

THE DISSEMINATION OF DVARAVATI CULTURE: EARLY RELIGIONS IN LAOS

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Abstract

This article is part of a doctoral dissertation on Dvaravati art in the Lao PDR. Laos: Religious Forms and Symbolism in the Creation of Installation Art. This research is qualitative research. The purpose is to study the spread of Dvaravati culture in the Lao PDR. Laos: This research employed a descriptive qualitative research methodology, utilizing literature reviews and relevant research, comprehensive field visits, and interviews with experts and academics in both Thailand and the Lao PDR. The study encompassed both structured and unstructured data from Laos. This research collected data from February 2021 to December 2022. The theoretical framework used for analysis includes cultural diffusion theory.

The research identified Dvaravati art that is found in Laos. Laos can be categorized into three primary groups: Buddha images, boundary stones, and Dharma wheels, which provide clear evidence of cultural dispersion from Thailand, especially from the Northeast, where this style of artwork is prevalent. The unique characteristics of Dvaravati art and its religious meaning in Laos PDR. Laos possesses a civilization characterized by the establishment of boundary stones extending from northern Thailand. The forms identified exhibit connections in both style and construction philosophy, alongside the practice of situating them around religious edifices. Moreover, several sandstone Buddha figures and Dharmachakras were discovered, reflecting the impact of Dvaravati culture while being adapted to local practices, a distinctive feature of Dvaravati culture in Laos.

Keywords: Cultural Dissemination, Dvaravati Culture, Buddhism, Lao PDR, Laos, Northeastern Thailand

Introduction

The Dvaravati Kingdom, which flourished from the 12th to the 16th Buddhist centuries, is considered an important ancient civilization in Southeast Asia. The word "Dvaravati" is a Sanskrit term that first appeared in the year 2427 by Prof. Samuel Beal, which is translated from the word "Tolopoti" mentioned in the records of the Chinese monk Jin Hong in the 12th century Buddhist era, referring to a kingdom located in present-day Thailand. The influence of Indian and Chinese civilizations, particularly in religious aspects from India, led to the establishment of small cities or states in various parts of Southeast Asia from around the 9th century Buddhist era onward (Subhadradis Diskul, 2511). These states, such as Funan, Champa, and Chenla, established a monarchy and court rituals with Brahmins as the officiants.

This cultural exchange with India represented self-development for both spiritual and material advancement, leading to civilizational developments such as the construction of cities surrounded by moats and fortifications, as well as the building of palaces for the king's residence. During the same period as the founding of the Chenla kingdom, the Dvaravati kingdom also emerged in the Chao Phraya-Pasak River basin, overlapping with the Funan kingdom during the 12th-16th centuries Buddhist era. This was the period when Dvaravati culture spread to various regions, based on Theravada Buddhism, as evidenced by the archeological artifacts discovered (RungrojThamrungruang, 2552).

Northeast Thailand (Isan) is a region that absorbed Dvaravati culture from the Chao Phraya River basin, either via the Dong Phraya Yen and Phetchabun mountain ranges or via the Pa Sak River basin. Archaeological evidence suggests that during the 12th-century Buddhist era, Northeast Thailand thrived with multiple cities, the most significant being Sri Khotrabun along the Mekong River. The Dvaravati culture disseminated throughout the area next to the Chi-Mun River (Suchit Wongthet, 2006). The Mon people, recognized for their Dvaravati civilization, extended their cultural influence to the Northeast circa the 13th century AD, originating from the lower northern area near Si Thep city in Phetchabun province. Subsequently, it disseminated throughout the Korat Plateau and thrived in the Chi River valley during the 14th century AD. Significant evidence of this cultural influence includes several Mon language inscriptions, antique artifacts, archaeological sites, and artworks located in the Northeast. The Dvaravati culture disseminated into the Northeast via two primary routes:

one through mountain passes in the Phetchabun mountain range (Lopburi, Chai Badan, and Lamnarai) into the Mun River, impacting Nakhon Ratchasima, Chaiyaphum, Khon Kaen, Maha Sarakham, Kalasin, and Sakon Nakhon; and the other through the Phanom Dong Rak mountain passes (Ban Ta Phraya, Aranyaprathet) into the Mun River in Buriram. The majority of the archaeological material discovered, including terracotta Buddha images, Buddha statues, stupas, stone boundary markers, and inscriptions, was produced for Theravada Buddhism in subsequent times, signifying that Theravada Buddhism was the predominant religion of the Dvaravati society.

Ancient artifacts from the Dvaravati culture can be categorized into three groups according to their stylistic attributes.

First (11th-13th centuries CE): Shaped by Gupta and post-Gupta Indian art, predominantly featuring religious artifacts rooted in Theravada Buddhist doctrines.

Second (13th-16th centuries CE): This group predominantly comprises ancient artifacts and structures constructed in accordance with Mahayana Buddhist principles, which disseminated to northeastern Thailand.

Third (15th-18th century CE): Artifacts from this era demonstrate a fusion with indigenous local features, shown by the distinctive form of stone marker construction in the Northeast, which became a hallmark of the Dvaravati culture.

The presence of multiple archaeological sites in the Northeast region indicative of Dvaravati culture suggests the possibility that this culture may have extended into Laos. Laos, a contiguous region defined by the Mekong River as its primary boundary, is undergoing initial data gathering in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Laos has substantiated this observation by discovering artifacts exhibiting patterns linked to Dvaravati culture,

akin to those located in northeastern Thailand, particularly in adjacent areas such as Vientiane (where the Ho Phra Keo Museum contains sandstone Buddha images, boundary stones, and inscriptions), Tham Chang Cave in Phonhong (featuring carved Buddha images), and the mountaintops near the Nam Ngum Dam (which include sandstone Buddha images and boundary stones). Furthermore, in the southern part of the Lao PDR, Laos has discovered artifacts associated with Dvaravati, including several sema stones in Savannakhet, stone Buddha statues, and a dharmachakra at the Wat Phu Champasak Museum. These findings unequivocally indicate that Dvaravati culture disseminated from the Northeast into the Lao PDR.

Objectives

To examine the dissemination of Dvaravati culture in the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

Methods

This study utilizes a qualitative research style, emphasizing descriptive analysis, which is suitable for examining and profoundly analyzing intricate cultural and creative phenomena. 1. Instruments utilized for data acquisition The primary instruments employed for extensive data acquisition in research comprise

- Field Survey: This instrument is crucial for examining the Dvaravati cultural patterns in Laos. Laos, specifically in designated locations such as the National Museum of Laos and several archaeological sites where Dvaravati art has been discovered.

- Unstructured Interview: This adaptable interview technique was employed to collect comprehensive information from important informants and scholars in Thailand and Lao PDR. Lao, possessing direct understanding and experience in Dvaravati art and history, contributed significant qualitative data and varied viewpoints for the classification and interpretation of artistic styles.

2. The process of creating research instruments : the construction of the research instrument was executed with precision and methodical rigor to guarantee the correctness and trustworthiness of the data.

- 1) Examination of the Conceptual Framework: Commence by meticulously analyzing pertinent research data, theories, and concepts to establish a definitive conceptual framework for the study.

- 2) Tool Design: Employ the data acquired from the conceptual framework study to create specialized instruments for field data collection.

- 3) Tool Development: Create field survey instruments and unstructured interview protocols.

- 4) Expert Consultation: Present the generated tools to specialists for content validation and obtain suggestions for repairs or enhancements.

- 5) Requesting Endorsement: Submit the amended instrument to the thesis advisor for evaluation and official approval.

3. Data Collection. Field data collection operations include the following:

- 1) Solicitation for collaboration: Organize and pursue cooperation from all pertinent sectors and agencies engaged in data collection.

- 2) Book Distribution and Coordination: Dispatch books accompanied by questionnaires to the expert group and academics, and organize in-person meetings to assist interviews.

- 3) Fieldwork: The devised instruments were employed in the field for data acquisition, encompassing the examination of artifacts in museums and at 11 locations along the Mekong River, spanning from Vientiane Province to Champasak Province.

4. Data Processing and Data Analysis

Data Processing: Following the completion of the field survey in Lao PDR, the collected data has been systematically sorted and classified by survey area, including objects shown in museums, artifacts relocated to communities, and artifacts remaining in their original sites. The processed data has been validated through triangulation by comparing it with scholarly documents and engaging experts and stakeholders to ensure its comprehensiveness and consistency. The triangulation technique is crucial in historical and cultural research, particularly when addressing fragmented or partial material, as it enhances the dependability and precision of the study outcomes.

Data Analysis: The Cultural Diffusion Theory theoretical framework informed the interpretation and analysis of the obtained data. We used this theory to analyze historical data and understand the patterns and processes that led to the spread and development of Buddhism in the Lao PDR.

Results

The dissemination of Dvaravati culture in the Lao People's Democratic Republic is the focus of this section. This part will delineate the principal findings of the empirical investigation, systematically arranged by research purpose, and will include specifics regarding creative styles and religious symbolism.

1. Dvaravati Buddhist Art in Laos

1.1. The influence of Thailand's Dvaravati-era Buddhism is examined.

The Dvaravati Kingdom, which thrived throughout the 12th to 16th Buddhist centuries, was a pivotal hub for the dissemination of Buddhism in Southeast Asia. The title "Dvaravati," originating from Chinese records of the 12th Buddhist century, denotes the kingdom located in contemporary Thailand. The Indian and Chinese cultures, especially Buddhism from India, significantly impacted the formation of states and rituals in the region (Bousseyer, Jean, 1968). The Dvaravati culture from the Chao Phraya-Pasak River basin disseminated into northeastern Thailand (Isan) via two primary routes: one through the Phetchabun Mountains to the Mun River basin, impacting provinces such as Nakhon Ratchasima, Khon Kaen, and Sakon Nakhon; and the other through the Phanom Dong Rak mountain pass to the Mun River in Buriram. Archaeological evidence discovered in Isan, including clay Buddha images, Buddha statues, and boundary stones, reveals that Theravada Buddhism was the predominant religion in Dvaravati villages (Phasuk Indravudh, 1995). Dvaravati art is categorized into three groups according to its evolution: the first group (11th-13th Buddhist centuries) was influenced by Indian Gupta/post-Gupta art, the second group (13th-16th Buddhist centuries) had Mahayana influence, and the third

The existence of multiple Dvaravati archaeological sites in the Northeast has prompted conjecture over the potential dissemination of this culture in Laos. Laos, a contiguous region bordered by the Mekong River, has undergone preliminary surveys in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Laos verifies the existence of Dvaravati-influenced artifacts akin to those located in the Northeast, namely in border regions like Vientiane Capital (Ho Phra Keo Museum), Tham Wang Chang Cave (Vientiane Province), and Wat Phu Museum (Champasak Province). These findings unequivocally demonstrate the dissemination of culture from the Northeast to Laos.

1.2. Dvaravati Buddhist artistic sites in Laos. Laos

Surveys and expert interviews have identified Dvaravati art sites in Laos. The majority of the eleven sites in Laos, which date back to the 12th century AD, are located near the border between northeastern Thailand and Laos. The cultural diffusion pathway from the Chao Phraya-Pasak River basin to the Mun-Chi River basin and the Mekong River basin in the lowlands of Laos is strengthened by Laos. The steep mountainous regions of Laos are largely unsuitable for extensive habitation, resulting in the integration of Dvaravati art with indigenous cultures that venerate spirits and ancestors. The amalgamation has resulted in the adaptation and evolution of Dvaravati art in Laos into distinctive forms during subsequent times, including the Lan Xang culture.

Significant artistic locations comprise:

1. That Luang Stupa Museum, Vientiane: Exhibits ancient relics pertinent to Lao history, featuring sandstone Buddha figures influenced by the Dvaravati era.

2. Phra Keo Museum, Vientiane: Formerly the repository of the Emerald Buddha, it currently serves as a museum exhibiting items from several periods, including a plethora of Dvaravati artworks such as sandstone Buddha sculptures and boundary stones.

3. Elephant Cave, Phonhong City, Vientiane Province: This site features extensive Dvaravati art, predominantly of sculptures carved into rock overhangs. Professor Dr. Sakchai Saising expressed his inspiration from the fusion of the Bayon style of Khmer art with the indigenous Dvaravati culture.

4. A collection of Buddha statues can be found on Mount Buffalo in the Nam Ngum Dam area of Vientiane Province. This sandstone sculpture amalgamates Bayon-style Khmer artistry with indigenous Dvaravati art. The large hat sculpted above the Buddha's head, commonly observed in Dvaravati art, illustrates this.

5. Wat Phra Bat Dan Soong, Ban Na Yang, Muang Na Sai Thong, Vientiane Province: This artistic collective utilizes a natural stone cliff to sculpt Buddha statues as a sacred location. The site is encircled by eight layers of overlapping border stones in eight directions, akin to the Phu Phra Bat archeological site in Udon Thani. It is thought to have been shaped by the Bayon style of Khmer art combined with indigenous Dvaravati art.

6. The villagers at the temple discovered and gathered several sema stones in Nathong Sandstone City, Vientiane Province. They are sema stones intricately engraved with decorations on the stupa's center.

7. Ban Si Khai, Xayaburi District, Savannakhet Province: This location features a collection of sema stones that have been relocated to the temple. The sema stones are formed like lotus petals, featuring a prominent central ridge and adorned with patterns at the base and on the petals.

8. Ban Kang, Mueang Xayaburi, Savannakhet: A substantial collection of Bai Sema stones has been relocated from rice fields, comprising both rounded octagonal pillars and lotus petal-shaped stones featuring a prominent central ridge, intricately carved with water pots and stupas.

9. Ban Na Muang, Xayaburi Province, Savannakhet: The set of sema stones transferred to the temple are lotus petal-shaped with a coarsely carved, raised center ridge and no ornate designs.

10. Savannakhet Provincial Museum: Exhibits Dvaravati era sema stones sourced from Ban Tak Daet, Xayphouthong District. The sema stones are formed like lotus petals, characterized by a prominent center ridge, and include a water container and a lotus petal base.

11. Wat Phu Castle Museum, Champasak Province: This museum exhibits antiquities from many periods, including sandstone law wheels, sandstone Buddha figures, and terracotta embellishments from religious edifices. These artifacts illustrate the impact of Dvaravati art that disseminated throughout southern Laos and interacted with the pre-Angkorian Khmer culture.

The spatial arrangement of these archaeological sites, particularly those adjacent to the Thai-Lao border, suggests that the Mekong River functioned as a crucial conduit for cultural dispersion rather than merely a geographical obstacle. The ability of Dvaravati culture to cross the Mekong River and penetrate Lao territory exemplifies the vibrancy of cultural exchange in this area. The adaptation and integration of Dvaravati art in Laos, incorporating local elements and Khmer influences, constituted not only the assimilation of external culture but also the genesis of new forms that embody the distinct identity of the region, culminating in the diversity and complexity of Dvaravati art in the Lao PDR.

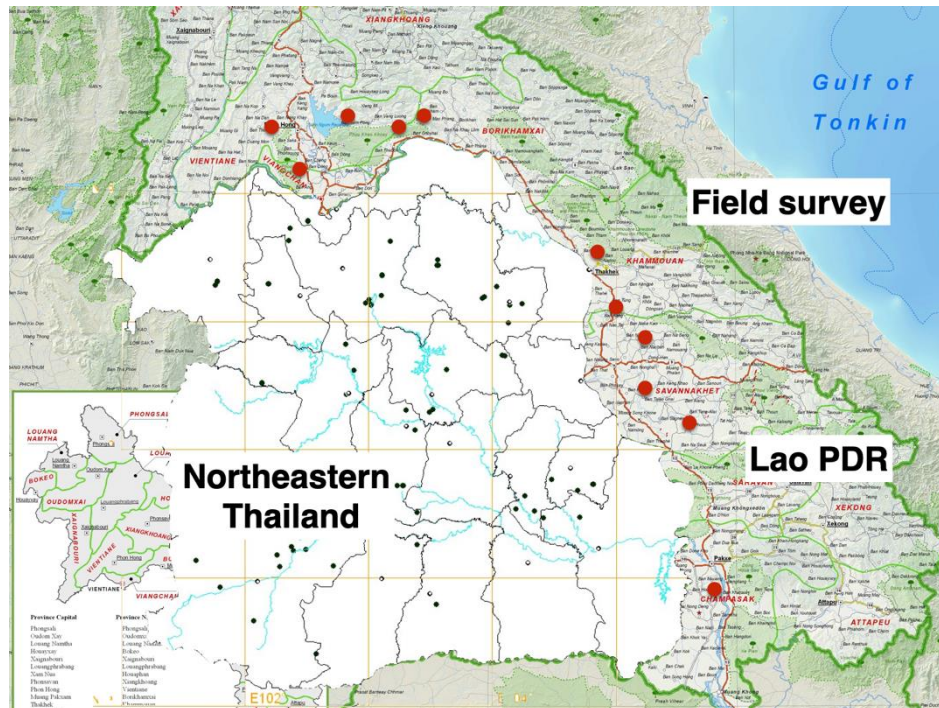


Figure 1: Map delineating the survey regions where Dvaravati culture was identified in Laos. (Derived from <https://ontheworldmap.com/laos/> as of May 11, 2023)

2. Religious Forms and Symbolism of Dvaravati Culture in Laos

This examination of Dvaravati art in Laos analyzes religious patterns and symbolism using Ralph Linton's theory of cultural diffusion (Sanya Sanyawiwat, 2002) and Peirce's semiotics to clarify the creation of spatial context as well as the explicit and implicit meanings of the artwork, which includes Buddha images, boundary stones, and Dharma wheels (Kanchana Kaewthep, 2009).

1. Statues of Buddha:

- **Style:** Dvaravati Era Images of Buddha discovered in Laos. Laos primarily consists of sandstone, originating from the 12th to 14th centuries AD, concurrent with Dvaravati art in central and northeastern Thailand. It is present in both freestanding and high-relief sculptures, reflecting influences from pre-Angkorian Khmer art. Prominent characteristics encompass standing Buddha figures exhibiting the Vitarka Mudra (gesture of teaching) with the right hand or both hands, a substantial and flat physique, and certain examples featuring a joint at the apex. Most seated Buddha representations are illustrated in a relaxed cross-legged meditation position, with both hands placed on the thighs. The visage is either round or square, adorned with a prominent hair bun. Certain statues feature a halo resembling a lotus bloom or a glass orb. The eyebrows frequently converge in a configuration resembling a crow's wing. The eyes are protruding and directed downward. The lips are full and somewhat ajar. The robes are sleek and form-fitting, featuring a U-shaped hem. Certain figures have towering objects adorned with flags, cloth streamers, whips, fans, and parasols, indicative of Khmer influence. Furthermore, they are located in clusters, often including 3 or 5 parts.

Symbolic Motifs:

- **Vitarka Mudra:** This pattern signifies the teaching of the Dharma and the inaugural sermon (Dhammacakkappavattanasutta), marking the advent of Buddhism to that region.
- **Meditation Posture:** Symbolizes the Buddha's enlightenment and the experience of liberation following that enlightenment. High-mounted decorations symbolize the Buddha's previous status as a monarch.

- **The Five Buddhas Group:** Represents the notion of the Five Buddhas in the present Bhadrakalpa. Earthenware sculptures with human features embellish buildings, symbolizing the guards safeguarding the religious site.

Contextual Space: The majority of Buddha pictures are conserved and shown in museums due to their relocation from native sites. Nevertheless, several locations retain their original state, including the Wang Chang Cave and the assemblage of Buddha images on Khao Kwai mountain adjacent to the Nam Ngum Dam, which utilize natural environments as sacred grounds.

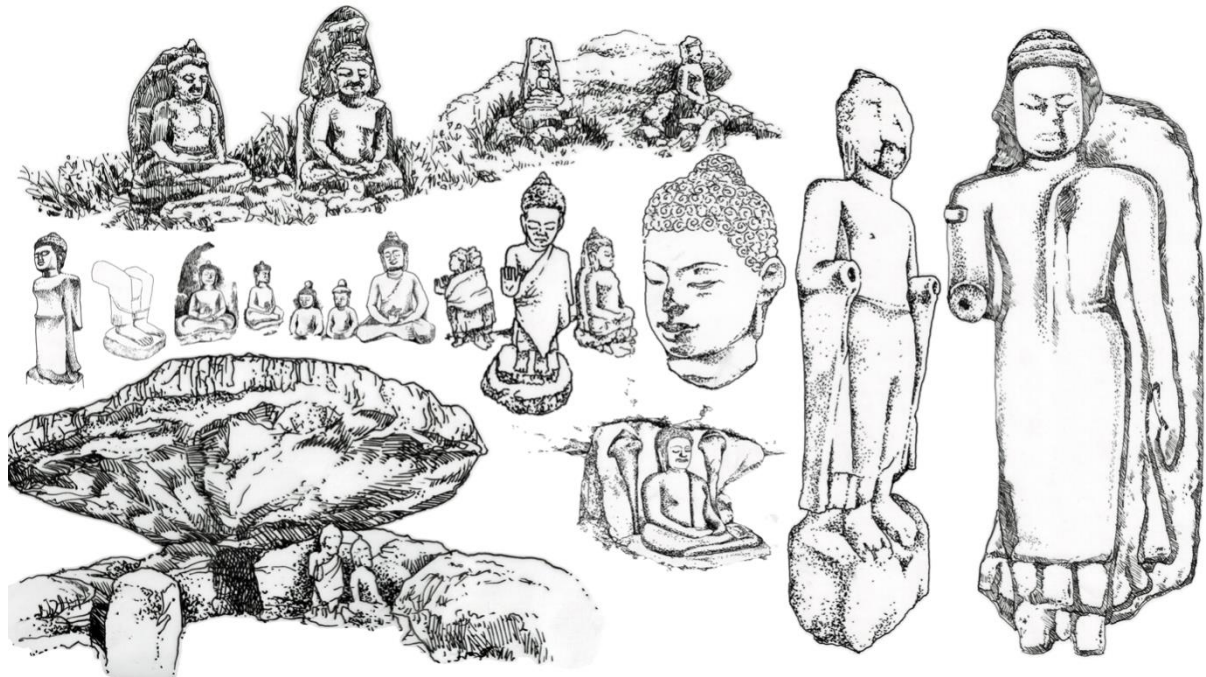


Figure 2: The line Drawing of Buddha representations from the Dvaravati civilization discovered in Laos.

- **Boundary stones:**

Style: Sima stones located in Laos, which are extensively dispersed along the Mekong River from Vientiane Province to Champasak. Dvaravati art, which originated from the 12th to 16th centuries of the Buddhist era in northeastern Thailand, influences many of the shapes. Prominent characteristics encompass natural stone columns (some with inscriptions), lotus petal motifs (including a raised central ridge or a stupa at the center), and rounded rectangular columns. The themes present consist of stupas (often sculpted as a central core), purnaghata pots (full water vessels) carved at the base or foot of the sema leaves, ornamental lotus petals, and narrative depictions (Jataka tales, particularly the Vessantara Jataka or the Ramakien epic) that exhibit Khmer influence.

Symbolic Motifs: Boundary stones serve as markers delineating the perimeter of the consecrated area within a religious site. Stupa-shaped carved boundary stones serve as symbols of pagodas and represent the Buddha. Purna-ghata pot: An emblem of prosperity, creation, and benedictions for individuals entering the temple. The narrative imagery on the border stones serves to convey stories and impart Buddhist precepts.

Contextual Space: Numerous border stones were relocated from their original sites, primarily agricultural regions, to temples or museums. Nevertheless, several boundary stones persist in their original positions, exemplified by Wat Phra Bat Dan Sung, where the natural rock cliff temple is encircled by three tiers of boundary stones in eight directions, akin to the site at Udon Thani.

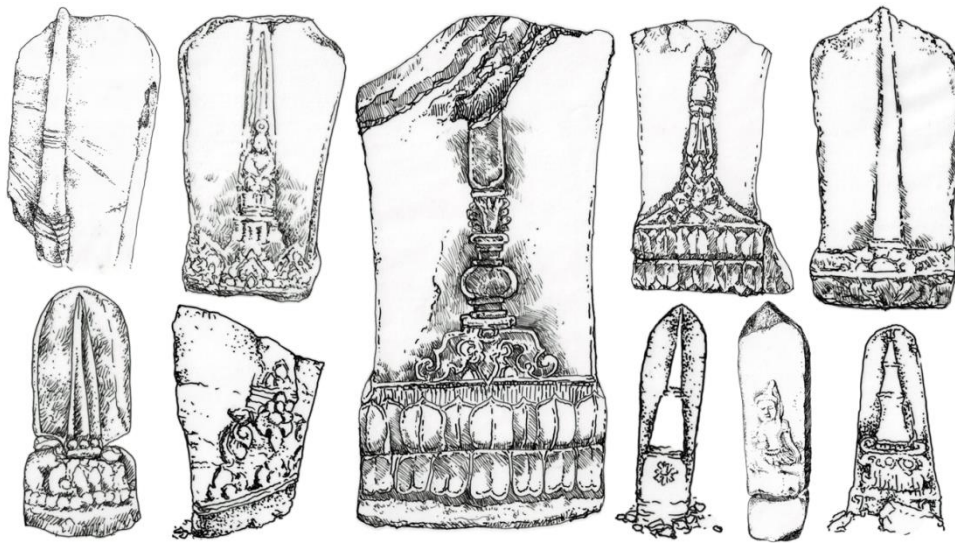


Figure 3: The line Drawing of the border stones, which are from the Dvaravati culture, were discovered in Laos.

• **The Wheel of Dharma:**

Style: A singular Dvaravati-era Dharmachakra has been discovered and exhibited at the Wat Phu Temple Museum in Champasak Province. It is sculpted from sandstone, is around fifty percent damaged, features a substantial central hub that is not perforated, and is said to have originally possessed eight spokes. The design resembles a wagon wheel, featuring a central hub, eight spokes, and an outer edge akin to saw teeth or rays of light.

Symbolic Motifs: The literal interpretation signifies a crucial emblem of Dvaravati culture, reflecting the proliferation of this cultural phenomenon. Implied meaning: A symbol of the inaugural speech (Dhammacakkappavattanasutta), representing the commencement of the proclamation and propagation of the Buddha's teachings in that specific region. The eight spokes of the wheel symbolize the Eightfold Path.

Contextual Space: Exhibited at the Wat Phu Castle Museum, a pivotal hub of Dvaravati Buddhist culture in southern Laos, linked to pre-Angkorian Khmer culture.

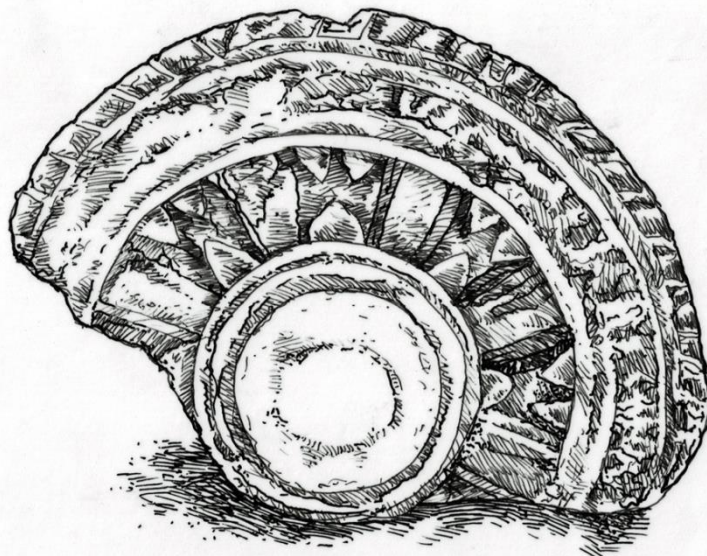


Figure 4: The line Drawing wheel of Dharma motifs from the Dvaravati civilization discovered in Laos.

Discussion

Investigation of Dvaravati Buddhist Art in the Lao People's Democratic Republic Laos employed cultural diffusion theory and semiotics, utilizing descriptive and qualitative research methodologies to gather data through literature studies, field trips, and expert interviews in both Thailand and Laos. Laos: The principal conclusions of the study can be encapsulated as follows:

1. Dvaravati Buddhist Art in Laos Dvaravati art discovered in Laos. Laos can be categorized into three primary classifications: Buddha effigies, border markers, and Dharma wheels. This constitutes compelling evidence that Dvaravati art in Laos was shaped by cultural diffusion from Thailand, especially from the Northeast, where numerous similar artworks have been discovered. The majority of Buddha pictures discovered are conserved and exhibited in governmental institutions. Prominent forms include standing Buddha pictures exhibiting the Vitarka Mudra and seated Buddha images in meditation posture, symbolically representing the teaching and dissemination of Buddhism in this region. Moreover, religious structures situated in natural locales, including the Elephant Cave and Wat Phra Bat Dan Suang, have been uncovered. Dvaravati art in Laos evolved in accordance with the second group of Dvaravati art (13th-16th centuries), influenced by Mahayana Buddhism, and the third group (15th-18th centuries), which exhibits a synthesis with indigenous art.

2. Religious Expressions and Symbolism of Dvaravati Culture in Laos Buddha images from the Dvaravati period in Laos Laos coincides with Dvaravati art in central and upper northeastern Thailand throughout the 12th to 14th centuries CE. The majority of the sculptures consist of sandstone Buddhas, both free-standing and in high relief, located along the Mekong River from Vientiane to Champasak. They exhibit a fusion of pre-Angkorian Khmer artistic elements. A significant quantity of boundary stones has been discovered in Laos, situated along the Mekong River. Many of the shapes are influenced by northern Dvaravati art from the 12th to 16th centuries CE. The Dharma wheel in Dvaravati culture serves as a significant emblem denoting the proliferation of this civilization. Only a single artifact has been discovered at the Wat Phu Museum in Champasak Province, illustrating the dissemination of Dvaravati culture to southern Laos.

Religious symbolism and the dissemination of Dvaravati culture from northeastern Thailand to Laos. Laos is home to several archaeological sites. Standing Buddha representations exhibiting the vitarka mudra symbolize the dissemination of the Dharma and signify the advent of Buddhism in this area. Seated Buddha figures in the meditation position represent the Buddha's enlightenment. Much Dvaravati art in Laos has been relocated from its original places to museums or other religious venues as a result of urban development and agricultural land use. Nevertheless, certain religious sites retain their original state, including the Wang Chang Cave and Wat Phra Bat Dan Sueng, where natural rock formations serve as enclosures for Buddha images, encircled by three tiers of boundary stones oriented in eight directions, akin to archaeological sites in Udon Thani. These boundary stones manifest in diverse forms, such as natural stone pillars, lotus petals intricately carved with stupa imagery, vessels of abundance, and narrative depictions, embodying the notion of crafting representations of the Buddha and conveying Buddhist narratives. The Dharma wheel represents the first preaching and the propagation of the Dharma.

Recommendation

This discourse on the research findings emphasizes correlating the facts acquired from the examination of Dvaravati art in Laos. Laos aligns with its historical and cultural setting. Field investigations and scholarly papers validate the presence of Dvaravati Buddhist art in

the Lao PDR. Artifacts resembling Dvaravati civilization have been discovered in 11 sites around Laos. Laos is primarily situated adjacent to the northeastern border of Thailand. This underscores that the Mekong River serves as a significant conduit for cultural dissemination, rather than merely a boundary. Buddhism disseminated from the Chao Phraya-Pasak River basin through the Northeast (Mool-Chi River basin) into the Mekong River basin in Laos, illustrating the dynamics of cultural interchange. The geographical qualities of Laos, characterized by steep mountains, led to the frequent blending and adaptation of Dvaravati art with local cultures that venerated spirits and ancestors, culminating in distinctive traits and the evolution of Lan Xang art in subsequent centuries. Unique creative techniques and religious iconography of the Dvaravati civilization in Laos. Laos possesses a culture of erecting boundary stones, originating from northern Thailand, characterized by similarities in both design and construction methodology, as well as in the tradition of situating them around religious edifices. Numerous Buddha pictures in Laos display the influence of Dvaravati; however, they have been modified to reflect local traits, culminating in a distinctive identity. The incorporation of pre-Angkorian Khmer art further highlights the intricacy of cultural exchanges in this area. Thus, analyzing the symbolism of Buddha images, boundary stones, and Dharma wheels necessitates an examination of both their original significance and their adaptation to the local context to comprehend the distinctive cultural history of Laos.

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