

SEALS, AMULETS AND COINAGES OF DVĀRAVATĪ CULTURAL SITES: UNDERSTANDING THEIR SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT AND RELIGIOUS NETWORK

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on minor artifacts, such as sealings, tablets, coinages, small figurines and amulets, that form integral parts of the socio-religious cultural milieu of a society. Such objects were recovered from various sites in Thailand attributed to the Dvāravatī cultural period, and they lead us to two concerns: First, what the nature of the society was that encouraged production and use of objects like sealings, terracotta figurines and amulets, and second, the persons that made them and the agency that percolated such socio-religious beliefs/rituals in the mind of people. An overview of archaeological materials recovered from Dvāravatī sites in central Thailand allow us to perceive a kind of society where Buddhism dominated, with elements of Brahmanism in its rituals. Seals and amulets were sure to come as voyaging objects from India in their initial phase. The ideology behind the offering and making of seals was then deeply ingrained in the Southeast Asian societies. The network of Buddhism can be understood also from the penetration of Mahayana ideas in the Dvāravatī sites. These ideas could have percolated both from Srivijaya and also from South eastern Bengal after traversing Arakan. In some cases, there are definite examples of emulation of Indian cultural practices. In others, there are examples of adaptation. Nonetheless, the strong presence of indigenous elements cannot be overlooked.

INTRODUCTION

“Much research on historical period subjects . . . still focuses on iconography and epigraphy. Because of this focus it has been difficult to move past earlier perceptions of an Indianized Southeast Asia and to surmount assumptions about the level of complexity of the societies under study” (Mudar 1999)

Keeping in mind Mudar’s statement, this paper focuses on the small artifacts that serve as integral parts of the socio-

religious cultural milieu of a society. These include the votive sealings, tablets, coins, small figurines and amulets recovered from various sites in Thailand that are attributed to the Dvāravatī cultural period. Just as the writing systems, honorific titles and art styles indicate extensive contact with India, this paper will try to understand the nature of linkage with the Indian subcontinent through these minor objects. The fact that the commencement of Dvāravatī Culture should be pushed back at least 200 years before the generally accepted date of around CE 600 (Glover and Barram 2008) is in accordance with the nature of these objects.

A study of these objects leads us to certain questions: What was the nature of the society that encouraged production and use of objects like these sealings, terracotta figurines and amulets? Who manufactured them and what was the agency that stimulated such socio-religious beliefs or rituals in the mind of people?

With these questions in mind, a brief survey of the objects is in order. We begin with the amulets, clay tablets, sealings and other votive offerings which form a major portion of the known archaeological materials. A set of culturally shared expressive practices should be perceived through a study of these objects. Phasook Indrawooth drew attention to the amulets unearthed in Thailand, asserting that seafaring merchants used to carry with them images of their gods and goddesses to ensure a safe voyage on the sea (Indrawooth: 1992: 163-173). As another example, recall inscriptions on small stones displayed in the Palembang museum, which read *jaya-siddha yatra* (“victorious fulfilled journey”), indicating a desire for a wish-fulfilled journey (Ramesh: 2002: 153). Images of Buddha Dipankara calming the waves have come to light at archaeological sites in Thailand. Dipankara literally means a mariner who crosses the sea to reach islands, but it is also an epithet for Buddha himself (Chakravarti 2004: 312). The images in Thailand belonged to the Amaravati school, a style deriving from the Andhra-Kalinga region of southeastern India. This style was very active in the early historical period, and references from

this region to Mahanavika (“sea captain”) can be found on an inscription from Ghantasala that dates as early as the 1st century CE (Ghosh 2003: 491-495). The Brahmanical merchants brought with them images of Ganesha along with their merchandise. It was—and still is—believed that the blessings of Ganesha is a requisite for any successful commercial venture, so it is natural that these merchants would carry with them images of Ganesha.

Archaeological excavations at sites like Nakhon Pathom, U Thong, Sab Champa, Chansen and others, have unearthed double-sided round terracotta medallions depicting Gajalakshmi and Kubera, as well as some with just Kubera or Gajalakshmi on one face. According to Indrawooth some of the unearthed pieces were of Indian origin and were perhaps brought by merchants as amulets, while others were local imitations. These two deities are synonymous to wealth and prosperity in Indian traditions, and it is natural that merchants would regard them as their patron deities. The depiction of Gajalakshmi is a feature of Indian art; she is also depicted on the coins of Scytho-Parthian rulers like Azilises. This motif was also common on seals and sealings from the Gupta period in South Asia. The reader should refer in particular to the Basarh sealings (ancient Vaishali in Bihar) which were used by traders. This motif was also represented in the seals of administrative personalities and adopted as a symbol of administrative offices (Thaplyal 1972: 179-184). Gajalakshmi was a motif which cut across all barriers of religion and profession.

Closely associated with Lakshmi is Kubera, who is also associated with wealth and opulence. Kubera was the king of the Yakshas, the Yakshas being lesser gods which played an important role in the development of the Brahmanical, Buddhist and Jaina pantheon of divinities (Op. cit.: 197). Small bronze images of Jambhala—the Buddhist equivalent to Kubera, representing prosperity—as well as clay tablets with the figure of Jambhala on the face have been recovered in various peninsular states in Thailand, such as Songkhla and Trang (Chirapravati 1997). The latter images date from from the 9th to the early 10th century AD. The prosperity of these states depended on coastal and overseas trade, particularly with areas where Mahayana Buddhism was practiced. Perhaps the contact between Srivijaya and Bengal facilitated the influence of Mahayana Buddhism. This resulted in the dispersal of Mahayana Buddhist deities all over the peninsular region of Thailand. In early Mahayana Buddhism emphasis was on making and venerating Buddhist deities, and the small votive images were products of its ritual ideologies. This ideology spread across the Bay of Bengal.

Thus if we look carefully at the representation of deities in the medallions or small sculptural pieces used as amulets, a strong association with merchant activities is suggested by the dominance of Buddha, Ganesha, Gajalakshmi and Kubera imagery.

There are also amulets from the Dvāravatī region in the form of a lion. The lion is generally linked with Buddha imagery as Buddha is represented in texts as Sakya Simha (“lion among the Sakyas”). Interestingly the lions of the amulets do not look at all like the lions in Indian art which are both naturalistic and at times stylistic. Dvāravatī lions look more like mythical figures, are stylistic in depiction, and are usually represented in full figure. Thus it appears that the Dvāravatī lions are a product of the imagination of the indigenous artist.

Small terracotta figurines abound in the site museums of Thailand. Images of the animal world are what the figures primarily represent, though men and women are also depicted. What were the functions of such figurines? These types of figurines are very common in early historic archaeological contexts in India, where they are generally interpreted to be votive offerings. An interesting moulded terracotta figurine found at various Dvāravatī sites is of a boy holding a monkey. An example of this is on display at the U-Thong museum. The boy is nude except for bangles, an amulet and a belt. These are unique to Dvāravatī and possible connections between this image and Indian narratives have yet to be traced. It may relate to local Southeast Asian folk lore.

Seals and sealings in early historic Thailand contribute significant evidence for regional and inter-regional exchange. This tradition continued in the Dvāravatī period, where Buddhist votive sealings are predominant. The religious motivation behind the prolific production of these images was the Buddhist practice of merit making. It is said that if someone writes the dharma verse and installs it inside the stupa, it is like doing homage by offering up a rare jewel (Guy 2002: 25-26). The fabrication of the clay devotional images was within the capability of all devotees. The *ye dharma/ye dhamma* verse found on the votive tablets is an important cultural marker, present in mainland and peninsular Southeast Asia, with the greatest concentration occurring in the Pyu kingdom of Srikshetra. From the Dvāravatī period onwards, in Siam, the verse was written in Pali, hybrid Pali and Sanskrit (Skilling 1999: 172-173). In Siam they were inscribed in variations of the Pallava script. Mention of this verse confirms the presence of Buddhist ideology. It was delivered to the public in the form of sacred words and in symbolic objects such as Buddha images and the Dharmachakra (or wheel of Dharma), which increased in popularity as the religion increased in recognition and acceptance.

Through which agency did the *ye dhamma* verse reach Siam, or for that matter Southeast Asia? Many seals and sealings from various sites of India bear this Buddhist creed formula. As connection between Buddhism and trade is now well accepted, is it possible to say that along with the largely Buddhist traders, there were also successive migrations of

Buddhist monks to countries of Southeast Asia, and the combination of monk and merchant was responsible for the adaptation of the Buddhist creed.

A type which is common to South Asia and Southeast Asia is a large sealing, either circular or conical in shape with an inscription bearing eighteen lines and a small relief of a stupa in the center. The inscription represents a longer version of the Buddhist creed. Apart from these terracotta sealings, numerous bronze sealings have been found attached to the back of votive bronze images. They too contain the *ye dharma* verse. Note that this ritual phrase is sometimes written in Pali-*ye dhamma*—or in a hybrid Sanskrit-*ye dharmā*.

These sealings were widely produced, usually in order to gain merit, and were seen as an act of devotion (Guy 2002: 24). Peter Skilling argues that Buddhist sealings are not the poor person's road to heaven but were products of a ritual ideology of mass production (Skilling 2008: 248-262). Many of these were produced by kings, members of the court and senior monks. Based on a study of the sealings bearing the Buddhist creed and found in various Buddhist sites of South Asia—housed presently in the Indian Museum and in the various museums of Thailand—we can say that most of the Buddhist clay votive sealing types are transregional, with minor variations in style, script and content. Apart from Buddhist sealings we have other kind of sealings like a Garuda sitting on a lotus, a dwarf or gana, a crouching bull, a swan, a trident and a disk, a man climbing a palm tree, etc.

Numismatics reveal further cultural connections with India. The Dvāravatī territorial location was unclear prior to the discovery of silver medals reading on the reverse *sriDvāravatīsvrapunya*,—meaning “meritorious deed of the ruler of Dvāravatī”—at Nakhon Pathom in 1943 (Wicks 1992: 158-159). On the obverse of these coins is a cow and calf motif or a flowing vase (purnaghata) motif. Other examples have also been found later from Chainat, Inburi and U Thong. Coinage recovered from the Dvāravatī period sites in central Thailand are usually struck in silver although recent excavations have revealed that a tin or lead alloy coinage was probably widespread. Coin moulds used to cast these base metal pieces have been reported as well (Ibid.). In U Thong, seal moulds of the purnaghata device as found in the coins have been unearthed.

The obverse on a coin from Nakhon Pathom shows a wheel of law with eight spokes. Another coin displays a deer walking to the right and has a crescent above its back. Linking these two designs is their Buddhist symbolism: the turning of the wheel of law in the deer park at Sarnath by the Buddha. Reference to this event appears on many ancient Indian terracotta sealings. It should be noted here that a wheel of law between two deer is represented in the seals of the copper plate charters from southeastern Bengal, a region with close connections to the Dvāravatī region, according to

the Chinese chronicler Hsuan Tsang. Another interesting reverse symbol is the representation of a temple with a thunderbolt. It has a fish swimming beneath and the sun and the moon symbols above. At the sides are a whisk and an ankus. These symbols were widely used on the coinage of southern India (Mitchiner 1998: 181-182). The thunderbolt is an allusion to the traditional Vedic view of world creation, symbolizing Indra as the great creator of God. It was Indra who lifted up the heaven from the primordial water and placed the world between them. The fish represents the water from which the world was raised up. The whisk and ankus were traditional symbols of royalty.

The temple-like structure may have originated from the tripartite symbol on the unscripted Arakanese coins. The latter seems to be a combination of an early Indian *srivatsa* symbol and a trident. The outline of the *srivatsa* symbol developed into that of a structure (Mukherjee 1996: 528-530). Similar developments of the *srivatsa* symbol took place in the Indian subcontinent itself. The inscriptions written on these coins are in late Brahmi script. Apart from the symbols having both Buddhist and Brahmanic affiliation, use of Brahmi script in the coins surely indicates an Indian connection. The forms of the letter ‘ra’ and ‘va’ betray the influence of the early Pallava variety of the Brahmi script of c. 6th–7th centuries CE. Hoards of smaller denominations have been unearthed from U Thong; they bear the outline of a conch like symbol. Such an image has also been found in clay sealings. These coins demonstrate an important element of shared culture.

Thus in the Dvāravatī period, the region of present-day Thailand may have undergone monetization, though one cannot be completely sure about its nature. Along with metallic currency, cowrie shells appear to have been used as money, given their large presence in archeological contexts. These shells are displayed in the site museums of central Thailand but no detailed report has been published. The Maldives are not necessarily the origin of every cowrie, as it is believed to be the case for India; they may originate in Thailand's own maritime zone.

A distinctive Indian type of dice has been found in association with coins inscribing the merit of the king Dvāravatī in Uthong. Dice have also been recovered from early historic contexts in India. They were perhaps used for a game of chance.

CONCLUSION

This overview of archaeological materials recovered from the Dvāravatī sites of central Thailand suggests a society dominated by Buddhism, with elements of Brahmanism in its rituals. Seals and amulets came as voyaging objects with traders from India, Said traders consist not only of Indians, but also those from the Dvāravatī settlements travelling to the ports of India. Evidence suggests

that the amulets were connected directly with the trading vocation, with subjects intended to ward off danger or for prosperity. The ideology behind the offering and making of seals became deeply ingrained in Southeast Asian societies. These Southeast Asian settlements were involved in both riverine and maritime trade networks that connected to the different centers of culture and as well as across the bay with India.

The network of Buddhism can be further understood from the penetration of Mahayana ideas in the Dvāravatī sites. These ideas could have percolated from Srivijaya and southeastern Bengal, after traversing Arakan. The practice of offering votive tablets assumed an increasingly prominent role with the widespread adoption of Mahayana teachings in India in the second half of the first millennium. These theological and sectarian developments were also reflected in devotional practices in regions of Southeast Asia. Beginning as early as the seventh century, the ideology and accompanying ritual spread throughout the Buddhist world. Though initially moulds (or copies of moulds) imported from India were used, the large scale presence of moulds in the Southeast Asian archaeological sites suggests local production at later times.

It also appears that the Dvāravatī sites experienced monetization (Wicks 1992). Who actually issued these coins is a matter of debate, but the large scale presence of lower denomination coins clustered together in hoards found at some archaeological sites would lead us to conclude that coins were not only used for rituals, but played a role in everyday transactions. Interestingly, these coins have symbols which relate to Brahmanical influence. It is difficult at present to categorically distinguish some Dvāravatī sites as Buddhist or Brahmanical. Though Vallibothama (1986: 231) has identified the western centers like U Thong and others as Buddhist, and the eastern centers like Sri Mahosod as associated with Hinduism, said the most secure conclusion is that Buddhism was very much present in Dvāravatī cultural sites, intensified in some and attenuated in others.

The study of these smaller artifacts does not equip us to fully understand the nature of the Dvāravatī polity, but their common presence supports the idea that the network of relations between the sites of central Thailand spreading across the ChaoPhraya, Tha Chin and Meklong rivers was intense enough to apply the singular epithet of "Dvāravatī." While Indian cultural practices were emulated in some cases, and adapted in others, the strong presence of indigenous elements cannot be denied.

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