

14 CHAM-KHMER INTERACTIONS IN 1113-1220 CE

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The Chams, unlike the neighbouring Khmers, did not seat their supreme Buddhas on the coils of a huge, multi-headed cobra.¹ Yet one of the most renowned and beautifully proportioned Khmer gilt-bronze *nāga*-enthroned Buddhas, adorned with high crown and heavy jewelry, was found in one of the huge brick *Bánh Ít* 'Silver Towers' on a hill outside the ancient Cham port of Vijaya, near modern Quy Nhơn. Speculating on how it got there takes us to the heart of the Cham-Khmer interactions that markedly intensified in the 12th century, when the Khmer empire expanded to its apogee from the reign of *Sūryavarman II* to the reign of *Jayavarman VII* (1113-c.1220 CE). John Whitmore in this volume defines for the first time an epoch-making 'Vijaya turn' in the history of this period.² The 12th century Khmer-Cham interactions have too often been characterised as continuous raiding warfare. A closer look shows a succession of friendships, and military, economic and cultural alliances, as well as confrontations, many directed against their northern neighbour, the *Đai Việt*. One of those most deeply engaged in, and affected by, the life-changing experiences of these interactions was *Jayavarman* who was to become the king who built the largest and best organised state on earth outside China by 1220 CE. The Khmer-Cham alliances ultimately had destructive consequences for both parties, as they awakened a sleeping giant who would absorb Champa and the Khmer Mekong delta in a 'movement south' (*Nam tiến*) over the ensuing centuries.

Henri Parmentier, who made his superb etching (Fig. 1) of the *Bánh Ít* bronze in 1919, was so impressed by it that he installed an entirely imaginary and wholly anachronistic stone *nāga*-Buddha as the high altar icon in his reconstruction of a *vihāra* of the late 9th century Cham Buddhist *Đồng Dương* temple, despite the fact that no *nāga*-Buddha was found there and such an icon did not appear in neighbouring Cambodia, the source country for this icon, until a century later. (Only one small stone *nāga*-Buddha, now lost, was found beside the unique Khmer bronze in

the *Bánh Ít* towers built 300 years after *Đồng Dương*).

For a century art historians have judged the graceful yet powerful *Bánh Ít* Buddha to be in the Cambodian 'Angkor Wat style' from 1113-1149 CE, the reign dates of Vaiṣṇava king *Sūryavarman II*. But no-one has attempted to explain how so many sophisticated, royal Buddhas appeared in a period when no Buddhist temples were constructed. *Sūryavarman* was devoted to Viṣṇu and there is no sign of Buddhism in his



Fig. 1 Parmentier's drawing of the *Bánh Ít/Tháp Bạc nāga-Buddha*, now accessioned as Ga 3296 in the National Museum of Cambodia, Phnom Penh.

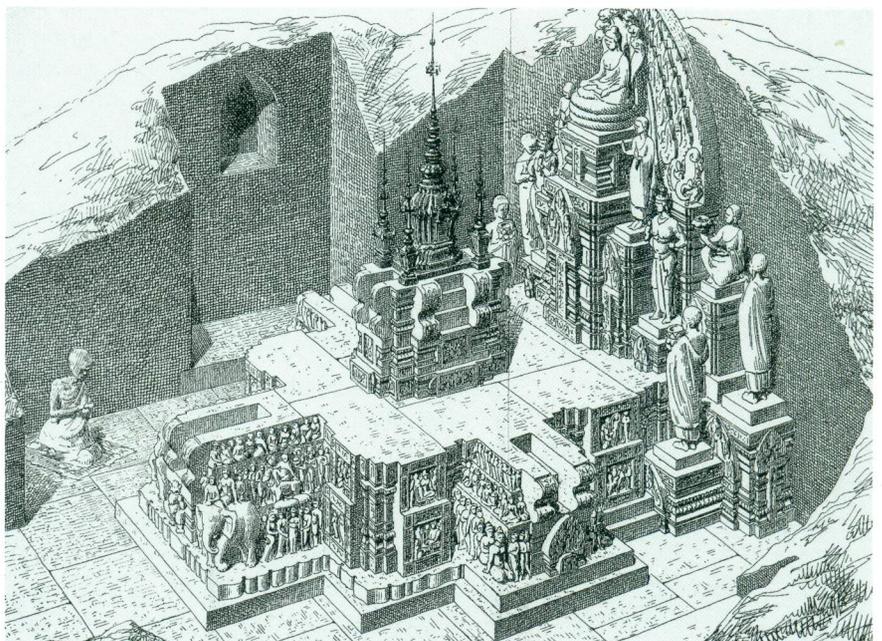


Fig. 2 Parmentier's drawing of an imagined *Đồng Dương vihāra* with *nāga-Buddha* on the high altar.