

# Two Vishnuite Stelae Commemorating Suryavarman II

គោលថ្ម ២ គោល ខាងលទ្ធិព្រះនារាយណ៍ ដែលលើកតម្កើងព្រះបាទ សូរ្យវរ្ម័ន ទី ២

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The subjects of this note are the well known sandstone “Vishnuite Votive Monument” displayed in the Musée Guimet in Paris (MG 18104) and a similar but less well known artifact in the depot of the Angkor Conservancy in Siem Reap (DCA invoice 6906). The observations

105 cm and equal sides of 41cm. Each side has 15 rows of 17 identical four-armed Vishnu figures. The total number of these figures is 255 per side or 1,020. The four sides on the top of the column are decorated with different scenes featuring Vishnu: a four-armed Vishnu, an eight-armed



Figure 1: *Guimet Vishnuite votive monument*



Figure 3: *Conservancy Vishnuite monument*

presented here supplement those of Mannikka (2000: 114-115). Her basic conclusion about the relevancy of these two artifacts to Suryavarman II is supported and amplified.

Vishnu, Vishnu standing on the shoulders of Garuda, and Vishnu reclining on the Sea of Milk.

The Guimet piece (Figs. 1-2) is the subject of description, commentary, and photographs in Jessup and Zéphir, 1997: 265-267, figs. 72-74. Found in the temple of Preah Khan of Kompong Svay by Louis Delaporte in 1873, it is a four-sided rectangular column with a height of

The monument in the Conservancy (Figs. 3-4), found at Kok Po, is a rectangular column 95 cm high with unequal sides of 38 and 30 cm. The two 38-cm sides have 17 rows of 17 four-armed Vishnu, while the two 30-cm sides have 17 rows of 13 Vishnu. These figures total  $(2 \times 289) + (2 \times 221) = 1,020$ . Three of the four sides on the



Figure 2: *Guimet Vishnuite monument, Vishnu reclining on gajasimha detail*



Figure 4: *Conservancy Vishnuite monument, Vishnu standing on Garuda detail*

top of the column are decorated with scenes of Vishnu, two with four-armed standing Vishnu and one with Vishnu standing on the shoulders of Garuda. The fourth side is obliterated.

All of the symbolism depicted on the artifacts is related to Vishnu. The Guimet piece, as noted by Jessup and Zéphir, “constitutes a brief catalogue of the deity’s [Vishnu’s] iconography.” In fact, the piece represents the Vishnuite iconography of Suryavarman II.

While Suryavarman II is not the only Angkorean ruler to be depicted in the guise of Vishnu, no other ruler was portrayed as Vishnu so often or in so many different attitudes. Most common are representations of Suryavarman II as a four-armed Vishnu. A particularly outstanding example, a beautiful and virtually complete 1.14 m sandstone statue, is exhibited in the National Museum of Phnom Penh (NMPP 1882) (Dalsheimer, 2001: 156-157). The face is undoubtedly that of Suryavarman II. Although questions have been raised about the authenticity of this piece (op. cit.), it is probably genuine.

Khmer statues of Vishnu with eight arms are less common. A stunning 75-cm bronze statue, again with the face of Suryavarman II, also is on display in the National Museum of Phnom Penh (NMPP 2024) (Dalsheimer, 2001: 242-243). This statue, although bronze, appears to be part of a “set” of at least two very similar statues of Suryavarman II as Vishnu. The other statue is the preceding two-armed Vishnu. This is one of several pieces of evidence supporting the authenticity of the latter piece. Another piece of evidence is a statue, unfortunately headless, which appears to be a bronze version of NMPP 2024 (NMPP 5166, Stung Moung, village d’Anlong Kop, Battambang; figure not available, currently displayed in same case as NMPP 2024). All three statues agree in overall slender proportions, similarly ornamented “double fish-tailed” sampot, flattened posterior profile with only slightly convex buttocks, slightly canted legs, and small feet with subequal toes pointed straight ahead. They also agree in lacking altogether the bejeweled gorgette, bracelets, wristlets, and anklets characteristic of many other statues and bas-reliefs of Suryavarman II.

Statues of Suryavarman II as Vishnu standing on the shoulders of Garuda have not been identified, but some Angkor Wat bas-reliefs of Vishnu standing on Garuda probably represent Suryavarman II.

The representation of Vishnu reclining on the Sea of Milk on the Musée Guimet piece is identifiable with Suryavarman II because the Vishnu is reclining not on the naga Ananta or Sesha, but rather on a gajasimha. This is not just any gajasimha, but one with features identifying

it with the gajasimha of Suryavarman II. This gajasimha (abundantly displayed in the Angkor Wat Churning of the Sea of Milk) is characterized by a head more lion-like than elephant-like and by the diagnostic presence of a goatee-like beard. Replacement of the naga by a gajasimha in the scene of Vishnu reclining on the Sea of Milk is the most outstanding modification of Hindu iconography in Khmer history. It is associated with the reign of Suryavarman II. The gajasimha, with its snout in the form of an elephant’s trunk, is of Indian origin. It has nothing to do with Chinese dragons, none of which display an elephant’s trunk: elephants do not occur in classical China.

Associated with the displacement of the naga by the gajasimha is another iconographic innovation displayed on the Guimet piece. This is the appearance of nagas without the intervention of makara or kurtimukha at the so-called pediments of the arcades over the four Vishnu scenes at the top of the column. Prior to the reign of Suryavarman II and the emergence of his gajasimha, Angkorean “pedimental” nagas usually are depicted as issuing from a kurtimukha (makara mouth).

As noted by Mannikka, the number of identical small figures of Vishnu, 1,020, probably corresponds to the year of Suryavarman II’s birth in the Saka era. Mannikka adds one year to this figure to correspond with a birth year of 1,021 Saka hypothesized by her on other grounds. She justifies this by supposing that the monument itself represents a year, but this might be ad hoc reasoning. It seems most likely, based on the Guimet and Conservancy artifacts, that the year of Suryavarman II’s birth was 1,020 Saka or (by convention) 1098 AD. Each identical small Vishnu figure in the lower part of the monument may represent a year presided over by Suryavarman II in his role as Surya, the sun god responsible for the annual cycle, and also in his role as Vishnu, one of the Aditiya or brothers of Surya.

Is additional information about Suryavarman II or about the monuments encoded in the numbers of small Vishnu figures? The following numbers have been mentioned: 13, 15, 17, 221, 255, and 289. Suryavarman II was enthroned at about the age of 15; the ages 13 and 17 might also be significant. The numbers 221, 255, and 289 presumably are incidental and without significance. For both monuments, if the number of “circumferential” Vishnu is summed, the total is 60, i.e.,  $4 \times 15 = 60$ ; and  $(2 \times 13) + (2 \times 17) = 60$ , as pointed out by Mannikka (2000: 115). As she remarked, the most common and ancient yuga period is a five-year “cycle” of 60 solar months, and twelve such cycles equal one 60-year cycle. Completion of such a cycle is even today considered a most auspicious event in the life of a person. It is an occasion of great national significance in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia when a king attains the age of 60. Do the monuments commemorate the 60th birthday of

Suryavarman II? It is generally supposed that the reign of Suryavarman II ended with his death in 1149 or 1150, or at the relatively young age (for a Khmer king) of about 52.

The year of production of these pieces is unknown. The Guimet piece exhibits superior or more pleasing artistry in that the four Vishnu figures above are more varied. The arcades, more strongly arched and thus more closely encompassing the enclosed figures, also are more pleasing, as is the greater care and attention to detail overall. This suggests that it may have been produced after the Conservancy piece.

## Bibliography

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Dalsheimer, N. 2001. *Les Collections du Musée National de Phnom Penh*. École Française d'Extrême-Orient (Paris) and Magellan & Cie (Paris), 305 pp.

Prasat Kok Po is a Vishnuite temple two km northeast of the NW corner of the Western Baray. The earliest inscription found there apparently is from the reign of Indravarman I [877-889] (Briggs, 1951: 103). Preah Khan of Kompong Svay is in Kompong Thom province about 60 km east of Beng Mealea. Its age is uncertain but it might date from the reign of Suryavarman I (Briggs, 1951: 154). Artifacts of Suryavarman II – statues, bas-reliefs, and inscriptions – were placed in numerous earlier Angkorean temples including but not limited to the temples of Phnom Rong, Phnom Bok, Bakheng, Bakong and the West Mebon.

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