

The Iconography Of Sema Stones In Dvaravati Art Of LAO PDR

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Abstract

This article is a part of the study on model iconography and distribution of Sema stones in the Dvaravati-art of Lao PDR. The purpose of this study was to study the iconography of Sema stones in the Dvaravati-art of Lao PDR. A survey and study of Sema stones in Dvaravati-art of Lao PDR. revealed 2 characteristics of carved images: 1) Symbolic images such as the lotus band motif and the Stupa-Kumpha motifs; 2) Auspicious images such as portraits and narrative arts. All of these symbols are associated with both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism share symbols, such as lotus petals and lotus flowers, which symbolize the Buddha. The Stupa-Kumbha is a mixed Buddhist symbol, representing the life of Lord Buddha and abundance and liberation. Auspicious images include engraved group portraits, single portraits, and three Buddha jatakas: Vidhurapandita Jataka, Mahosadha Jataka, and Kulavaka Jataka. These images reflect the values and worldviews of the time, reflecting the values and worldviews of the people.

Keywords: Sema Stones, Dvaravati Art, Iconography, LAO PDR.

1. Introduction

Dvaravati was an ancient Southeast Asian state that was influenced by Indian civilization. Around the 17th century, Dvaravati flourished in Thailand's central area. The archaeological evidence suggested that

the majority of the people in Dvaravati strictly practiced Buddhism. Despite the presence of some Brahmin communities in Dvaravati, the state of Dvaravati has spread its cultural influence throughout all regions, particularly the Northeast. The state declined around the end of the 21st century as the Khmer Empire extended its influence into Thailand's central region (Phasuk Intrawut, 1999: 1).

Dvaravati in Thailand's E-sarn or Northeast generally refers to a collection of arts and cultures dating from the 17th-21st centuries or later. In the central region, there was a form of belief similar to Dvaravati that was distinct from the Khmer culture that had spread to the Northeast region at that time. The stone pillars or Sema stones, which were defined in Dvaravati culture as well, were the most significant evidence. However, such evidence differed significantly from central Dvaravati and Khmer findings. (Roongroj Dhammarungruang, 2015: 3-7).

Sema stones in Dvaravati-art were stones carved into pillar or slab types of different sizes. They were discovered in both flat and decorated motifs throughout Thailand's northeastern region and some coastal regions along the Mekong River in Lao PDR or central Laos. There were three constructional concepts: 1) inherited from the megaliths (Hin Tang), 2) continued in Buddhism to define the sacred area or a place where Buddhist ceremonies were performed, 3) acting on behalf of the sacred, the majority of which were large Sema stones. The Sema stones in Dvaravati-art possessed three types: 1) slab type, 2) pillar type, and 3) natural type (Vallipodom, S., 1975: 90); and five types of decoration: 1) flat type 2) carved as the axial Stupa, 3) carved Kumbha motif, followed by flora pattern in a row forming a stupa, 4) carved Dharmachakra, and 5) carved auspicious and narrative images from the life of the Buddha and Jataka (Maneechot, S., 1987: 97).

The research on Sema stones in Dvaravati-art of Lao PDR was conducted in three phases: 1) A survey by foreign scholars, such as H. Parmentier, who uncovered Sema Phra That Phon and Sema Wat Inpang in 1911 (M. Lorrillard, 2011: 233-238 and 2014: 73-76). Lorrillard, M., discovered several Sema stones from the survey report of ancient Mon and Khmer evidence in Lao PDR between 2011 and 2014. 2) Operation carried out by Laotians in collaboration with foreigners. Many pieces of archaeological evidence were discovered during the construction of the Nam Ngum Dam in 1968-1969 and the landscaping of That Luang Lake in 2011. 3) surveys conducted by the researcher. However, in 2020-2021, the researcher did another survey of the Sema stones in the Dvaravati-art of Lao PDR. Hence, several

new pieces of evidence were found during repeated visits to the area, interviews, and online media.

2. Objectives, Methodology, Area, and Theory of Research

According to the survey, Sema stones in Dvaravati-art of Lao PDR shared similar decoration with the Sema stones in Dvaravati-art of Northeastern Thailand, particularly the carving of various symbolic and auspicious images. As a result, the researcher employed iconography to investigate the story and meaning of religious art depicted on the carvings, which could represent the relationship between different beliefs that were emerging at the time. Images that depicted the development, decline, and unique characteristics of arts in each region. Furthermore, they could determine the age of the culture, way of life, social system, and people's worldview in that period and location (Phasuk Intrawut, 1979: 3-4).

This article is part of the study on the models, iconography, and distribution of Sema stones in the Dvaravati-art of Lao PDR. The purpose of this study was to investigate into the iconography of Sema stones in the Dvaravati-art of Lao PDR. Surveys, interviews, and focus groups served as research tools in this qualitative study. Vientiane, Vientiane's capital, Khammouan, Savannakhet, and Salavan Province were the study regions. The theory adopted for this study was iconography, with Lorrillard, M., (2011, 2014), Stephen Murphy (2010), and Roongroj Dhammarungruang (2015, 2017) serving as research guides.

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3. Results

1. Sema stones in the Dvaravati-art survey in Lao PDR.

The researcher adopted the conceptual framework of Lorrillard, M., (2011, 2014) to classify the areas of the Sema stones in Dvaravati-art of Lao PDR into two parts: 1) the Vientiane plain in 21 sites, 72 Sema

stones were found, and 2) the plain above Wat Phu in 7 sites, 38 Sema stones were found. The classifications are as follows.

Table 1 Part 1) Vientiane plain

No.	Village	District	Province	Coordinates	Sema
1.	Ban Pakpod (Nampod)	Keo Oudom	Vientiane	18.555580, 102.501965	1
2.	Ban Tinkeo	Keo Oudom	Vientiane	18.523483, 102.521739	2
3.	Ban Thalad	Keo Oudom	Vientiane	18.519299, 102.508364	3
4.	Ban Muangkao	Thoulakhom	Vientiane	18.440922, 102.535722	2
5.	Ban Viengkham	Viengkham	Vientiane	18.369623, 102.552915	8
6.	Ban Saphue	Thoulakhom	Vientiane	18.300456, 102.675216	2
7.	Ban Nakha	Nasaithong	Vientiane capital	18.207194, 102.497028	4
8.	Ban Dong	Nasaithong	Vientiane capital	18.180716, 102.504505	3
9.	Ban Nayang (Dansoong)	Nasaithong	Vientiane capital	18.121182, 102.436889	3
10.	Ban Nongkhankhu	Nasaithong	Vientiane capital	18.120642, 102.502959	4
11.	Ban Nason	Nasaithong	Vientiane capital	18.105727, 102.505328	16
12.	Ban Phonpanao	Chaichettha	Vientiane capital	17.991184, 102.638659	1
13.	Pha That Luang	Chaichettha	Vientiane capital	17.976856, 102.636522	5
14.	Ban Nonkho	Chaichettha	Vientiane capital	17.970850, 102.654818	1
15.	Ban Saphangmor	Chaichettha	Vientiane capital	17.963250, 102.635111	2
16.	Ban Dongphosi	Hadxayfong	Vientiane capital	17.904997, 102.710688	2
17.	Wat In Pang	Chanthaburi	Vientiane capital	17.966606, 102.602398	3
18.	Hor Phakeo	Chanthaburi	Vientiane capital	17.961733, 102.611513	6

No.	Village	District	Province	Coordinates	Sema
19.	Ban Pakmee (Wat Siphum)	Chanakam	Vientiane	17.907525, 101.665459	1
20.	Ban Pakton	Sangthong	Vientiane capital	18.090097, 102.285025	1
21.	Ban Jomthong (Ban Hom)	Hadxayfong	Vientiane capital	17.834366, 102.640258	2

Table 2 Part 2) The plain above Wat Phu

No.	Village	District	Province	Coordinates	Sema
1.	Pha That Sikhottabong	Thakhek	Khammouan	17.350209, 104.807014	2
2.	Ban Kang	Chai Buri	Savannakhet	17.042900, 104.951400	14
3.	Ban Sikhai	Chai Buri	Savannakhet	17.030700, 104.925700	10
4.	Ban Nongreuthong	Chai Buri	Savannakhet	16.942511, 104.839220	3
5.	Ban Takdad	Chaiphuthong	Savannakhet	16.531000, 105.030500	6
6.	Pha That Phone	Chaiphuthong	Savannakhet	16.367350, 105.027930	1
7.	Ban Napang (Phabang)	Lakhonepheng	Salavan	15.924090, 105.436892	2

2. Analysis of models and decorations of Sema stones in Dvaravati-art in Lao PDR.

The researcher employed Vallipodom, S., (1975) conceptual framework to classify Sema stone in Dvaravati-art models which were found in Vientiane plain and plain above Wat Phu in Lao PDR. They were classified into three types: **1) 88 Sema stones slab type** which is composed of a rounded top model, lotus petal top model, and unidentified model. Both locations had a large quantity of lotus petal tops. **2) 18 Sema stones pillar type** which is composed of round, octagonal, and square pillars. The octagonal pillars were the most prevalent in both areas, and **3) 4 Sema stones natural type** found only in one location, Wat Pa Phai Nam, Ban Viang Kham, Vientiane Plain, where the Sema stones were discovered in their original location (in situ).

The researcher employed the conceptual framework of Somchat Maneechot (1987) to classify the decoration of the Sema stones in Dvaravati-art in Lao PDR into two parts: **1) Base decoration**, which included three models of decoration, namely lotus band, others, and

unidentified, and **2) Body decoration**, which included five models of decoration, namely plain, axial stupa formations, stupa-Kumbha formations, auspicious formations, and skeletal formations.

Skeletal formations mean sketching, shaping, or determining the position to be engraved. A survey of Sema stones in Dvaravati-art of Lao PDR discovered three kinds of skeletal formations: incised at the base of the Sema stones, borderline along the edge of the Sema stones, and sketches on the body of the Sema stones. The majority of them were discovered in the Vientiane plain. These findings could be considered in two distinct ways: 1) A reflection of the Sema Stones' construction plan, and 2) A reflection of the Sema Stones' unfinished construction or carving.

A study of the iconography of the Sema stones in Dvaravati-art of Lao PDR. The researcher has employed Stephen Murphy's conceptual framework (2010) to classify the iconography into 2 parts, namely: Part 1 Study of the symbolic images, and Part 2 study of the auspicious images.

Part 1 Study of the symbolic images composed of 1) Lotus band motif and 2) Stupa-Kumbha motif.

1) Lotus band motif

The lotus flower is considered to be a universal symbol of wisdom, purity, beauty, goodness, rebirth, and prosperity. The word *Psu kr* and *Punthrik*, which signifies lotus in the Rigveda scriptures, first appeared in ancient Indian civilization. As a result, it is reasonable to infer that Indians have long been acquainted with the lotus (Tengsuwan, B., 1978: 4, 22). The lotus flower is a Buddhist symbol that represents the Lord Buddha from birth to death (nirvana). For example, at birth, Prince Siddhartha took seven steps, each supported by a lotus flower, indicating that he was pure and devoid of passion. The same is true for Buddha images, particularly in standing and walking postures where the lotus appears to support the image (Namsanga, P., 2018: 63). Furthermore, the lotus represents the teachable individuals, and the 4 lotuses represent the classification of human intellect. In the *Milinda Panha* scripture, the lotus is also a symbol of dhamma practitioner, enlightenment, and Nirvana. According to the *Paha*, "Nirvana is comparable to the nature of the lotus in that water does not penetrate, and all greed cannot be absorbed" (Pranee Samraengraj Foundation, n.d.: 210). There is a lotus flower metaphor for the Buddha's posture while sitting cross-legged with one foot on top of the other in a meditation state (Monsintorn, J., 2004: 83). The lotus represents life or the beginning. The earth was scorched by a blazing fire during the

apocalypse, and everything was lost. The lotus clump was the very first clump of trees that emerged in the world. (Saddhamma Jotika Dhammachariya, Phra. 1996: 134).

Lotus flowers in sculpture and construction of Buddha images first appeared in the Kanthararath region. The Buddha images appeared in the posture of the great miracles, with the Buddha sitting on a lotus according to ancient Indian Buddhist beliefs. Later, lotuses were widely used to support the bases of Buddha images in various postures, as well as idols in Brahmin-Hinduism. Making a lotus flower base has therefore become a popular tradition from generation to generation. The sculptures discovered in Thailand shared the same design. The lotus motif is featured on idols, Buddha images, votive tablets, and dharma objects of the Sema models. The lotus, on the other hand, was not popularized as a direct symbol of the Lord Buddha, but rather as a base to support the Lord Buddha, which implied having pure and blooming virtues as the foundation. A lotus band motif base, a plain base, and a mixed variety, such as a double band with the upper petals facing upwards and the lower petals facing downwards, are the three kinds of bases used to support the Buddha images. Aside from the Buddha image, the blooming lotus was also popular as a base to support sacred items or other Buddhist symbols (Buabut, J., 1987: 48, 52).

Murphy (2010) investigated the lotus petal symbol on Sema stones in Dvaravati-art found in the Korat Plateau and Central Laos. There were five distinct models: type A, single lotus band with lotus petals facing upwards; type B, double lotus band with one band facing upwards and the other facing downwards; type C, overlapping lotus band with 2-3 bands, usually decorated with rows of stamens; type D, single or double lotus band with the complicated decoration of rows of stamens (Ancient Khmer influence); type E, Khmer floral pattern (Ancient Khmer influence). The researcher has studied the lotus petal symbol on the Sema stones in Dvaravati-art of Lao PDR by comparison with the study of Murphy's (2010), it was found that there were five models:

Model 1: Single lotus band: **found 9 Sema**, 7 in Vientiane plain, and 2 in plain above Wat Phu. This Sema was aligned with Murphy's single lotus band.

Model 2: Double lotus band with one band facing upwards and the other facing downwards: **found 2 Sema**, none was found in Vientiane plain and 2 were found in plain above Wat Phu. These Sema were aligned with Murphy's double lotus band with one band facing upwards and the other facing downwards.

Model 3: Overlapping lotus band: **found 2 Sema**, 2 were found in Vientiane plain, and none in plain above Wat Phu. These Sema were aligned with Murphy's overlapping lotus band with 2-3 bands.

Model 4: Single or double lotus band with complicated decoration; **found 11 Sema**, 3 in Vientiane plain, and 8 in plain above Wat Phu. These Sema were aligned with Murphy's complicated decoration (Ancient Khmer influence).

Model 5: Others or floral pattern; **found 3 Sema**, 2 in Vientiane plain and 1 in plain above Wat Phu. These Sema were aligned with Murphy's Khmer floral pattern (Ancient Khmer influence).

Table 3 summarizes the study on the symbolic images, lotus band

Model	Murphy	Researcher	
1	A Single lotus band	Single lotus band (9 Sema)	
		1) Sema Ban Saphue 01/02 3) Sema Ban Nayang 02/03 5) Sema Ban Nason 01/16 8) Sema Ban Kang 06/14 9) Sema Ban Takdad 06/06	2) Sema Ban Saphue 02/02 4) Sema Ban Nongkhankhu 02/04 6) Sema Hor Phakeo 03/06 7) Sema Wat In Pang 01/03
2	B Double lotus band (facing upwards and downwards)	Double lotus band, facing upwards and downwards (2 Sema)	
		10) Sema Ban Kang 03/14	11) Sema Pha That Phone 01/01
3	C Overlapping lotus band with 2-3 bands	Overlapping lotus band (2 Sema)	
		12) Sema Ban Nachon 10/16	13) Sema Hor Phakeo 04/06
4	D Complicated decoration (Ancient Khmer influence)	Single or double lotus band, complicated decoration (11 Sema)	
		14) Sema Ban Muangkao 01/02 16) Sema Ban Pakmee 01/01 18) Sema Ban Sikhai 04/10 20) Sema Ban Kang 01/14 22) Sema Ban Kang 08/14 24) Sema Ban Takdad 04/06	15) Sema Ban Dong 02/03 17) Sema Ban Sikhai 02/10 19) Sema Ban Sikhai 08/10 21) Sema Ban Kang 04/14 23) Sema Ban Kang 09/14
5	E Khmer floral pattern (Ancient Khmer influence)	Others or floral Model (3 sema)	
		25) Sema Ban Nongkhankhu 01/04 27) Sema Ban Sikhai 06/10	26) Sema Ban Nason 12/16

2) Stupa-Kumbha motif

Stupa is a dome structure that was used to enshrine sacred items in Buddhism, such as the Buddha's relics. It originated from a semicircular grave mound or buildings that housed important people's relics for the purpose of commemoration and worship. Stupa, according to ancient Indian traditions, could allude to both a pilgrimage and a place of worship. Stupas are significant Buddhist structures in both India and Southeast Asia. It is considered to be a universal Buddhist symbol. Artists frequently used the stupa as a symbol depicting the history of the Lord Buddha's Nirvana (Parinibbana) as well as the Buddha (Foucher A, 2003 cited in Murphy, 2010: 324). The discovery of carved Stupas in major Buddhist sites in India, as well as carved images of Stupa-Kumbha on Sema stones in Dvaravati Buddhist communities in Thailand and Laos, led to the concept of Stupa worship later on (Snodgrass, 1985: 189-190). Since the 13th - 14th centuries, the cult *Apara-mahavinaseliya* has had an impact on U Thong city. Instead of Buddha images, this cult worshiped Stupas (Pagodas). Around the 17th-18th centuries, this concept may have spread to the Korat Plateau or the Northeast of Thailand (Phasuk Intrawut, 1999: 234).

Kumbha is a water pot with plants slithering out of its mouth. It is also known as the *Purnaghata* or the Fertility Cauldron. This auspicious symbol originated in India. It was applicable to both Buddhist and Brahmin settings. According to the Brahman concept, it represents the beginning of the universe, whereas the Buddhist concept states that it represents liberation or the birth of all Buddhas. The pattern that overflows or emerges from the mouth of the Kumbha could be flora, which means fertility, or the stupa axis, which means the center of the cosmos that causes order and enlightenment. *Trishula* or *Dhammachakra* may emerge at the top of the stupa axis. It indicated how symbols in both Brahmanism and Buddhism were adapted to their respective contexts (Snodgrass, 1985: 189-190). During the Dvaravati period, a stupa or stupa axis, known as the Stupa-Kumbha, may also emerge. (Vallipodom, S., 1985: 15, 27; Paknam, N., 1981: 62).

The stupa-Kumbha symbol, on the other hand, was not always a depiction of the Buddha but it could be a "*Phan Baisri*" sacrifice. Dhammarungruang, R., (2015: 57-63) called this symbol "*Mor-tor-gruay*." Such a symbol could be generally found on the carvings of Sema stones in Dvaravati-art. Therefore, it could reflect to the use of Sema stones instead of a sacrifice. Worshiping the Buddha or ancestors may be referred to as worship in this context. This *Mor-tor-*

gruay image may have been associated with pottery in death rituals before Buddhism spread to this region.

The Stupa-Kumbha symbol could have a variety of meanings depending on the locality, social, and cultural context of the period. Stupa-Kumbha was inevitably linked with the Buddha or a representation of the Buddha himself in Buddhism.

Murphy (2010) investigated the Stupa-Kumbha symbol on Sema stones in Dvaravati-art found in the Korat Plateau and Central Laos. There were 5 models: 1) Basic or plain model, 2) Kumbha with the continuation of lotus petals and a simple stupa, 3) Kumbha on a base or double Kumbha, long lotus petals as the stupa and the Stupa's summit was ornamented with a Trishula or Dharmachakra. 4) There was a relocation, such as moving the Kumbha from the top of the stupa to the center of the stupa or discovering more than one Kumbha. 5) Ancient Khmer motif or floral model, such as Sema Ban Muang Kao, Laos PDR.

Rungroj Dhamrungruang (2017) examined the Stupa-Kumbha symbols on Sema stones in Dvaravati-art of Thailand and discovered 3 models: 1) Convex lines or pointed cones, 2) Single pot linked by a cone, and 3) Stacked pot connected by a cone or placed on a base. The researcher examined the Stupa-Kumbha symbol on the Sema stones in Dvaravati-art of Lao PDR and discovered three models when compared to the studies of Murphy (2010) and Rungroj dhamrungruang (2017):

Model 1: Stupa axis refers to carving an axis line, a cone, a triangle, or a basic stupa with sharp points. They were discovered in both square-convex and rounded-convex models, as well as striped model. **11 Sema** were discovered, 3 in the Vientiane plain and 8 in the plain above Wat Phu, which corresponded to model 1) of Murphy and 1) of Roongroj Dhamrungruang.

Model 2: Kumbha with a plain Stupa refers to carving a single Kumbha image followed by a continuation with lotus petals and the flora pattern arranged in a conical form or in a plain stupa model. **10 Sema** were discovered, 5 in the Vientiane plain and 5 in the plain above Wat Phu, which corresponded to model 2) of Murphy and 2) of Roongroj Dhamrungruang.

Model 3: Kumbha on a base with a complicated decoration Stupa (Ancient Khmer influence) refers to the engraving of a single or double Kumbha on a base, followed by a pattern of flora arranged in

a continuous conical shape or a Stupa with complicated decoration. Kumbha was relocated and influenced by Ancient Khmer model, such as Khmer flower models. **13 sema** were discovered, 4 in the Vientiane plain and 9 in the plain above Wat Phu, which corresponded to model 3) - 5) of Murphy and 3) of Roongroj Dhamrungruang.

Table 4 summarizes the study on the symbolic images, Stupa-Kumbha

Model	Murphy / Roongroj Dhamrungruang	Researcher	
1	Murphy Basic or plain Roongroj Dhamrungruang Convex lines or pointed cones	Stupa axis (11 sema)	
		1) Sema Ban Viengkham 03/08 3) Sema Hor Phakeo 06/06 5) Sema Ban Kang 07/14 7) Sema Ban Sikhai 04/10 9) Sema Ban Takdad 03/06 11) Sema Ban Naphang 01/02	2) Sema Ban Viengkham 06/08 4) Sema Pha That Sikhottabong 02/02 6) Sema Ban Kang 14/14 8) Sema Ban Takdad 01/06 10) Sema Pha That Phone 01/01
2	Murphy Kumbha with the continuation of lotus petals and a simple Stupa Roongroj Dhamrungruang Single pot linked by a cone	Kumbha with a plain Stupa (10 sema)	
		12) Sema Ban Nason 02/16 14) Sema Ban Nason 14/16 16) Sema Pha That Luang 02/05 18) Sema Ban Kang 05/14 20) Sema Ban Nongruethong 01/03	13) Sema Ban Nason 13/16 15) Sema Pha That Luang 01/05 17) Sema Ban Sikhai 07/10 19) Sema Ban Kang 13/14 21) Sema Ban Naphang 02/02
3	Murphy -Kumbha on a base with long lotus petals forming the stupa -The Stupa's summit was ornamented with a Trishula or Dhammachakra* -Relocation of Kumbha -More than 1 point of Kumbha* -Ancient Khmer influence (Khmer floral model)	Kumbha on a base with a complicated decoration Stupa (Ancient Khmer influence) (13 sema)	
		22) Sema Ban Pakpod 01/01 24) Sema Ban Nongkhankhu 03/04 26) Sema Ban Sikhai 02/10 28) Sema Ban Sikhai 08/10 30) Sema Ban Kang 02/14 32) Sema Ban Kang 08/14 34) Sema Ban Takdad 04/06	23) Sema Ban Muangkao 01/02 25) Sema Ban Pakmee 01/01 27) Sema Ban Sikhai 06/10 29) Sema Ban Kang 01/14 31) Sema Ban Kang 04/14 33) Sema Ban Kang 09/14

Model	Murphy / Roongroj Dhamrungruang	Researcher	
	Roongroj Dhamrungruang Stacked pot connected by a cone* or placed on a base		

*None has been found in Lao PDR

Part 2 Study on the auspicious images composed of 1) portraits and 2) narrative images.

1) Portraits

Sema Hor Phra Keo 01/06 (HPK 1/26). These Sema are currently on display at the Hor Phra Keo Museum. They craved Buddha images cross-legged with one foot on top of the other. There are three similar Buddha images, The left and right are in front. The center part is at the back, with a convex round button at the base.

These portraits have three interpretations: 1) Kakusandha Buddha, Gamana Buddha, and Kassapa Buddha, 2) Gautama Buddha, Metteyya Buddha, and Bhaisajyaguru Buddha (Lorrillard, 2014: 77-83). The concepts for the 3 sculptures (Trinity) are based on the Buddha's three bodies, namely Dharmakaya, Sambhokaya, and Nirmanakaya. All of these were famous in Thailand and Cambodia during the 22nd - 23rd centuries (Phasuk Intrawut, 2000: 282,298).

Sema Hor Phra Keo 02/06 (HPK-). These Sema are currently on display at the Hor Phra Keo Museum. They craved Buddha images cross-legged with one foot on top of the other. Two people are standing on either side. The person on the right wears long robes.

There is only one interpretation of these portraits. The concept for the 3 sculptures (Trinity) was influenced by the Three Jewels Mahayana (Ti-ratana or Ratanattaya Mahayana) concept, which depicts the Lord Buddha sitting on the curled portion of the Mucalinda naga with Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva on the left. His four arms and head were both damaged. Prajnaparamita Buddha is on the right (Lorrillard, 2014: 77-83). Ratanattaya Mahayana was prevalent in both

Thailand and Cambodia during the 22nd - 23rd centuries, coinciding with the three-bodies concept. The concept symbolizes Buddha worship (Shakyamuni or Buddha), Dhamma worship (Prajnaparamita Bodhisattva), and Sangha worship (Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva). It was also discovered that Shakyamuni was always created as a Buddha sheltered by the Naga hood (Phasuk Indrawut, 2000: 282,298).

Sema Ban Chomthong 01/02. These Sema were found at Wat Jiem Pang, Chaiyaram, Ban Chomthong. They are currently enshrined at Wat Pho Chai, Silaram, Ban Chomthong. Sema Ban Chomthong 01/02 was discovered alongside with Sema-inscriptions Ban Chomthong 02/02 at the Mekong River near Wat Chiampang pier. Sema Ban Chom Thong 01/02 (Luang Pu Phra Sila) were summoned to be enshrined at Wat Pho Chai. Such Sema was carved with Buddha images wearing yellow robes seated cross-legged with one foot on top of the other. The Buddha has knotted or spiral hair curls. His face is a characteristic of local Lan Xang. The back decorative part depicts the Buddha image sitting beneath a Chatra flanked by lotus flowers or Stupa.

In terms of interpretation, the researcher assumed that such Buddha images were comparable to those carved on the cliffs at Wang Chang Cave, Phonhong District, Vientiane Province, in Group 1. These two Buddha images are large and depict the Vitarka Mudra posture, with one foot on top of the other. The one on the right appears to be decorated with 2-3 grooves of lotus flowers (similar to Sema Ban Chomthong 01/02). It was sometime during the 26th - 27th centuries (Saisingha, S., 2008: 90-96).

2) Narrative images

Sema Ban Phonpanao 01/01 was discovered at Ban Phonpanao. This Sema features a single-sided narrative image. There are two persons in the image; the person on the left was carved in the center of the Sema, sitting cross-legged. The person on the right was engraved in the right position of the Sema, in the kneeling position and facing the person on the left to listen or worship. It was assumed that it is a carved image of Vidhurapandita Jataka when Vidhura expounds the law to Punnaka (Lorrillard, 2014: 61-62 and Murphy, 2010: 237).

Sema Ban Sapangmor 01/02 was discovered at Ban Sapangmor. It is currently on exhibit at the Hor Phra Keo Museum. This Sema features a single-sided narrative image. There are three people seated; one is sitting on top, and the other two are on the bottom. The figure above

was most likely a Buddha or a Bodhisattva seated in Vajrasana, wearing a neck, and showing Vitarka Mudra. The persons in the costume below are most likely the King and Queen. The two make an Anjali Mudra to worship the individual above them. It is thought to be a carved image of Kulavaka Jataka from the Thao Sakkha Thewarat (Indra) episode, comparable to the carved Sema Ban Dongphosi 01/02 (Lorrillard, 2014: 65-66).

Sema Ban Sapangmor 02/02 was discovered at Wat Sapangmor, Ban Sapangmor. This Sema has a one-sided narrative image as well as a one-sided sketch. The image depicts 2 persons. A lady on the left is dressed (Panung) in an ankle-length, with her right arm folded at the waist and her left arm spread out along the body. On the right is a man wearing a thigh-length dress, similar to a Sampot (Ancient Khmer dress); his right arm is raised and his left arm is released across the torso. It was assumed that it is a sculpture of Mahosadha Jataka when he first encountered Amara (the courting of Amara). Above the carved image is a 3 line inscription in the ancient Mon language, dating from the 19th-21st century. (Lorrillard, 2014: 65-66).

Sema Ban Dongphosi 01/02 (NH10/07) was discovered at Ban Dongphosi. It is currently on exhibit at the Hor Phra Keo Museum. This Sema is a one-sided narrative image. There is a portrait of a person wearing a crown, earrings, and necklace. His right arm is folded, and his right hand is at his chest clutching an oval-shaped object. The left arm rests across the body as he sits hanging or raising his right foot in the Lalitasana or Maharaj Leela posture on a lotus petal base. He has dressed in a heavily pleated suspender with a double panel. It was assumed that it is a carved image depicting the Kulawaka Jataka episode of Thao Sakkha Thewarat (Indra) episode. Above the carved image is an 8-line inscription in the ancient Mon language, dating from the 19th-21st century (Lorrillard, 2014: 63-64).

However, given the discovery of ancient Mon language inscriptions above Sema carvings from Ban Sapangmor 02/02 and Ban Dong Pho Si 01/02 in the 19th - 21st centuries, it could be presumed that all four Sema narrative images are of the same age.

The researcher utilized Roongroj Dhammarungrueng's (2017: 206-233) study guideline to describe the society and culture through the image of the Buddha Jataka on Sema as follows: 1) Vidhurapandita Jataka; a Dharma instruction on truthfulness. This Jataka reflected society's desire at that time to encourage people to be truthful, and honest, and to dare to speak and act. It also represented the equality

that every human being has the potential to achieve enlightenment. Even those with great merit must reside in the ten-fold virtue. 2) Mahosadha Jataka is a Dharma instruction on wisdom. This Jataka represented the desire of society at the time to encourage people to have wisdom, to be able to discern between right and wrong, and to be in a relationship with scholars who could counsel. It entails employing one's intellect inappropriate household ownership, and 3) Kulavaka Jataka; a Dharma teaching about generosity. It reflected society's desire at the time to urge people to see the benefits of generosity, keeping precepts, and perseverance. Sacrificing their own happiness to benefit the public, determination to teach others to do good, commitment to doing good, and belief in good deeds.

Table 5 summarizes the findings from the study of auspicious images.

Topic / Sema	Dated (CE.)	Details
1 Study on the auspicious images (portraits), 3 sema		
1) Sema Hor Phra Keo 01/06	22nd-23rd	Three Buddha images arranged according to the Trikaya concept.
2) Sema Hor Phra Keo 02/06	22nd-23rd	The Buddha images flanked by Avalokiteshvara according to the Ratanattaya Mahayana concept.
3) Sema Ban Chomthong 01/02	26th-27th	The Buddha images, local face similar to Wang Chang Cave, Vientiane, Group 1)
2 Study on the auspicious images (narrative images), 4 sema		
1) Sema Ban Phonpanao 01/01	19th-21st	Vidhurapandit Jataka, Vidhura expounds the law to Punnaka episode
2) Sema Ban Saphangmor 01/02	19th-21st	Kulavaka Jataka, Thao Sakkha Thewarat (Indra) episode
3) Sema Ban Saphangmor 02/02	19th-21st	Mahosadha Jataka, the courting of Amara episode, with ancient Mon inscription
4) Sema Ban Dongphosi 01/02	19th-21st	Kulawaka Jataka, Thao Sakkha Thewarat (Indra) episode, with ancient Mon inscription

4. Conclusion and Discussion

A study on the iconography of Sema stones referred to the study of the story and meaning of the images carved on the Sema stones. A survey of Sema stones in Dvaravati-art of Lao PDR revealed two kinds of carved images: 1) Symbolic images including lotus band and Stupa-Kumbha; 2) Auspicious images including portraits and narrative images. All of these images were associated with mixed Buddhism, both Theravada and Mahayana. However, there was some Brahmanism - Hinduism influence. The researcher studied the

carvings on the Sema stones using iconography theory, obtaining the following information:

The lotus petal or lotus flower is a symbol symbolizing the Lord Buddha throughout his life, from his birth to his nirvana. Lotus flowers were commonly used in the arts as a base to support the Lord Buddha as well as various types of dharma items known as the lotus base, which implies having pure and blooming virtues as the foundation. The lotus base appeared to be employed for holding idols in the Brahmin-Hindu religion as well. Lotus petal symbols on Sema stones in the Dvaravati-art of Lao PDR were divided into five models and could be found on all kinds of Sema stones. It was commonly inscribed on the slab Sema stones in Thailand.

The Stupa-Kumbha symbol was a mixed Buddhist symbol between the stupa, which represents the Buddha's history on his nirvana, and Kumbha, which represents fertility in both Buddhism and Brahmanism. During the Dvaravati era, it frequently appeared as an axial Stupa, which was referred to as Stupa-Kumbha. The symbol could represent intuition or enlightenment. It may refer to a kind of offering or Phan Baisri to pay homage to the Buddha or the ancestors. In Lao PDR, the Stupa-Kumbha symbol could be found on Sema stones in Dvaravati-art. It could be divided into three models, comparable to those found in Thailand, but no Stupa was decorated with a Trishula or Dhammachakra, nor was there more than one Kumbha.

Portraits were found in three Sema stones, namely Sema Hor Phra Keo 01/06, engraved with 3 sitting Buddha images according to the Trikaya concept of the Buddha, meaning Dharmakaya, Sambhokaya, and Nirmanakaya; Sema Hor Phra Keo 02/06, engraved with Buddha image sheltered by Naga hood with individuals standing on either side. According to the concept of Ratanattaya in Mahayana, it implies Shakyamuni, Avalokiteshvara, And Prajnaparamitta. The concept of creating a group of 3 sculptures (Trinity) in Mahayana Buddhism, found in Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos, dated between the 22nd-23rd centuries. Sema Ban Chomthong 01/02 carved a picture of a seated Buddha image with a Lan Xang local face, comparable to the carved Buddha image on a Wang Chang cliff, Phonhong City, group 1, dated around the 19th-21st centuries.

Narrative images were found in four Sema stones, one of which was a Sema Ban Phonpanao **01/01** engraved with the Vidhurapandita Jataka (truthfulness) when Vidhura expounded the law to Punnaka. Sema Ban Sapangmor 02/02 engraved the Mahosadha Jataka (wisdom) when the courting of Amara. Sema Ban Saphangmor 01/02 and Sema Ban Dong Phosi 01/02 engraved the Kulavaka Jataka (generosity)

episode of Thao Sakka Dewarat (Indra). Sema Ban Sapangmor 02/02 and Sema Ban Dongphosi 01/02 were engraved with the ancient Mon language inscriptions above the image, which dated from the 19th-21st century. It was assumed that these four narrative images on the Sema stones were believed to be the same age.

In general, the models and decorations of the Sema stones in the Dvaravati-art of Lao PDR were very similar to the Dvaravati culture in the Northeast of Thailand, particularly the slab-type Sema stones, the top with the lotus petals, the lotus band carving base, and the carved Stupa-Kumbha on the body. This demonstrates that the cultures in these two areas shared similar values, beliefs, and the concept of constructing Sema stones. Until it was transformed into a cultural zone that connected both ends of the Mekong River. People in this cultural region shared a common belief. Details and various art styles may have appeared to demonstrate identity or particular characteristics of their location.

5. Suggestions for the future research

In order to readily see the overview of Dvaravati culture, as a shared culture on both sides of the Mekong River, information about Sema stones in Dvaravati-art, as well as the route of spreading Buddhism between Thailand, Cambodia, and Lao PDR, should be added.

Illustrations

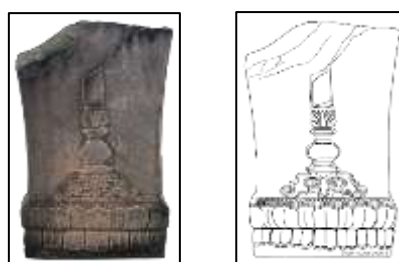


Figure 1: Sema Ban Takdad 04/06 (Photo and illustration by the researcher)

Lotus band symbolic Model 4:

single or overlapping lotus band complicated decoration (Ancient Khmer influence).

Stupa-Kumbha symbolic Model 3:

Kumbha on the base, complicated decoration

(Ancient Khmer influence).



Figure 2: Sema Ban Sikhai 06/10 (Photo and illustration by the researcher)

Lotus band symbolic Model 5:

The floral Motif, Khmer floral (Ancient Khmer influence).

Stupa-Kumbha symbolic Model 3:

Kumbha on the base, complicated decoration (Ancient Khmer influence).

Sema Ban Sikhai 06/10



Figure 3: Sema Hor Phra Keo 01/06 (Photo and illustration by the researcher)

Auspicious image according to the Trikaya concept



Figure 4: Sema Hor Phra Keo 02/06 (Photo and illustration by the researcher)

Auspicious image according to the Ratanattaya Mahayana concept.



Figure 5: Sema Ban Chomthong 01/02 (Photo and illustration by the researcher)

Auspicious image assumed to have local Buddhism characteristic.



Figure 6: Sema Ban Phonpanao 01/01 (Photo and illustration by the researcher)

Auspicious image, Vidhurapandita Kataka, Vidhura expounded the law to Punnaka.



Figure 7: Sema Ban Saphangmor 02/02 (Photo and illustration by the researcher)

Auspicious image, Mahosadha Jataka, the courting of Amara. There are 3 lines of ancient Mon inscription.



Figure 8: Sema Ban Dongphosi 01/02 (Photo and illustration by the researcher)

Auspicious image, Kulava Jataka,
Thao Sakkha Thewarat (Indra) episode
There are 8 lines of ancient Mon inscription.



Figure 9: Sema Ban Saphangmor 01/02 (Photo and illustration by the researcher)

Auspicious image, Kulava Jataka,
Thao Sakkha Thewarat (Indra) episode

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