

# IN QUEST OF ANGKORIAN MEDICINE BUDDHA AND BODDHISATVA: NEW ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

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## Abstract

This paper attempts to describe the historical iconography of medical Buddhist statues uncovered from an excavation site at the Angkor archaeological park that brings new evidence to support the Buddhist roots and cultural foundations of public health and medical practices in medieval Angkor during the reign of King Jayavarman 7 (1181-1221 CE). This focused Art history paper does not include any comprehensive analysis of the overall excavation project that will be reported elsewhere by the archeological team in the near future.

*Keywords: Angkorian, medicine, Buddha, Bodhisatva, archeology*

The previous historical study showed that this King had established a unique public health network across the Angkor Empire made of 102 hospitals (Coedès, 1941, p. 408). In his endeavor to provide medical care services to all castes, the King embraced two paradigms based on Buddhist charity and military strategy as shown in the founding stone inscription of Say-Fong (Finot, 1903):

Stanza XIII. He suffered illnesses of his subjects more than his own, for it is the public grief that makes the pain of kings, not their pain.

Stanza XIV. By warriors-doctors-versed in the science of arms-medicine-he destroyed the enemies that infested his kingdom-the diseases-using the weapons: remedies.

The health system was established through a network of 102 hospitals distributed across the empire to provide medical services to the entire people of Angkor without any discrimination of castes (Coedès, 1941). From the foundation stone of the hospital, medicine was not only practical but religious, and doctors, medical manuscripts, and hospitals were placed under the protection of Buddhist triad made of the "medicine Buddha" known as the Bhaisajyaguru and the two "medicine Bodhisattvas" (Finot 1903; Chhem, 2005). Pulse taking, alchemy using sulfur mercury salts and medicinal plants were distinctive diagnosis and therapeutic practices in those hospitals (Chhem, 2005). The evidence that was used to write the history of Angkorian Buddhist medicine were multiple and diverse: Inscriptions from the hospitals' foundation stone; extant medical manuscripts; works of arts like bas-reliefs, medical anthropology, and archaeological findings. Modern biotechnological such as paleobotany and material sciences analysis may shed light on various aspects of Angkorian medicine, especially to further study the materia medica and alchemy. Of all these sources, Buddha statues, especially that of the medicine Buddha seem to capture the public imagination that goes beyond its intrinsic value as historical evidence. "So then where are the statues of this elusive triad mentioned in the hospital edicts?" (Chhem, 2005, p. 11). This quest of the medicine Buddha took twelve years until this excavation finally revealed these religious treasures.

In this paper, we wish to focus on the description of fragmented Buddha and Bodhisattava statues that were uncovered during the recent archaeological excavation conducted at the Prasat Tonle Sngout, a hospital shrine at the north gate of the ancient city of Angkor Thom, the capital of the Angkor Empire. This archaeological campaign follows another one that was carried out in 2006 at the Prasat Tromuong near the western gate of the capital (Pottier & Chhem, 2010) as part of the "Angkor Medieval Hospitals Archaeological Project" that received the royal patronage of His Majesty King Norodom Sihamoni.

No statues of significance were uncovered during that first campaign. The purposes of the excavation were several and included: hospital structures, settlements, and habitat around the hospital, spatial organization of health system within the capital of the Khmer empire. Beyond these scientific research goals, the excavation found some evidence that could shed light on religious rituals and practices (diagnosis and treatments) of Buddhist medicine during King Jayavarman 7 which were of great interest to historians of Angkor in general and historians of health and medicine in particular. Discovery of medicine Buddha and Bodhisattva is the ultimate dream for Angkor

historians, museum curators, and art lovers, adding a dose of romanticism to the actual scientific and archaeological quest. The spectacular statuary remains were recovered at the east side of the main shrine nearby the walkway that leads to the eastern gate of the hospital shrine.

### **Medicine Buddha**

**Figure 1a: Medicine Buddha**



Source: Preah Norodom Sihanouk-Angkor Museum.

**Figure 1b: Medicine Buddha**



Source: Preah Norodom Sihanouk-Angkor Museum

Two fragments of a Bhaisajyaguru Buddha were transferred from Tonle Sgnuot archaeological site to Preah Norodom Sihanouk-Angkor Museum on August 08, 2017. They bear the inventory numbers NSAM.2017.4.1 and NSAM. 2017.4.2 respectively. They have been dry-cleaned by the museum's conservation team. The first fragment (NSAM.2017.4.1) is the remainder of the lower part a statue of Buddha from the waist downwards

with crossed legs, measuring 40 cm x 32.5 cm. In the meditation position, the statue has its two hands resting on its two crossed feet. The distinctive pattern here is the presence of a spherical object within the palm of the left Buddha's hand that may represent a medicinal jar, a signature pattern that certifies that this statue is that of medicine Buddha (Chhem, 2005). The right knee is slightly damaged. There is a tenon under the coiled naga whose role was to protect the Buddha. The "scales pattern" of the naga was not completed. The front part of the naga is seriously damaged at three spots.

The second fragment (NSAM. 2017.4.2) is the bust of the Buddha surmounted by a half-broken naga head (measuring 45.5 cm x 30 cm). Albeit a broken nose, this Buddha presented a serene and smiling face. It seems to wear a robe on the right shoulder, leaving the left one uncovered. The Buddha does not wear a diadem or earrings. The back of the naga head is decorated with a disc. The naga's scale pattern is seen. This statue is most likely of Bayon style. This Bhaiṣajyaguru statue shares some similarities with those displayed at Preah Norodom Sihanouk-Angkor Museum. They were uncovered from Banteay Kdei temple in 2001 (thirty in total but only fifteen are displayed). They are all made of sandstone but vary in sizes ranging from 18 cm to 95 cm. Some are single statues, and some others form the triad Lokeshvara-Buddha-Prajnaparamita. Most of the Bhaiṣajyaguru statues wear ornaments such as earrings, necklace, bracelets on wrists and ankles. They hold a "medicinal jar" which is a signature pattern that certifies the medical role of this particular Buddha. Besides the artifacts from Banteay Kdei temple, Preah Norodom Sihanouk-Angkor Museum also houses some Bayon-styled Bhaiṣajyaguru statues from other temples of Angkor archaeological park.

### **Medicine Bodhisattva**

This headless statue is in a meditation posture. It is presumed to be one of the medicine Bodhisattvas. It was brought to Preah Norodom Sihanouk-Angkor museum from Tonle Sgnuot archaeological site on August 08, 2017. It is inventoried as NSAM 2017.8 and dry-cleaned by the museum's conservation team. It measures 47 cm x 37 cm. The statue is in the relatively good condition of conservation. The Bodhisattva is seated cross-legged on a rectangular pedestal with a shortly broken tenon underneath. The hands point away from the body and are in a "palm-to-palm" position holding a flask that most likely contains medicine. The flask seems to have a cover, slightly protruding from the hands. The carving of this statue is not yet completed as an emerging pattern of the belt is identified around the waist. From the presence of this belt,

we can infer that the Bodhisattva would wear a pair of trousers while the bust would have left uncovered. The pedestal is decorated with small rectangular motifs called 'buffalo's teeth' according to Khmer iconographical terminology. Like the statue of the Bhaisajyaguru, this statue was carved according to the Bayon style.

**Figure 2a: Medicine Bodhisattva**



Source: Preah Norodom Sihanouk-Angkor Museum



**Figure 2b: Medicine Bodhisattva**



Source: Preah Norodom Sihanouk-Angkor Museum

### **Hospital Dvarapala**

On 30 July and 1 September 2017, Preah Norodom Sihanouk-Angkor Museum received six fragments of a “guardian (Dvarapala)” discovered at the entrance of Tonle Sgnot temple. They bear the inventory numbers from NSAM.2017.3.1 to NSAM.2017.3.6. After being recomposed from various uncovered fragments, the statue measures approximately 2 meters. The first fragment consists of a head wearing a diadem and earrings. The diadem is in good condition of conservation, but the earrings are broken. It has a chignon the top of which is decorated with a flower. The nose is broken; the eyes and the lips cannot be seen clearly.

**Figure 3: Dvarapala**



Source: Preah Norodom Sihanouk-Angkor Museum

The second fragment consists of a body from neck to legs, but without feet. On both shoulders, there are traces of earrings, but the necklace is in good condition of conservation. There seems to be an armor covering the chest and the abdomen. It wears a pair of shorts with a belt. Both legs are broken; the left one is broken up to the knee and the right one to the ankle. There are some motives on both the thighs. The third fragment is the upper part of the left arm of the statue. It has a bracelet. The fourth fragment is the lower part of the left



leg, from the knee to the ankle with an anklet. The fifth fragment is the back part of the right leg's ankle. And the sixth fragment is a part of one of the earrings. Guardians of Angkor temple's gates are always in pairs. In the Jayavarman VII period, they stood on each side of the walkway with, to the left, a benevolent-looking guardian and, to the right, a malevolent looking guardian. This arrangement is also found at Angkor Thom's gates, capital of the Angkor Empire, where the gods holding the naga are on the left side, the demons on the right side of the walkway.

## **Discussion**

Several medicine Buddha statues have been uncovered during excavations at the Angkor in the past. To the best of my knowledge, the Buddhist statues we described above are among the first of this kind that is uncovered in-situ from the compound of one of the hospitals built during the reign of King Jayavarman 7 (1181-1221 CE). The iconographic analysis of these statues brings additional knowledge about the Bhaisajyaguru and one of his accompanying medicine Bodhisattva. Chhem performed a detailed analysis of the triad made of the Bhaisajyaguru and his two Bodhisattvas that were carved on a sandstone votive tablet mold and a bas-relief at the Prasat Ta Prohm Kel (Chhem, 2005, p. 11). The current Buddha statue displays the similar characteristic iconographic pattern that allows us to identify it as the medicine Buddha, i.e. holding a medicine flask in his left hand. However, several authors proposed other interpretations for that special attribute and identify it as a medicine jar, alms bowl, jewelry, lotus flower, votive stupa, myrobolan fruit (Boisselier, 1966; Karow, 1991). It is important to note that several other medicine Buddhas were uncovered by Banteay Kdei, but they were found outside hospitals compound and stored or displayed at the Preah Norodom Sihanouk-Angkor Museum. The second statue uncovered from Tonle Sgnout displays a "palm-to-palm" position of the hands holding a flask. Referring to a paper on bronze Bodhisattva statues displayed at the Berlin Museum of Asian Arts (Sharrock, 2011), this hands positioning and the presence of a flask indicate that this statue is that of one of the Bodhisattvas that are flanked on both sides of the Bhaisajyaguru. Sharrock translated the Sanskrit name of the two divinities as Bodhisattva "Sunlight" and "Moonlight." Obviously, it is not possible to identify if this Bodhisattvas is the Moonlight or Sunlight as none of them hold any distinctive iconographic features. Let's note here that the second Bodhisattva is still missing. Future excavation at the same site may uncover the last Buddhist figure of the hospital triad. These statues provide

further evidence to support the actual practice of Buddhist medicine at Angkor as demonstrated by Chhem in his doctoral dissertation (Chhem, 2008). The hospital Dvarapala statue may have been placed at the main gateway as the symbolic guardian of the shrines and the hospital warehouse where precious royal donation including medicine was stored. It is noted that the distal fragments of the left arm and leg of that guardian are of different colors, but their respective shape and size match perfectly with that of the proximal segments. This may reflect the various chemical reactions between the chemical nature of stone and the soil in which they were buried. However, further analysis of the chemical structure and the magnetic susceptibility of those fragments are needed to confirm this hypothesis that does not in any way interfere with the argument and conclusion of this current art and historical study. Pottery uncovered from the same archaeological site is being studied in an attempt to eventually find traces of herbal medicine or cinnabar that were the two main therapeutic methods proposed by the Bhaisajyaguru in his medical sutra. In summary, these new in-situ archeological findings within the compound of a Jayavarman 7 hospital are the direct evidence that confirms the importance of the practice of Medicine Buddha cult in the healthcare network of the 13th century Angkor Empire.

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