^a	8th century	•	•
Cave 29 ^a	Late 6th century	•	•

^aShared citation.

Dates are from Huntington 1985 and Michell 1989.

Balarāma-type lotus base (Pl. VII). Another example is the Tuol Neak Ta Bak Ka stelae on which an image of Nandin, the *vāhana* of Śiva, lies recumbent on an open lotus with heart-shaped calyx leaves. Below is an eleven-line Khmer inscription dated by Coedès (1966:216–217) to śaka sixth century (A.D. 578 and 677). Even so, we have already established that the Balarāma-type lotus base first enters Cambodian art in the Sambor style dated between A.D. 617 and 637. This leads me to conclude that the Tuol Neak Ta Bak Ka stele can be more precisely dated between A.D. 617 and 677.

As early Cambodian lintels changed and became engulfed in leafy profusion, the Balarāma-type lotus base did not appear on late-seventh-century or early-eighth-century lintels. This is not to say that it completely disappeared, for this lotus base is present on columns. A fragment of a column from Ak Yom is especially important because the Balarāma-type lotus base can be seen immediately above the early eight-century variation of *la bande à chatons* (Pl. VIII).



Pl. VII (above). Lintel from Vat Eng Khna, Cambodia, mid-seventh century A.D. National Museum of Cambodia, Phnom Penh.



Pl. VIII (at left). Column fragment from Ak Yom, Cambodia, early eighth century A.D. Taken from Bénisti 1970: photo 136.

This artistic evidence suggests that the Balarāma-type lotus base predates by 10 to 30 years the first appearance of *la bande à chatons* in early Cambodian art. Of further importance is that this lotus base is contemporaneous with the short-lived jeweled band pattern that suddenly disappears in the second decade of the eighth century. All of this indicates that the homogeneous stylistic group of four Phnom Da images dates to after c. A.D. 617 and before the early eighth century. An earlier rather than later date is a logical conclusion because these Phnom Da images are the earliest known Cambodian sculpture.

CONCLUSIONS

What does this mid-seventh-century date for the Phnom Da images suggest about early Cambodian art and history? The new inception date indicates that earliest known Cambodian images have no association with Rudravarman, the last king of Funan, who reigned c. A.D. 514–539. This separates the Phnom Da images from the named ruler and shortens by 100 years the chronology for early Cambodian sculpture. Of further importance, no gap of 100 years now separates the Phnom Da style from the early to mid-seventh-century date for the Sambor style. In this way, the existing stylistic order is upset, compelling us to scrutinize many of the assumptions on which we have previously interpreted early Cambodian sculpture.

By assigning a mid-seventh-century date to the earliest known Cambodian sculpture, the Phnom Da images do not exist in an artistic vacuum. These images are now inseparable from a widespread artistic development in seventh-century Cambodia, when permanent materials first appear in temple architecture and sculpture. The Vat Chumpon inscription from Surin (K. 377) eulogizes the installation of “an image of Nandin in stone” by Citrasena-Mahendravarman, who reigned between A.D. 598 and sometime before A.D. 617 (Coedès 1953:3–4). One may, indeed, argue that the underlying reason for drawing attention to a sacred bull sculpted in stone, as opposed to any other material, stems from the fact that stone is regarded as noteworthy or its use is singularly unusual. This interpretation merits serious consideration, especially when we take into account that stone first appears at approximately the same time in the construction of early Cambodian temples dated to the first half of the seventh century.

This mid-seventh-century date for the earliest known Cambodian images further challenges Coedès’ preconceived notions of early Cambodian history. What kind of polity was Funan? How Indianized was this unquestionably most important Indianized kingdom of early Southeast Asia (Coedès 1968:36)?

That the lower Mekong had already reached by the mid-third century A.D. a fairly sophisticated level of economic and political development can hardly be denied. Chinese documents have shown that this country was engaged in wars and territorial expansion; had a dynastic (?) succession of rulers; paid taxes in gold, silver, pearls, and perfume; and dispatched and received diplomatic emissaries (Coedès 1968:36–38, 40–42).

Indianization is a separate matter. The artistic evidence, or, should I say, the lack thereof, suggests that Funan had not yet adopted Indian practices and beliefs to mark their accomplishments and legitimize their right-to-rule.

We may suspect that the strategy of monumental self-validation was acquired by the region’s rulers only after some centuries of experimentation with political devices, presumably at about the same time that those rulers adopted the time-tested Indian strategies of temple-founding, inscription-erecting, and the support of brahmanical royal cults. (Bronson 1979:316)

The Phnom Da images indicate that “the strategy of monumental validation” first appeared in the early to mid-seventh century, after the dismemberment of Funan by Chenla. Only then does the artistic evidence suggest that local rulers seriously began to adopt Indian practices and beliefs that were to characterize Southeast Asia for the next 1000 years.

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ABSTRACT

The widely held belief that the earliest known Cambodian sculpture from Phnom Da has an early-sixth-century date is challenged. New artistic evidence supports a mid-seventh-century date on which a new chronology for early Cambodian sculpture can be established. This new inception date has implications for the understanding of early Cambodia. It indicates that the Phnom Da images have no association with Rudravarman, the last king of Funan. This separates the Phnom Da images from the named ruler and shortens by 100 years the chronology for early Cambodian sculpture. The earliest known Cambodian images are now inseparable from a widespread artistic development in seventh-century Cambodia, when permanent materials first appeared in temple architecture and sculpture. The seventh-century inception date indicates that “the strategy of monumental validation” first appeared in the early to mid-seventh century after the replacement of Funan by Chenla. Only then does the artistic evidence suggest that local rulers seriously began to adopt Indian practices and beliefs that were to characterize Southeast Asia for the next 1000 years. KEYWORDS: Southeast Asia, art history, early Cambodian art, Funan, sculpture, Indianization of Southeast Asia.