

The unclear archaeological context of the discovery of this goddess with intense eyes has not resolved whether she was a principal deity in a sanctuary or an architectural element positioned in a *candraśālā* or *kuḍu* window, as known in Indian architecture. This feminine bust was uncovered with other pieces in 1982 when a canal was under construction at An Mỹ, not far from the Chiên Đàn temple in Quảng Nam province. A report of the excavation has yet to be published. It is known however that there were several monuments at the site, including a sanctuary tower in brick, which has now disappeared. The cella of this sanctuary contained an important *līṅga* in three parts, measuring 1.70 m high, with pedestal and water channel, all now conserved in the Chiên Đàn site museum. The site also yielded two small headless statues of *dikpāla* (Indra and Yama or Īśāna) of a kind well known in Champa, as well as three busts (one male and two female), which are today in the Đà Nẵng museum. After their discovery, the three busts gave rise to multiple and divergent debates among specialists.¹ Some considered them ancient pieces of great iconographic interest, while others expressed doubts. We cannot of course resolve this issue but we will try to penetrate the matter by drawing together several remarks.

The first difficulty with these works is establishing their function: were they principal divinities placed in sanctuaries, or where they part of the architectural décor? One sculpture found in 1990 and accessioned to the Bình Định museum in 2002, is very close to this feminine bust and would incline us towards the first hypothesis because, as its base indicates, it was probably a stela destined to be positioned on an altar inside a sanctuary and not an architectural element.² The disconcerting appearance of these busts of An Mỹ, in comparison with other long-known Cham works – including the most ancient – constitutes a second obstacle to their correct evaluation. They do not in fact belong to one or other of the styles so far defined. Are they, to the best of our knowledge, doubtful? This problem arises from the fact that one always hesitates to consider dating any object from any part of Southeast Asia earlier than the 6th century. This brings grave problems of methodology. With no reference to known styles, the busts of An Mỹ may be considered as very early, even the earliest, Cham sculptures. In the light of comparisons with certain Indian works,

this becomes comprehensible and even logical – furnishing a kind of missing link between India and Champa at the period of the earliest known Cham inscriptions (4th-5th centuries). The hairstyles, and even more the jewelry, notably the ear pendants (*kundala*), are inspired directly from known models, attested from the 2nd and 3rd centuries, in the couples on the façade of the great *caitya* at Kanhērī in Mahārāṣṭra,³ or in certain images of Amarāvati.⁴ The *śīrasacakra* (nimbus) with radiating incisions, make reference to certain Indian works of the Gupta era⁵, from 4th to 5th centuries; and it is not only the modelling of the faces that fully evokes the classical Indian tradition. Many elements therefore seem to indicate that the busts of An Mỹ are not only authentic but they have a considerable importance, for the models they make reference to are precisely those that the historical data point towards. In the absence of attributes or other distinguishing signs, the identity of these deities of An Mỹ are impossible to determine. While awaiting new discoveries, that confirm or infirm the hypothesis we are formulating, it seems possible to envisage dating these works approximately to the 5th century.⁶

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- 1 Among the first were Trần Kỳ Phương, who dated them to the early 8th century (AMRH 1990 p.7 ill.3 & 4), Albert Le Bonheur, who proposed a 7th to 8th century date (Le Bonheur 1994, fig. 129 & 545), and Hồ Xuân Tịnh who preferred a late 8th-early 9th century dating (1998 (1), p. 92-4).
- 2 The sculpture has been reproduced in Ngô Văn Doanh and Nguyễn Văn Kỵ 2005 p. 276 no.334.
- 3 Heinrich Zimmer, *The Art of Indian Asia*, New York, Bollingen Foundation Inc., 1955, figs 84 & 85.
- 4 H. Sarkar and S. P. Nainar, *Amaravati*, New Delhi, Archaeological Survey of India, 1980 (2nd edition), figs 4 & 5.
- 5 Susan L. Huntington, *The Art of Ancient India – Buddhist, Hindu, Jain*, New York, John Weatherhill Inc., 1985, figs 10, 14.
- 6 The chignon of this female divinity is furthermore of the same style as a masculine divinity considered as among the earliest Cham sculptures, even though its date is hardly precise. (See Boisseier 1963 (1), p. 30-1 and fig. 7.