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The Dvaravati "Buddha on a Monster" Stelae: A Possible Interpretation

SARAH TIFFIN AND MARTIN STUART-FOX

Providing convincing explanations for objects that are unique to Dvaravati is particularly challenging given that our knowledge of the polity is sketchy to say the least. One particularly fascinating group of such objects comprises a number of stelae depicting the Buddha apparently standing on the head of some beast or "monster". The central Buddha figure is usually flanked by two gods, probably Indra and Brahma,[1] or two *bodhisattvas*,[2] or just two attendants.[3] The "monster" has been interpreted as some combination of the vehicles of Visnu (Garuda), Siva (bull) and/or Brahma (hamsa or goose), or as Garuda, or Surya, the Sun God.[4] There are no Indian prototypes for these objects,[5] which are found only in the Dvaravati sculptural style.[6]

Attempts to explain how the iconography of these "Buddha on a monster" stelae might have arisen have been unconvincing. Quaritch Wales thought they demonstrated a local "liking for symmetry",[7] while Lyons entertains the possibility that they resulted from what amounts to error on the part of Dvaravati sculptors in portraying Indian prototypes.[8]

[1] Dorothy H. Fickle, *Images of the Buddha in Thailand* (Singapore, 1989), p. 36; see also Ven. Kandarapanguwe Dhammasiri, *The Buddha Images and Pagodas in Thailand* (Bangkok, 1991), p. 17. The majority of commentators believe the Buddha is flanked by Indra and Brahma. This seems the most likely identification of the figures as the texts relating to the Buddha's descent from Tavatimsa heaven, associated with these objects through the Buddha's performance of the double-handed *vitarkamudra*, describe the Buddha as accompanied by Indra and Brahma as they descend three sets of staircases.

[2] Steve Van Beek and Luca Invernizzi Tettoni, *The Arts of Thailand* (London, 1991), p. 68.

[3] Robert L. Brown, *The Dvaravati Wheels of the Law and the Indianization of South East Asia* (Leiden, 1996), p. 83.

[4] Brown notes that the vehicle varies between some conflated beast and images more easily identified as Garuda or Surya. Brown, *The Dvaravati Wheels*, p. 83. See also Robert L. Brown, "'Rules' for change in the transfer of Indian Art to Southeast Asia", in *Ancient Indonesian Sculpture*, eds. Marijke J. Klokke and Pauline Lunsingh Scheurleer (Leiden, 1994), p. 19.

[5] M. C. Subhadradis Diskul (ed.), *Art in Thailand: A Brief History* (Bangkok, 1970), p. 3 and Brown, "'Rules' for change", p. 18. Brown further notes that there are no literary sources describing the Buddha descending from the Tavatimsa heaven on a bird or beast, and suggests that, unless there is a lost text, the objects are an invention of the Dvaravati artists (p. 19).

[6] Elizabeth Lyons, "Dvaravati, a Consideration of its Formative Period", in *Early South East Asia: Essays in Archaeology, History and Historical Geography*, eds. R. B. Smith and W. Watson (Oxford, 1979), p. 357; and Brown, *The Dvaravati Wheels*, p. 82.

[7] H. G. Quaritch Wales, *Dvaravati: The Earliest Kingdom of Siam (6th to 10th Century AD)* (London, 1969), p. 44.

[8] Lyons, "Dvaravati", p. 357. See also Brown, "'Rules' for change", pp. 13–14 and p. 19. The concept of innovation through error is a highly contentious one, however, and Brown cautions that such assumptions presuppose knowledge of the artist's intent – something which is impossible to determine in the case of the Dvaravati objects (p. 14). Further, as Brown has observed of the Dvaravati *cakras*, objects can sometimes display inconsistencies in their decorative patterns which, although these could readily be interpreted as mistakes, they may just as easily be read as intentional or planned (*The Dvaravati Wheels*, p. 175ff.).

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Understanding their meaning and the use to which they were put has proved even more elusive.

It is the purpose of this paper to propose a solution to this hermeneutical and utilitarian conundrum. The approach we take is to consider the possibility that they are deliberate expressions of local syncretism, combining Buddhist with Hindu iconography. We read these stelae as ritual objects, likely, because of their number and cost of manufacture, to have played some more significant role in the life of the Dvaravati kingdom than that of a simple icon. To do so, we begin from the little we do know about Dvaravati plus what we can glean of a comparative nature from the political institutions and forms of legitimation of neighbouring and similar polities.

The Comparative Approach

Of the various theoretical frameworks that have emerged in recent years to explain the historical character of Southeast Asian polities, the most sophisticated and convincing has been that outlined by O. W. Wolters in his seminal text, *History, Culture and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*, first published in 1982.[9] According to Wolters, the Southeast Asian political matrix was both dynamic and competitive. Leaders and potential leaders vied with one another in what seems to have been a volatile political arena characterised by multicentricity, instability and peripheral fluidity as the networks of loyalties associated with various local centres manoeuvred in response to emerging dominant powers in their region. These emerging dominant centres and their associated tributary networks constituted what Wolters has termed *mandalas*, in order to specify their peculiar political configuration.[10]

In order to stabilize the *mandala's* potentially fluctuating periphery and develop and maintain the complex systems of alliances and kinship ties on which his power was predicated, the "man of prowess", the ruler, obviously required exceptional skills in leadership and diplomacy.[11] Furthermore, he needed a highly organised means of communicating complex dimensions of the power of the centre to its outlying administratively autonomous but tributarily dependent peripheral components.

Of course the power of the centre depended on its political effectiveness, the resources at its disposal, the wealth it could generate from tribute, production and trade, and the population which it could conscript to project its military might. But importantly too, the power of the centre depended on the prowess and charisma of the ruler, and the acceptance by his peers of the legitimacy of his right to rule. This was provided by the crucial dimension of ideological power.[12]

[9] By the Institute of Southeast Studies, Singapore. A revised edition which includes a postscript longer than the original work was published by Cornell University in its Southeast Asia Program series in 1999. All subsequent references to Wolters are to this 1999 revised edition.

[10] O. W. Wolters, *History, Culture and Region*, rev. ed., pp. 27ff. and 114ff. See also Charles Higham, *The Archaeology of Mainland Southeast Asia* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 239–40, though Higham's interpretation is more centralized than Wolters would wish (Cf Wolters, p. 108). Dvaravati, by all accounts, was anything but a centralized polity. See Srisakra Vallibhotama, "Political and Cultural Continuities at Dvaravati Sites", in *Southeast Asia in the 9th to 14th Centuries*, eds. David G. Marr and A. C. Milner (Singapore, 1986), pp. 229–36.

[11] Wolters, *History, Culture and Region*, p. 18.

[12] For the classification of social power into political, military, economic and ideological, see Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power. Volume 1: A History of Power from the Beginning to A.D.1760* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 2.

As in the Hindu/Buddhist world-view of early Southeast Asia, the alliances and power relationships that underpinned the *mandala* were premised on perceptions of a leader's accumulation (or dissipation) of *karma*, and so it was essential that the ruler publicly demonstrated the power of his *karma*. The performance of religious ritual in which the ruler figured as the central focus constituted the basis of his ideological power, and that of his regime. The correct and public performance of ritual was thus crucial to the establishment and continuation of a ruler's pre-eminence,[13] serving not only to confirm his legitimacy and the sacred power of his office and ritual centre, but also to reinforce belief in a shared world-view that served to strengthen ties of both kinship and loyalty.[14]

Perhaps the most important rituals to legitimise political power were those associated with the coronation or inauguration of the kings of great *mandalas*, in particular, the *abhiseka* or anointment.[15] These are of particular interest for the symbolism upon which they draw, and the way that symbolism was expressed. Unfortunately we have no records of the performance of a Dvaravati coronation, but we do know that the Burmese *abhiseka* ritual has deep historical roots which almost certainly drew upon Mon precedent, and which therefore may throw some light on practices performed in Dvaravati.

Burmese evidence is relevant to any study of Dvaravati, if only because the Pagan dynasty owed much of its court culture to the Mon.[16] We do not know with any precision how extensive Dvaravati was, nor do we know the ethnic make-up of its population. The Mon, however, constituted the political and cultural elite, founding kingdoms as far north as Haripunjaya centred on Lamphun in northern Thailand and west to the Thaton (Pegu/Bago) region of southern Burma. Early in the eleventh century, thousands of Mon were removed *en masse* to Pagan following the conquest of Thathom by the Burmese king Aniruddha (Anawrahta fl.1044–77). The forced migration of Mon to Pagan had a profound impact on Burmese political and cultural practices, and although the Burmese maintained their pre-eminent social position and political control of the *mandala*,[17] Mon culture was much admired, especially in art and architecture. Above all, however, it was through

[13] Michael Aung-Thwin, "Heaven, Earth, and the Supernatural World: Dimensions of the Exemplary Center in Burmese History", in *The City as Sacred Center: Essays on Six Asian Contexts*, eds. Bardwell Smith and Holly Baker Reynolds (Leiden, 1987), pp. 96, 99.

[14] Barbara Watson Andaya, "Statecraft in the Reign of Lü Tai of Sukhodaya (ca.1347–1374)", in *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Thailand, Laos and Burma*, ed. Bardwell L. Smith (Leiden, 1978), p. 8.

[15] This observation is also endorsed by Tambiah: "I would like to suggest that it is precisely because there were perennial rebellions and usurpations and because legitimation through orderly succession was absent that the rituals of kingship, particularly the periodic *abhiseka*, which purified and replenished kings with sacred power, were so elaborate and considered so essential" (Stanley J. Tambiah, "The Galactic Polity: The Structure of Traditional Kingdoms in Southeast Asia", *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, CCXCIII (1977), p. 81). As Quaritch Wales observes, coronation ceremonies, which had their origins in the ritual re-enactment of the beginning of the universe, became the equivalent of "the regeneration of the kingdom" (H. G. Quaritch Wales, *The Universe Around Them: Cosmology and Cosmic Renewal in Indianized South-east Asia* (London, 1977), p. 147) which underscores their importance in legitimising the rule of a new leader.

[16] D. G. E. Hall, *A History of South-East Asia* (London, 1981), p. 184; see also p. 182. Le May recounts the flight of Dvaravati Mons from Haripunjaya to Thaton during a cholera epidemic in the eleventh century (Reginald Le May, *A Concise History of the Buddhist Art of Siam* (Rutland, 1938), p. 30; see also H.G. Quaritch Wales, "Dvaravati in South-East Asian Cultural History", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, (1966), p. 42, and Luce comments that although their artworks are stylistically different, "[t]here was little or no difference between these Mons, either in language or race" (Gordon H. Luce, "Dvaravati and Old Burma", *Journal of the Siam Society*, LIII, 1 (1965), p. 11; see also A. B. Griswold, "The Architecture and Sculpture of Siam", in *The Arts of Thailand*, ed. Theodore Bowie (Bloomington, 1960), p. 41.

[17] Michael Aung-Thwin, *Pagan: The Origins of Modern Burma* (Honolulu, 1985), pp. 23–4, 81ff.

Buddhism, including its cosmological legitimation of political authority, that the Mon made their most significant contribution to Burmese political and cultural life.

Geographical proximity and trade between the Burmese and the Mon both ensured a continuing exchange of ideas. During the reign of Kalancacsa (Kyanzittha fl.1084–1112), Pagan society adopted various political, social, and cultural practices derived largely from the Mon. By the end of the eleventh century, the Mon had emerged as "the intellectual elite" of Pagan, their language was spoken at court, their script was used for important documents and inscriptions, their artistic traditions were maintained, and, importantly, their legal code and religious philosophy were embraced.[18]

Given this synthesis of Upper Burmese Pagan and Lower Burmese Mon culture, it would not be surprising if some parallels between Dvaravati and Pagan could usefully be drawn.[19] The earliest written records of Burmese history begin with the Pagan period, so it is to these texts that we must turn to seek comparisons that might suggest a possible iconographical reading for the Dvaravati "Buddha on a monster" stelae.

Comparison requires some firmly established basis. We would accept Wolters's contention that there existed a " 'Southeast Asian' predicability of outlook [that] could have been engendered by the acknowledgment of a common fount of Indian conceptions."[20] Indian cultural models were widely adopted and adapted throughout Southeast Asia in response to locally evolving political needs and intra-regional relations.[21] But imported Indian cultural influences, as Wolters suggests, served primarily to reinforce and refine long-established local practices, particularly with respect to the exercise of power and legitimacy within the region, thus materially assisting *mandala* elites to assert political control over a wider and widening area.

Comparison of Southeast Asian ritual objects (particularly those required for the performance of ideologically legitimising religious ritual) both reveals shared motifs, forms or iconographies which differ from Indian models, and provides evidence of how a distinctly Southeast Asian artistic vernacular, albeit one marked by intra-regional variety, emerged in response to regional concerns and priorities. Such comparisons between the Dvaravati and Khmer *mandalas*, and between Dvaravati and Arakan, have already yielded interesting results. Study of these two cases will demonstrate the comparative methodology we intend to apply in interpreting the "Buddha on a monster" stelae.

Robert L. Brown has contributed much to our understanding of the Dvaravati polity,

[18] The era, Aung-Thwin suggests, was one of "Burman military rule, Pyu traditions, Mon culture, and *Theravadin* spirit" (*Pagan*, p. 23).

[19] The influence of the Burmese Mons is also detectable in later Thai practices, in particular their legal code, the *Phra Thammasat*, believed to have been based on the Burmese Mon *Dharmasastra* with which the Thai were familiar, see (Yoneo Ishii, *Sangha, State and Society: Thai Buddhism in History*. Transl. Peter Hawkes (Honolulu, 1986), p. 44. (See also Andaya, "Statecraft", p. 5).

[20] Wolters, *History, Culture and Region*, p. 66.

[21] Wolters, *History, Culture and Region*, pp. 66 and 55ff. As Wolters observes, historians "are now being encouraged to suppose that by the beginning of the Christian era a patchwork of small settlement networks of great antiquity stretched across the map of Southeast Asia" (pp. 15–16). One of the most important features of prehistoric central Thailand was its diversity, a variability that was "characterized by complex interdependence rather than discreteness." Jean Kennedy, "From Stage to Development in Prehistoric Thailand: An Exploration of the Origins of Growth, Exchange, and Variability in Southeast Asia", in *Economic Exchange and Social Interaction in Southeast Asia: Perspectives from Prehistory, History and Ethnography*, ed. Karl L. Hutterer (Ann Arbor, 1977), p. 23; and it is in the light of this interdependence that the later appropriation of external influences should be assessed, p. 24.

not least by demonstrating evidence linking the Dvaravati and Khmer *mandala*s that would appear to support Wolters's concept of a shared Southeast Asian "outlook". While acknowledging the existence of a high degree of intra-regional diversity, Brown's authoritative study of the Dvaravati *dharmacakrastambha*s reveals sometimes general, sometimes quite specific commonalities among Southeast Asian responses to Indian cultural models. Brown maintains that:

> South East Asian reactions to Indian artistic influence share more among themselves than they do with anything in India. . . . [For example], the *cakra*s – in their artistic forms, in their epigraphical and iconographical contexts – relate most closely to South East Asian, rather than Indian, monuments and practices.[22]

The Dvaravati and Khmer polities, Brown concludes, shared more than just their response to Indian artistic forms. Similar broad cultural traits can be discerned in the form of a "shared vocabulary of power and persuasion, . . . languages, texts, religion, and art",[23] which reference Indian models but are expressed in a distinctly Southeast Asian idiom. This shared ideological vocabulary, reflected in what Brown describes as the "Indian mirror", informed the network of historical, cultural and political relationships that supported Southeast Asian *mandala*s. It is this commonality, based on region-wide pre-existing cultural dispositions towards the adoption and localised adaptation of Indian models, that allows intra-regional comparisons to be made.

Brown's study of the Dvaravati *cakra*s reveals the value of turning to nearby polities by showing how such evidence can produce both interesting and surprising results. Given his important findings regarding cultural sharings between the Dvaravati and Khmer *mandala*s, even though one was Theravada Buddhist and the other Hindu (in the period that interests us), it is not inconceivable that equally significant affinities may be found with polities to the west of Dvaravati that shared its religious beliefs.

The most likely candidate is Arakan. In her study of ancient Arakan, Pamela Gutman drew upon archaeological evidence to note strong similarities between two Dvaravati stone plaques and an object which, she suggests, played a central and very specific role within the *abhiseka* ritual of the Arakanese *mandala*.[24] Let us begin, therefore, with the Arakanese evidence.

The Arakanese plaque, some 17cm square and 12cm high, is decorated with twelve symbols, each of which, Gutman suggests, represents an aspect of divine power which had specific application within the context of legitimation of kingship.[25] The plaque was

[22] Brown, *The Dvaravati Wheels*, p. 188. This is a claim made repeatedly throughout his study, a finding consistent with his previously published work on Southeast Asian *linga* and Ganesa, Visnu and Buddha figures ("Ganesa in Southeast Asian Art: Indian Connections and Indigenous Developments", in *Ganesh: Studies of an Asian God*, ed. Brown (Albany, 1991), p. 171–99 and "Indian Art Transformed: The Earliest Sculptural Styles of Southeast Asia", in *Indian Art and Archaeology*, eds. Ellen M. Raven and Karel R. Van Kooij (Leiden, 1992), pp. 40–53). As he comments of the Ganesa figures, "[t]hese Southeast Asian objects shared more characteristics among themselves than they do with any Indian prototypes and formed the shared seed from which the later regional Southeast Asian styles grew." ("Ganesa", p. 172).

[23] Brown, *The Dvaravati Wheels*, p. 52.

[24] Pamela Gutman, *Ancient Arakan with Special Reference to its Cultural History between the 5th and 11th Centuries*, Doctoral thesis, Australian National University, 1976, p. 295ff.

[25] The symbolic meanings of the objects depicted on the plaque – the *purna kalasa*, *chattra*, *ankusa*, bull, *dhvaja-stambha*, *sankha*, fly whisks, peacock, deer, *srivatsa*, pair of fishes and *hamsa* – and their relevance in the Arakanese *mandala* are discussed in detail by Gutman, *Ancient Arakan*, pp. 298 -310.

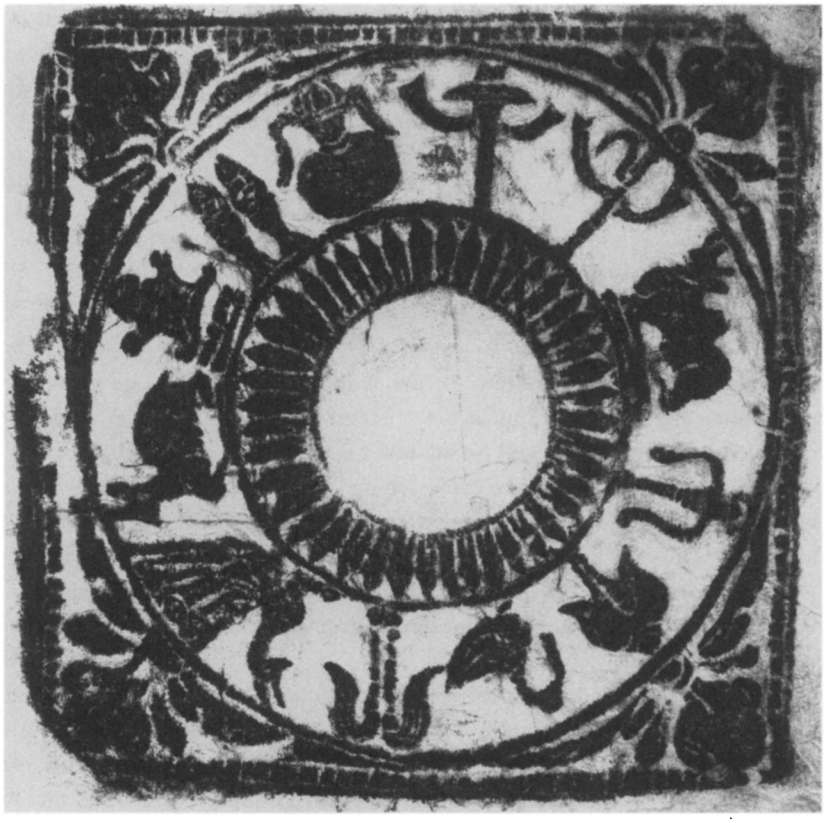

Fig. 1 Arakanese abhiseka plaque (Mrohaung Museum)

uncovered with a small bronze round-based jar which Gutman identifies as a lustration vessel, noting that it fits within the small depression in the centre of the plaque.[26] The symbolic meaning of the plaque, she suggests, is closely related to the *cakravartin* concept, in which the anointed ruler claimed not only possession of his own kingdom, but also status as a universal ruler.[27] If the plaque did play a central role in the *abhiseka* ritual, it is likely symbolically to have represented the macrocosm in relation to which the *mandala* stood as its microcosmic reflection. The vessel at its centre would then, metaphorically speaking, have been located at the centre of the universe. When anointed with its waters, the ruler would have been considered to assume the qualities of the symbols surrounding the vessel, and thus become a universal ruler, or *cakravartin*.[28]

Importantly, the form of the vessel (*purnaghata*) echoes the *kalasa* depicted on the plaque. It has particular significance as symbolising abundance, fertility and prosperity. That the elite of the Dvaravati *mandala* also were familiar with the iconography of the *purnaghata* is evident from its inclusion amongst the symbols depicted on at least one of the Dvaravati

[26] *Ibid.*, p. 295.
[27] *Ibid.*, p. 296.
[28] *Ibid.*, p. 298.

Fig. 2 Dvaravati abhiseka plaque (National Museum, Bangkok). *Courtesy of The Siam Society*

plaques,[29] and also on a Dvaravati silver medal.[30] The vessel, as it appears on these objects, closely resembles both the Arakanese bronze vessel and the images of the *kalasa* on the Arakanese plaque, not only in form, but also in decoration, each being depicted with rings around the vessel's neck.

The significance of the *purnaghata* on the plaques is best understood when the importance of the *abhiseka* ceremony is considered. The performance of the *abhiseka* ceremony was the most powerful ritual of legitimation available to a leader to reinforce his claim to kingship over the *mandala*,[31] for according to the *Rajadhiraja Vilasini*, " 'One who is not inaugurated . . . does not acquire the kingly powers' ".[32] By enacting the ritual, the king assumed not only these kingly powers, but also the responsibility of providing for the

[29] J. J. Boeles, "The King of Sri Dvaravati and his Regalia", *Journal of the Siam Society*, LII, (1964), p. 103. The other plaque does not include the vegetation and so, Boeles concludes, cannot necessarily be read as a *mangalakalasa* but as a *kumbha* (p. 105).

[30] Gutman notes that symbols on the Arakanese plaques are also found on medals in Arakan and Burma (Gutman, *Ancient Arakan*, p. 295).

[31] Aung-Thwin, *Pagan*, p. 51 and Michael Aung-Thwin, "Divinity, Spirit, and Human: Conceptions of Classical Burmese kingship", in *Centres, Symbols and Hierarchies: Essays on the Classical States of Southeast Asia*, ed. Lorraine Gesick (Yale, 1983), p. 69. Its importance is underscored by Quaritch Wales who describes the ceremony as "the highest degree of consecration that could be reached by a Siamese king during his lifetime" (*The Universe Around Them*, pp. 153–4).

[32] Aung-Thwin, "Divinity, Spirit", p. 66. The importance of the *abhiseka* in Thailand is highlighted by the fact that the ceremony was (when King Prajadhipok was crowned in 1926) perceived as the anointment of an "emperor" rather than an "ordinary king". H. G. Quaritch Wales, *Siamese State Ceremonies: Their History and Function* (London, 1931), p. 70. This would tend to suggest that either Lyons' dismissal of the Dvaravati court for which one of the plaques was made underestimated its importance, or that a minor leader was making a very strong statement of his ambitions to dominance.

prosperity of the *mandala*, as symbolised by the *purnaghata*. According to Gutman's reading of the plaques, at the pivotal moment of the *abhiseka* ritual, water from the *kalasa* vessel at the centre of the macrocosm symbolized by the plaque was used to anoint the ruler at the centre of the microcosmic *mandala*: "the 'vase of plenty' inaugurated the 'man of plenty' ".[33]

The most thorough treatment of the Dvaravati plaques is that of Boeles in his 1964 article. Like Gutman, he identifies the form of the plaques as reflecting that of a *mandala* and believes that the symbols refer to the royal regalia. His interpretation differs from Gutman's, however, in his conclusion that the object is a toilet tray created for the king's use,[34] the central depression being used to hold toilet powder.[35] For Boeles then, the plaque was a relatively minor ritual object.

In coming to this conclusion, Boeles refers to the inclusion of the Gaja-Laksmi grouping amongst the various symbols. This grouping depicting the *abhiseka* of Laksmi was frequently employed by Dvaravati artisans,[36] although its meaning has been disputed.[37] Boeles favours the identification of the female figure as Laksmi in her role as (Sri who is associated with wealth and beauty). This interpretation, he reasons, is an appropriate one by which to read the iconographic decoration of an object created purposely "to beautify its user".[38]

Laksmi, however, has other identities that support Gutman's interpretation of the plaques. While she is certainly associated with beauty, she is also the consort of Visnu, the heavenly king, and thus is also associated with royal authority and kingly might. More importantly, however, she is associated with fertility and prosperity for both the ruler and ruled.

Gutman's reading of the Arakanese plaque's association with the *abhiseka* ritual provides us with fascinating implications for the Dvaravati *mandala*. Although we have no records of a Dvaravati coronation, Mon influence was obviously significant in upper Burma, and has been detected also in Thai court rituals in which, significantly, the *abhiseka* plays a part.[39]

[33] Aung-Thwin, "Heaven, Earth", p. 97.

[34] Boeles, "king", p. 107. Boeles notes that he reaches this conclusion based on the identification made by Van Lohuizen de Leeuw (p. 114).

[35] Boeles, "king", p. 104. A number of other scholars have suggested uses for these intriguing objects. Quaritch Wales concurs with Boeles's reading of the plaques as toilet trays, noting that some elements of the regalia are still in use by the Thai monarchy. The symbolism of the *mandala*, he suggests, would have meant that "the use of this tray would automatically assure by magical means the king's maintaining his proper position at the cosmic centre" (*Dvaravati: The Earliest Kingdom*, pp. 48–49). Like Boeles, Elizabeth Lyons also interprets the objects as symbolising a *mandala*, but suggests instead that their most probable use was in association with investiture (p. 358). Caption details for the reproduction of the National Museum, Bangkok, object given in Maud Girard-Geslan's comprehensive survey, *Art of Southeast Asia*, describe it as a " '[m]ake-up palette' or, more probably, tablet used for a foundation deposit" (*Art of Southeast Asia* (New York, 1998), fig. 315, p. 601) while Boisselier refers to them as "curious sculptured palettes and cupped tablets whose function is still a matter of conjecture" (*The Heritage of Thai Sculpture* (New York, 1975), p. 66).

[36] Boisselier, p. 92.

[37] Boeles. Foucher has suggested that the Indian images associated with this iconography should be interpreted as symbolising the Buddha's birth, the elephants anointing the female as part of the *bodhisattva-abhiseka* p. 104. Margaret Stutley, *Hindu Iconography* (London, 1985). According to the logic of this interpretation rests in the observation that Laksmi seems to have been the iconographic model for depictions of Maya, the Buddha's mother, p. 78, and that similarities between the two can make correct identification difficult, pp. 44–45. Foucher's thesis, however, has not been widely adopted.

[38] Boeles, "king", p. 105. He does not totally reject Foucher's thesis, however, noting that one of the trays depicts a tree, perhaps signifying the grove in which the Buddha was born.

[39] P. Amara Thera, "The Influences of Indian Culture in Thailand", in *Researches in Indian History, Archaeology, Art and Religion*, I, eds. G. Kuppuram and K. Kumudamani, (Delhi, 1990), p. 177. There are strong links between the later Thai coronations and those of the early polities. Quaritch Wales, *Siamese State Ceremonies*, p. 85. More

That the Dvaravati and the Arakanese plaques exhibit a high degree of similarity in their forms and their iconographic devices is clear. If Gutman's reading of the purpose of the plaque is accepted, then we would appear to have evidence of the sharing of at least one significant ritual practice between Dvaravati and another *mandala*.

Michael Aung-Thwin pushes his interpretation of Gutman's findings a step further. Accepting her reading of the plaques in *mandala* terms, as symbols of a macrocosmic geography, Aung-Thwin has proposed a further layer of meaning that narrows the symbolic import of the plaques into sharper focus. By turning to Burmese inscriptions and chronicles which describe the *abhiseka* rituals,[40] Aung-Thwin concludes that the plaque connects in a similar way to the city at the centre: "The capital city, which was a microcosm itself, had its own microcosm: the abhiseka plaque".[41]

Rulers sought to recreate the order of the macrocosmos in cities that were its architectural and civic microcosmic reflection. To ensure prosperous and harmonious rule, the cities became exemplary centres, their sacrality created and maintained by the presence of the legitimate king.[42] As Aung-Thwin explains,

> The pre-colonial Burmese capital city symbolized sacred space, acted as the custodian of sacred time, and was the reservoir of sacred energy. . . . [A]s a microcosm of Tavatimsa, the most cherished of the various Buddha 'heavens', the city became, by extension, the ordered universe itself, a *mandala* essentially.[43]

Given these beliefs, the *abhiseka* took on particular significance as the ritual which legitimised a king's claim to the right to rule the earthly Tavatimsa, for it was only after the *abhiseka* had been enacted that the ruler was able to take possession of the centre by ritual circumambulation.[44] As the centre represented the geographical and political *mandala* in its entirety, which in turn was representative of the macrocosmos (in particular Tavatimsa), the leader consecrated by the *abhiseka* was "the center of power in all senses of the term: political, economic, spiritual, cultural, supernatural".[45] The *abhiseka* ceremony confirmed the status of the centre – the palace and city – as the power conduit between the microcosmos and macrocosmos. Once the city was sanctified and the leader legitimised through the *abhiseka* ritual, the city became an exemplary centre, a temporal counterpart of the Tavatimsa heaven, and the ruler could then properly assume the throne as a *cakravartin*, a world-conqueror, and thus a *bodhisattva*, or Buddha-to-be.

The chronicles Aung-Thwin cites present us with fascinating descriptions of the Burmese rituals enacted as part of the *abhiseka* – fascinating because we detect in them what may be a tantalising clue as to the iconographical meaning of the so-called "Buddha on a monster" stelae. By turning to the accounts of Burmese coronation rituals we may discover a coincidence in symbolic meaning that more clearly explains the likely significance of

recently, King Prajadhipok's 1926 coronation included the *abhiseka*, although by this time the emphasis of the ceremony had shifted from the anointment to the moment of crowning. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

[40] Aung-Thwin, "Divinity, Spirit", p. 67.

[41] Aung-Thwin, "Heaven, Earth", p. 96. See also Aung-Thwin, *Pagan*, p. 51, and Aung-Thwin, "Divinity, Spirit", p. 69.

[42] Aung-Thwin, "Heaven, Earth", p. 90.

[43] *Ibid.*, p. 94.

[44] *Ibid.*, p. 95.

[45] *Ibid.*, p. 101.

these objects as important devices for the legitimation of kingly rule within a specifically Southeast Asian context.

The "Buddha on a monster" stelae

As Aung-Thwin tells us, the earliest account of a Burmese *abhiseka* ceremony is that of the eleventh-century coronation of King Kalancacsa, an event deeply influenced by Mon court ritual. The inscription in question is, however, in too poor a condition to provide complete information, although enough is intact to suggest that the rites associated with this eleventh-century coronation conformed closely (perhaps even identically) with later practice, about which we possess more detailed records.[46] What these records suggest is that during Burmese coronation ceremonies the king was seated on a lotus-shaped throne made of wood from the *bodhi* tree[47] – clearly he is symbolically identified with the Buddha, the ascension to the throne being depicted as the earthly parallel of spiritual enlightenment[48] – " 'flanked' (so the chronicler wrote) by Brahma on the right and Sakka [Indra] on the left".[49]

The presence of Indra and Brahma is similarly connected with a number of coronations described in the eighteenth-century *Hman-nàn ya-zawin* (Glass Palace Chronicle) which is an amalgamation, with commentary, of a number of earlier chronicles, including the *Maha-ya-zawin-gyi* (Great Chronicle).[50] For instance, the installation of Dhajaraja, a founder of Tagaung (Thaton) is described as follows:

> . . . he took possession of the palace with the pomp of kings of exceeding majesty, opened the noble door leading to the coronation throne, assumed the title of Thado Jambudipa Dhajaraja, observed a great *thingyan* ceremony, and was anointed king . . . When the thingyan was completed the king ascended the palace, with Brahma and the Naga king on the right, Sakra and Pajjunna on the left. . .[51]

And here is the coronation of Pyusawhti (fl.167–242AD):

[46] Aung-Thwin, *Pagan*, pp. 49–50. Aung-Thwin has turned to the 1633 coronation of King Thalun as described in U Kala's *Maha-ya-zawin-gyi* (*Great Chronicle* 1730), the 1649 *Rajamanicula* Inscription regarding Na Thap Dayaka's *abhiseka*, and the *Twin-thin Taik-wun* (*New Chronicle* late 18th century) for more precise details of the ceremony.

[47] Aung-Thwin, "Heaven, Earth", p. 95. Elsewhere Aung-Thwin describes the king sitting on a throne made from the Bodhi tree which is decorated with painted lotus flowers ("Divinity, Spirit", p. 67 and *Pagan*, p. 50). A. B. Griswold, Introduction to *Monuments of the Buddha in Siam*, Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, rev. ed., (Bangkok, 1973), p. 10. Griswold assumes that cuttings from the bodhi tree had also been sent to Dvaravati.

[48] Aung-Thwin, "Divinity, Spirit", p. 68; Aung-Thwin, "Heaven, Earth", p. 95; and Aung-Thwin, *Pagan*, p. 51.

[49] Aung-Thwin, "Divinity, Spirit", p. 67. See also Aung-Thwin, "Heaven, Earth", p. 95; and Aung-Thwin, *Pagan*, p. 51.

[50] Although it is acknowledged that the use of later sources in describing earlier societies does have some pitfalls, and the implication of a "timeless" East should be avoided, such evidence can be of value, particularly when it is considered that, at least in the case of Burma, institutional organisation from the ninth to nineteenth centuries has been found to display "remarkable continuity" (Aung-Thwin. "Divinity, Spirit", p. 45). Aung-Thwin continues "[c]onceptions of order and disorder; of legitimacy, authority, and justice; of history, time, man, and salvation did not change; neither did the larger structures to which these conceptions were attached and in which they were embedded. . . . There were indeed changes in Burmese history, but they did not transform whole institutions . . . The principles, character, function – the essence of these institutions – persisted" pp. 45–6.

[51] Pe Maung Tin and G. H. Luce, trans., *The Glass Palace Chronicle of the Kings of Burma* (Rangoon, 1960), p. 4–5.

Fig. 3 "Buddha on a monster" stele (National Museum, Bangkok). *Photograph Robert L. Brown*

> When Pyuminhti ascended the throne, Brahma on the right and Sakra on the left lifted him by the hand and set him on the throne. He caused spirit drums and harps and trumpets to sound, what time [sic] he mounted the throne and was anointed king.[52]

While we would not propose that the *abhiseka* ceremony of one of the founders of Tagaung necessarily followed the procedure described in the passage above, its inclusion in

[52] Pe Maung Tin and Luce, *The Glass Palace Chronicle*, p. 40. The inauguration of Dwattabaung (fl. 443–373BC) was also undertaken with the involvement of Sakka: "When thus the labour of the city and the palace were fulfilled Sakra lifted king Dwattabaung by the hand to the golden throne, and he was anointed king", p. 15.

Fig. 4 "Buddha on a monster" stele (National Museum, Nakhon Pathom).
Photograph Robert L. Brown

the *Hman-nàn ya-zawin* would suggest that the presence of Brahma and Indra was considered to have been of longstanding importance when the chronicles were first committed to writing. What we may have here is the key to interpreting the Dvaravati images; that is, as objects depicting, in symbolic terms, the ritual of royal coronation.

Whether the rulers in Dvaravati followed a comparable ritual practice is, of course, impossible to determine, although the similarities in the Arakanese and Dvaravati *abhiseka* plaques seems to suggest they may well have done so. The Burmese evidence provides stronger support. Even in more recent Thai coronation ceremonies we find traces of

Burmese and Mon ritual practice. Quaritch Wales's description of the 1926 coronation ceremonies of King Prajadhipok gives an account of the circumambulation of the city during which the official party was flanked to the left by eight representatives of Brahma and to the right by eight representatives of Indra, accompanied by drummers and umbrella bearers.[53]

Numerous scholars have made connections between the stelae and the Buddha's Descent from Tavatimsa, a likely interpretation if the figures are, as generally supposed, Indra and Brahma, and given that the Buddha is frequently performing the double-handed *vitarka-mudra*, which is closely associated with this event.[54] The double-handed *vitarkamudra* is also characteristic of the majority of Dvaravati Buddha figures, so it would seem that the Descent was a favourite subject of Dvaravati sculptors.[55]

What has confused scholars regarding the depiction in the Dvaravati stelae, however, is the absence of the crystal ladder on which, according to the scriptures, the Buddha and his companions descended to earth. This absence may perhaps be explained if the stelae are interpreted not as an accurate depiction of the Descent, but as referring to an important ritual which itself symbolised the Buddha's return to earth. In other words, the stelae may not signify the Descent itself, but the *abhiseka* ritual's analogous enactment of the Descent to legitimise and confirm the right of the king to occupy the centre of the *mandala* by virtue of the quality of his *karma*.

The Buddha's Descent from Tavatimsa was clearly an event of great importance to Dvaravati, given the frequency with which it is depicted or implicated in the sculptural assemblages associated with the legitimation of political power, and the echo of it was also apparent in coronation rituals which enacted in the temporal world the symbolic moment that the Dvaravati images depict. Both ritual and image drew the connection between the *karma* necessary for the *bodhisattva* to enter the Tavatimsa heaven in order to descend to become a Buddha, and, in the case of the king, the *karma* necessary to assume the throne, potentially to become either Maitreya or a *cakravartin*. But there is another connection to make, for Indra was "Lord of Tavatimsa" (the macrocosm) and Burmese kings (and surely Mon too) were, through their coronations, "Sakka [Indra] on earth" (the microcosm).[56] Thus the Descent could be interpreted, by those who viewed the iconography, as Buddha descending to install the king upon his throne. In either event, the Descent would have legitimised royal power through symbolic identity, or association, of the king with the macrocosmic ruler of the Tavatimsa heaven.

It is the Tavatimsa iconography, as we have seen, that in relating the *abhiseka* plaques to the stelae allows us to use the Burmese coronations as a decoder for the stelae. When we do

[53] Quaritch Wales, *Siamese State Ceremonies*, p. 108. That the king is accompanied by far more figures than the Burmese description, might perhaps indicate that the importance of the presence of Brahma and Indra may have been somewhat diminished in the contemporary Thai coronation ritual, but this is not the only feature of the ceremony to have suffered from a shift in emphasis since the earliest adoption and adaptation of Indian coronation practices. As has been noted earlier, the *abhiseka* itself, once the most important aspect of the coronation ceremony, has taken a secondary role to the moment of crowning, p. 70.

[54] Griswold, "The Architecture", p. 44. Griswold notes that the *mudra* has been associated with the Descent "[s]ince the 19th century at least, and perhaps far earlier . . . It is generally believed that in Dvaravati art it had the same significance. . ." although he cautions that this is speculative in some cases.

[55] Brown, *The Dvaravati Wheels*, p. 82, n. 52. Here Brown notes the frequency of Dvaravati depictions of the Sravasti Miracles and of the Buddha preaching to his mother in Indra's Heaven.

[56] Aung-Thwin, "Heaven, Earth", pp. 94–5.

this, the stelae emerge as crucial signifiers of the ideological power which the ruler at the exemplary centre assumed because he had correctly performed the *abhiseka* coronation, and so could represent himself, through Kama, as endowed as *cakravartin*, or as Indra ruling his earthly Tavatimsa.

The significance of the Buddha, Indra and Brahma as represented on the stelae can be explained, therefore, as symbolically alluding to the performance of the *abhiseka* which established the ruler's rightful assumption of power at the exemplary centre of the *mandala*. But what of the "monster"? This too, we suggest, can be explained in terms of a ruler's claim to legitimacy.

There appear to be two types of "monster" depicted in the stelae. The first is most commonly interpreted as Panasbati, a conflation of the vehicles of Visnu, Siva and Brahma, or sometimes as Brahmaspati, a combination of the bird and bull vehicles which Quaritch Wales describes as "a peculiarly Dvaravati conception".[57] The format of the stelae – the Buddha standing on the "monster" with Indra and Brahma in secondary roles as attendants – has been interpreted as a statement of the supremacy of Buddhism over Hinduism within the Dvaravati polity.[58] The divisions between philosophies, however, were never clear-cut, especially in Southeast Asia. Certainly, from the material remains in the Dvaravati style Buddhism appears to have been the dominant religion, but the sites have also yielded an impressive number of Hindu, predominantly Vaishnavite, objects.

Attempts to ascribe one era or region to Buddhist domination, another to Hindu (a frequent means for categorising mainland Southeast Asian polities), can lead to errors of interpretation implying that the philosophies suddenly "supplanted" one another when changes in dynastic allegiance or regional power occurred. Such differentiation was hardly characteristic of Dvaravati which appears to have displayed a great deal of eclecticism in its appropriation of religious practices and beliefs. The objects uncovered in the various centres, whether Buddhist or Hindu in character, cannot be interpreted sequentially,[59] for the archaeological evidence supports simultaneous worship which cannot be supposed to have been mutually exclusive.[60]

This tendency illustrates a "blurring" of categories that can be found in a number of aspects of the Southeast Asian *mandala*. In his study of the region's artefacts, Brown has found that

> standard categories used to discuss seventh and eighth century Thailand and Cambodia – Buddhist vs. Hindu religion, Mon vs. Khmer culture and geography, Dvaravati vs. pre-Angkor art – often merge and blend. . . . Life, and the art it produces, are part of a constantly changing process in which categories shift, overlap, and merge. . .[61]

Certainly, the *abhiseka* as described in the Burmese Chronicles was a mixture of Hindu and Buddhist belief and practice. As Yi Yi remarks in his description of the inauguration of Mindon in 1857,

[57] Quaritch Wales, *Dvaravati: The Earliest Kingdom*, p. 44.

[58] Lyons, "Dvaravah", p. 357; Steve Van Beek and Luca Invernizzi Tettoni, *The Arts of Thailand* (London, 1991), p. 68; and Diskul, p. 3.

[59] Brown, *The Dvaravati Wheels*, p. 35.

[60] *Ibid.*, p. 27. See also K. D. Bajpai, "South-East Asian Sculpture as a Source", in *Indian Civilization: The First Phase (Problems of a Sourcebook)*, ed. S. C. Malik (Simla, 1971), p. 256.

[61] Brown, *The Dvaravati Wheels*, p. xxix.

> I use the word 'Indian' because the ideas borrowed were neither purely Hindu nor Buddhist but a mixture of true Hindu rituals together with Hindu influenced Buddhist ideas, Hindu ceremonies modified to suit Buddhist needs and purely Buddhist theories.[62]

A strict definition of the role each religious system played within the *mandala* cannot be made in an environment in which "religion dominated everything":[63] the enactment of ritual, the ownership or commissioning of important objects and the possession of sacred texts all played a part in confirming the legitimacy of the king at the centre. The secular act of coronation was implicitly and fundamentally linked to larger cosmological principles, the harmonious equivalence between Tavatimsa and its earthly "mirror", the capital city, being of critical importance to a king seeking to legitimise his rule. What this suggests is that, in the highly competitive political environment of the Southeast Asian *mandala*, leaders seized upon any source of ideological or symbolic power that had the potential to legitimise and endorse their rule. Although Buddhism was dominant in Dvaravati, all avenues of legitimation were pursued which led to a complex interweaving of aspects of Buddhism and Hinduism, reflected in the rituals enacted and objects created to support and maintain royal power.

It is in the light of the apparently compatible coexistence of Buddhism and Hinduism that the "monster" vehicle should be read: the Buddha is not so much holding the "monster" down, rather the "monster" is holding the Buddha up.[64] The ruler, who was identified with the Buddha through the enactment of the *abhiseka*, was also able to draw on the powers of those Hindu deities whose vehicles he thereby appropriated to descend from Tavatimsa. Hinduism as much as Buddhism confirmed and supported the power of the ruler of the Dvaravati *mandala*.

The "monster", when depicted as Garuda or Surya, may similarly be interpreted with reference to an astute leader's adoption of Hindu iconographical devices to support the legitimacy of his rule. As has already been observed, the Dvaravati Hindu objects are predominantly images of Visnu. The occasional depiction of Garuda, then, should not be surprising, though Garuda's identity as the sunbird may suggest that rulers also drew upon earlier, non-Indian belief systems to legitimate their power, for symbols are multivalent.

Brown has suggested that the depiction of Garuda or Surya on a number of the stelae may be a reference to a pre-Indian belief system, indigenous to the region, which privileged a solar deity.[65] When reading the stelae as reinforcing legitimacy, his hypothesis that "[i]t appears that some local association between the Buddha and the sun is being made"[66] is an interesting and highly suggestive one.

Brown's interpretation serves to take the spotlight off India and focus it more locally, eschewing explanations derived from attempting to understand the objects as "somehow in

[62] Yi Yi, "Life at the Burmese Court under the Konbaung Kings", *Journal of the Burmese Research Society*, XLIV, (1961), p. 85. See also San Shwe Bu, "The Coronation of King Datha-Raja (1153–1165 AD)", *Journal of the Burmese Research Society*, VII (1917), pp. 181–4.

[63] Luce quoted in Tambiah, *World Conqueror*, p. 83. See also Hall, p. 12. As Hall observes, it is "not always easy to draw a clear dividing line" between the two belief systems.

[64] Brown has similarly interpreted the Phra Ngam cave relief in which the Buddha is depicted with Siva and Visnu whose deportment and position indicate that the artisan had intended to show that the deities were part of "a hierarchy and not in terms of the Buddha as absolutely preeminent" (*The Dvaravati Wheels*, pp. 30–1).

[65] Brown, " 'Rules' for change", p. 18ff.

[66] *Ibid.*, p. 19.

relationship to the Indian evidence" (of which there is none), and instead suggesting that the objects reflect pre-existing belief systems which were never far below the "veneer", as Van Leur described it, of imported Indian concepts.[67] Such connections, however, must remain tenuous while local beliefs are little known and so provide little positive evidence.

While there is no direct evidence of a local and earlier belief in a solar deity, however, references to the sun do appear to have influenced the iconographical and stylistic choices made by Southeast Asian artisans, in addition to those already suggested in connection with the Dvaravati "Buddha on a monster" stelae. In his study of the Dvaravati *dharmacakra-stambhas*, Brown cites at least two instances in which the sun seems to have been included as a decorative element in Southeast Asian sculptural forms.

The first he draws from Ma Tuan-lin's descriptions of the audience halls of two seventh-century Southeast Asian polities (Khmer and Ch'ih-t'u, somewhere on the Malay peninsular) which featured discs with (sun?) rays above the rulers' thrones. Although Brown concedes that Dvaravati is not mentioned in Ma Tuan-lin's account, he suggests, not unreasonably, that "it is tempting to think that the practices in these seventh-century neighbouring countries could reflect practices in Dvaravati as well".[68]

A further example of the use of the sun as a design element may be found in the felly-edge patterns of the Dvaravati *cakras*. These, Brown argues, may be interpreted as "flame-like" although whether the patterns actually do represent flames is open to conjecture. As Brown remarks,

> . . . it is largely a guess that the tongue-and-split-curls motif represents flames at all on the Dvaravati *cakras*. Still, flames are . . . appropriate to the meaning of the *dharmacakra*. The Indian *dharmacakra* is replete with solar implications of which the Dvaravati, largely through texts and monks, were, I think, aware. Based upon the appropriateness of this symbolism, the flame-like form of the patterns chosen, and the possible relation of the felly-edge patterns to the flames on halos [sic], I think it most likely that the Dvaravati artist intended the felly-edge pattern to represent flames.[69]

The inclusion of Garuda or Surya on a number of the stelae is not the only reference to the sun that these objects include. As Brown observes, the Buddha depicted in the stelae is not always performing the *vitarkamudra*, as is generally suggested, but often the double-handed *katakahastamudra*, a *mudra* which Brown does not believe relates to any episodes from the Buddha's life, and which he has only seen in connection with images of Surya.[70]

[67] Brown, *The Dvaravati Wheels*, p. 185 and p. xxviii, n. 42. An important issue for any discussion of Indian influence in Southeast Asia is the application of the term "indigenous". Where the term is used to describe pre-Indian objects, there is the implication that "indigenous" practices stopped with the advent of Indianization. A further complication is the use of the term "localised". As Brown notes, "indigenous" can also be used to mean "local", but when it is used in the context of the process of "localisation", it takes on the "pre-Indian" meaning with the implication of a suspended culture. Such readings may imply, erroneously, that the eventual re-emergence of "indigenous" forms was a regressive step and a degeneration of the Southeast Asian sculptural vernacular; for example, see Quaritch Wales' introduction to his publication *The Making of Greater India* (London, 1961), pp. 1–31, reworked in his introduction to *The Indianization of China and of South-East Asia* (London, 1967), pp. xi–xxv.

[68] Brown, *The Dvaravati Wheels*, p. 184.

[69] *Ibid.*, p. 173.

[70] Brown, "'Rules' for change", p. 18ff. See also the comments of Professor D. K. Donhanian regarding the *vitarkamudra* and *katakamudra* as quoted in A. B. Griswold, "Imported Images and the Nature of Copying in the

Certainly, the *mudra* does appear to be very similar to that performed by a number of Dvaravati Surya figures.[71]

If the "Buddha on a monster" stelae do refer back to pre-existing beliefs in a solar deity, Aung-Thwin's observation that, in Burma at least, ritual and practices were marked by continuity is of particular interest. Turning once more to the Mon-Burmese evidence, we find a strong thread running through the legitimising aspect of the chronicles as royal regalia in the emphasis placed on tracing dynastic lineages back to the solar dynasty through the first king, Mahasamanta.

The assertion of direct lineage was frequently used as a device of legitimation to mask dynastic change or rupture through a veneer of seamless succession. Both the Burmese rulers, whose coronation ceremonies we have used as the decoding tool for our interpretation of the stelae, and the Siamese kings, of whose early coronation ceremonies we know comparatively little, adopted the imported practice of tracing their lineage in their respective chronicles back to the solar dynasty.

Read in this context, the inclusion of Garuda or Surya in the "Buddha on a monster" stelae takes on additional significance, suggesting that the ruler may have drawn legitimation not only from the Buddhist notion of the *cakravartin* and his ability to draw upon the powers of Hindu deities, but also through symbolism that harked back to an even older stratum of belief and ritual.

A further aspect of the stelae, although one that is yet to be conclusively proved, which offers fascinating implications as to their meaning and purpose is the suggestion that they were linked in some way to the *cakras*.[72] A number of the stelae have holes drilled in them and some feature tenon-like projections from their backs which could perhaps have allowed them to be attached to the hubs of the *cakras* which also have drilled or carved holes. Brown further observes that a terracotta Dvaravati votive tablet depicting the Sravasti miracles show *cakras* with "clearly prominent forms on their hubs" which he suggests could be interpreted as attachments.[73] The stelae/*cakra* combination is yet to be proved, however, as Brown notes that an attempt by students at Silpakorn University, under the supervision of M. C. Subhadradis Diskul, to match the extant stelae and *cakras* was unsuccessful.[74] The hypothesis, though, is compelling, the implication of such an arrangement being that these amalgamated objects perhaps functioned as "signposts" of Dvaravati power in the manner of the Asokan pillars.[75]

Art of Siam", in *Essays Offered to G. H. Luce by his Colleagues and Friends in Honour of his Seventy-Fifth Birthday*, II, Ba Shin, Jean Boisselier, and A. B. Griswold (Ascona, 1966), p. 66, n. 78.

[71] The *mudra* is performed in a number of instances by both those Surya figures which act as the "monster" vehicle and those which support the *dharmacakras*.

[72] Brown, *The Dvaravati Wheels*, p. 82.

[73] *Ibid.*

[74] *Ibid.*

[75] This makes clear the propagandist possibilities of the imagery, possibilities that had previously been recognised and effectively exploited by Asoka who was considered in Southeast Asia as the ideal king whom any ruler should seek to emulate. Andaya, p. 5. Asoka's use of imagery on his edicts regarding *ahimsa* used the various symbolic meanings of the figures depicted, adopting them to suit the content of the edicts. Stella Kramrisch, "Artist, Patron, and Public in India" in *Exploring India's Sacred Art: Selected Writings of Stella Kramrisch*, ed. Barbara Stoler Miller (Philadelphia, 1983), p. 57.

Concluding Remarks

The *abhiseka* plaques, as we have seen, played a central role in the ritual of coronation itself; but what role did the "Buddha on a monster" stelae play? It seems possible, though their geographic provenance is too imprecise to provide firm evidence, that the stelae figured in rituals not just at the exemplary centre, but in more peripheral regions making up the Dvaravati *mandala*. More likely is that they functioned in the "multiple consecration" or "periodical anointing" of a king performed to reinforce his claim to the throne.[76] In either case, the stelae would have served a commemorative purpose, reminding regional rulers of the power of the king legitimised through his coronation.

That the "Buddha on a monster" stelae served as potent signifiers of a king's right to rule constitutes our principal interpretive claim, though their potency would appear to have been effective only within the Dvaravati context. The fact that these symbolic statements did not outlast the Dvaravati polity, which left a not insubstantial cultural legacy, can be explained, however, by the subsequent pre-eminence of the Khmer empire.

The "Buddha on a monster" stelae (and in all probability a number of other legitimising practices) would have served their purpose where no more effective or more powerful tools of legitimation were available. The eventual overthrow of the Dvaravati *mandala* by their Khmer neighbours, however, brought a new system of ritual endorsement to the region. The Shaivite Khmer, with their sophisticated rituals of legitimation and superior systems of political administration, would have had little reason to adopt the local Mon practices.[77] The "Buddha on a monster" iconography, then, was perhaps too specific in its purpose to survive, and while Dvaravati influence can be detected in aspects of later Southeast Asian sculptural, architectural and ritual practices, the stelae themselves were supplanted by other, more effective tools of legitimation. Indeed, it may have been the threat to the Dvaravati *mandala* from Khmer expansion that prompted the emergence of the stelae in the first place.

The adoption of a particular iconography in times of political upheaval is not a unique occurrence in the Southeast Asian context, and just such a stimulus may explain the large number of Pyu images of Maitreya that are attributable to the late-ninth century. The Pyus at this time were also under threat from encroaching forces and Pamela Gutman has suggested that under such conditions, the Messianic aspects of belief in a future Buddha would have had considerable appeal, particularly as *mandala* rulers often claimed to be *bodhisattva*s themselves.[78]

Commenting generally on the Dvaravati imagery, Pierre Dupont has expressed surprise that an era of which so little is known historically should have been so artistically prolific: "it seems curious, in a way, to see that a historical period as obscure as the VIIIth century is

[76] Sachchidanand Sahai, "The Royal Consecration (Abhiseka) in Ancient Cambodia", *The South Asian Review*, 32, 1 & 2 (1997), p. 7.

[77] Nai Pan Hla, ed. and trans., and Ryuji Okudaira, collab., *Eleven Mon Dhammasat Texts* (Tokyo, 1992), p. xvi. A similar conclusion has been drawn in the case of the Burmese Mons. Nai Pan Hla has suggested that the annexation of Thaton and the removal of the Mon population to Pagan was prompted by Aniruddha's wish to preserve the Buddhist *Pitaka* in the face of the Khmer threat.

[78] Pamela Gutman, "The Pyu Maitreyas", in *Traditions in Current Perspective: Proceedings of the Conference on Myanmar and Southeast Asian Studies 15–17 November 1995, Yangon* (Yangon, 1996), pp. 166–7.

archaeologically marked by a large number of monuments."[79] But as Brown remarks of this observation, it is a "curious idea that unless we know a period's history, there should be little art produced".[80] Such a conclusion, he suggests, may have been premised on the "common sense" assumption that few artistic works would have been produced in times of political upheaval when it may be supposed that resources would be more pragmatically applied to supporting warfare and programmes of political consolidation.[81]

In the Southeast Asian context, in particular, such assumptions do not hold true, for the creation of works of art, far from being an indulgence, played a central role as sources of ideological power and legitimation of the exemplary centre, and in negotiating power relations in the region. Thus, contrary to expectations of an artistic or cultural drought, as Brown suggests, "we might expect more, not less, . . . to be produced during politically unstable or stressful periods".[82]

Such interpretations underscore the importance of examining archaeological evidence in terms of both the political imperatives of the leader and the *mandala*, and the world-view they accepted and expressed. In the competitive political environment of the Southeast Asian *mandala*, in which a leader's power had continually to be demonstrated, it is evident that ritual objects played a crucial role in legitimising the exercise of that power. Within this environment, we suggest that the "Buddha on a monster" stelae played a very specific and important role, a role most vital precisely when the *mandala* was threatened with disaggregation in the face of encroachment by external powers.

It is acknowledged that in the absence of more precise evidence from the Dvaravati *mandala* itself, the conclusions outlined in this paper can remain at best only tentative. This being said, using the Southeast Asian *mandala* pattern of power organisation as the lens through which to focus on the stelae, and given the available evidence – Dvaravati, Khmer and Mon-Burmese; textual and archaeological – a possible iconographical interpretation of the "Buddha on a monster" stelae does begin to emerge.

As statements of legitimation, the stelae had the purpose of making it clear to regional leaders that the *mandala* was ruled by one who had undergone the empowering ritual of the *abhiseka* coronation and so was symbolically associated with the cosmic powers of all the Buddhas. He therefore ruled legitimately in accordance with the *Dharma*, as a king who had taken lawful possession of the centre and therefore of the *mandala* as a whole. In the dynamic and competitive world of Southeast Asian politics, in which rulers had to avail themselves of every form of legitimacy to ensure their place at the centre of the *mandala*, such statements were of signal importance.

[79] Pierre Dupont, "La dislocation du Tchen-la et le formation du Cambodge Angkorien (VIIe-IXe siècle)", XLIV *BEFEO* (1943–46), p. 55, quoted in Brown, *The Dvaravati Wheels*, p. 194.
[80] Brown, *The Dvaravati Wheels*, p. 194.
[81] *Ibid.*
[82] *Ibid.*