

5 THE PĀŚUPATA SECT IN ANCIENT CAMBODIA AND CHAMPA

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The exquisitely carved M̄y S̄on E1 temple pedestal is remarkable for multiple carvings of ascetic figures performing several functions. As in the art of neighbouring cultures, they are usually described rather vaguely as ascetics, sages or *r̄ṣ̄is*. They appear in such profusion that our eye skims over them as ornamental elements, intermingled with the floral and vegetative motifs that adorn the temples. But M̄y S̄on E1 is different. It clearly portrays ascetics performing the acts of meditation, preaching, conversing, dancing, playing musical instruments, and so on, and thus giving us a unique glimpse of their daily lives. Given the lack of Cham or Khmer texts offering to throw light on the Śaiva ritual practices of the period, this pedestal is an important and precious source of information. [Fig. 1, 2, 3]

Here the depictions of the ascetics are indeed so close that several activities can be aligned with what we know of the oldest Śaiva sect of Pāśupatas, who left epigraphic traces on the Austroasiatic mainland from the turn of the 7th century. The existence of an Indian Pāśupata sect in ancient Cambodia was first commented on by Kamaleswar Bhattacharya in 1955:

'L'existence de la secte indienne des Pācupata au Cambodge ancien a été reconnue depuis longtemps. Mais nos données, que nous devons exclusivement à l'épigraphie, sont encore dispersés. Le but de ce travail est de rassembler toutes ces informations éparses et d'étudier les problèmes qu'elles posent.'¹

Following on from Bhattacharya's exploratory paper, we look at the Śaiva textual material,



Fig. 1 M̄y S̄on E1 pedestal ascetics playing flute, drums and dancing. (River Books)



Fig. 2 M̄y S̄on E1 pedestal ascetics in the forest or a hermitage setting and teaching or conversing. (River Books)



Fig. 3 M̄y S̄on E1 pedestal ascetics in the forest or a hermitage setting teaching or conversing, meditating with a rosary in hand and playing a musical instrument (possibly a zither). (River Books)