

46. Tympanum of Viṣṇu on Ananta

Trà Kiệu, Quảng Nam

10th century

Sandstone: H. 125 cm;

W. 140 cm; D. 40 cm.

BTC 142-18.4



It was long thought that the divinity enthroned in majesty on a large tympanum from Trà Kiệu had a feminine appearance, owing (probably?) to the chipping of the stone of the breast, and also no doubt because of being adorned with rich necklaces.¹ Thus, the iconography remained unexplained and one only had unsatisfactory hypotheses concerning the true nature of this deity. Yet even with a cursory observation of this breast, though fragmented, one sees that the image is actually masculine. The attributes and the animal itself then explain themselves with ease.

It is an unusual representation of Viṣṇu seated on Śeṣa or Ananta, serpent of the primordial waters. Viṣṇu is recognizable with his four arms (*caturbhujā*), his golden hair-cover (*mukuta*) and above all by the three attributes he holds: (from left to right and up and down) the discus (*cakṛa*), the conch (*śaṅkha*), the mace (*gadā*). His lower left hand seems to make the 'menacing finger' gesture (*tarjanī-mudrā*), which is hard to explain here. The magnificent serpent deploys its scaled concentric coils under the folded legs of Viṣṇu and forms a sumptuous nimbus of 13 grimacing

heads. They are identical with bulging eyes, gaping maw and all fit beautifully into the leaf-shaped tympanum.

But make no mistake, the iconography here is not a variant of that representing Viṣṇu meditating on Ananta (Viṣṇu Anantaśāyin) that we encountered earlier (cat. 10). Viṣṇu sits in majesty, with legs folded upon each other (*sattvaparyāṅkāśana*); he is not lying on the serpent. This iconography is met with in India, notably in the art of Bādāmi or Aihole, and corresponds with the 'primordial form' (Ādi-mūrti) of Viṣṇu, which precedes the creation of the world.²

In some aspects, certain sculptures of Trà Kiệu offer diverse signs of a certain drying-up of forms, notably in the bodily physique, where the volumes, as here, become schematized little by little. Equally, the jewelry is simplified and does not offer the same variety and the hidden details that attest to the work of the goldsmith; in many respects this Viṣṇu may be compared with the great Śivas of the musée Guimet and Đà Nẵng (cat. 74) a little later, but whose aesthetic he announces.

1 Boisselier 1963 (1), p. 209-10; Ducrest et Vandermeersch 1997, np. 122, p. 142-3.

2 S.K. Ramachandra Rao, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Iconography*, Indian Books Centre, Delhi 2003, p. 1544.