

Several interpretations have evolved about the function of this famous high relief of beautiful dancers draped in beads that is a widely acknowledged masterpiece of Cham art (AFAO-EFEO 1997: 133; Guillon 2001: 120). It was long thought to be the pedestal for an icon set in a temple-sanctum (Parmentier 1922: pl. XX and XXI; Boisselier 1963: 179-82); it has also been defined as part of the foundation wall outside a temple (Baptiste 2008: 46-54); and in the view of this author it could have been a temple an offerings altar (*bali-piṭha*) set at the entrance of a large brick temple, whose foundation was discovered during the excavation in 1927-28 at Trà Kiệu (Trần Kỳ Phương, in this volume pp. 37-44).¹

According to Parmentier, the altar was square with sides of about 2.70 meters and a height of 1.10 meters (1919: 58-60). Each side is carved with three female dancers and two musicians, making up a whole altar with twelve dancers and eight musicians (Baptiste 2008: 49, fig. 4.3).² Each dancer stands on a lotus set on a carving of two *kāla-makara* heads which spew out gazelles; each male musician holds a *tuila* (bar zither) standing on two lions. The motif of *kāla-makara* occurs across the sacred architecture of the region and adds to evidence for connections between the arts Champa and contemporary Central Java (Bosch 1931 [no.3-4]: 485-91; Stern 1942: 67, pl. 50; Boisselier 1963: 179-82). Currently, two of the carved blocks on display at Đà Nẵng Museum of Cham Sculpture, featuring two female dancers and two male musicians on the same block.

The dancer performs a sacred dance in a graceful posture found over the centuries in Cham art (including on the Mỹ Sơn E1 pedestal) and also in earlier Dvāravatī art.³ (Fig. 1) The dancer's right turns beside her large earring while the (long) left arms stretches across the torso to the right thigh; her heels cross, forming an X-shape. In a gentle yet marked movement the dancer tilts her head to her left; she wears a conical *kirīṭa-mukūṭa* with precious metal and a diadem with five fleurons, from which two small triangular hair lines appear above the temple. Her graceful eyebrows arch and meet above diamond-shaped eyes without pupils, lost in the dance -- eyes that become a feature in Cham sculpture from the late 10th to 12th centuries. Her full lips are drawn in at the corners in a smile and large bundled earrings (*kunḍala*) pull forward the ear auricle beside the face. The dancer wears



Fig. 1 Terracotta dancer of 'Dvāravatī' art, Thailand of the 7th-8th centuries at Som Det Phra Narai National Museum, Lop Buri.

upper armbands with triangular flowers of precious metal (*keyūra*), bracelets (*kaṅkana*) of triple beads (*trisara*) and triple necklaces that fall to her chest, a double waistband (*udarabhandā*) adorned with a flower and strings of multiple beads over her hips and thighs. She wears a thin wrap (*uttariya*) of fabric that shows behind her hip in a petal-shaped tie. This kind of sarong is woven from kapok trees and called 'cổ bối/cát bối' (吉貝) in contemporary Chinese records (scientific name *ceiba-pentandra*) (Wade 2011: 142).⁴ Rows of beads in Cham sculpture in the 11th-12th centuries, replaced the gold and silver adornments of the 9th-10th centuries in the *Đông Dương* style (c.875 CE).

The musician standing on the left of the dancer plays a popular string instrument in

3 In Dvāravatī, this dance gesture appears on a terra cotta bas-relief representing a male dancer dancing; his left leg is on tiptoe; his head tilts to the right; he wears a *kirīṭa-mukūṭa* with conical chignon, a big circular earrings, adornments with small flower/fleuron at the upper arm and a long dhoti with the waistband dropping down in front; his left forearm curved outwardly along the torso to the right thigh; his left hand folded in V-shape towards the head. His clothing and dance position are completely similar to the *apsaras* on Trà Kiệu altar. This dancing work of Dvāravatī art dated to 7-8th century, on display at Som Det Phra Narai National Museum, Lop Buri; and the same one at U Thong National Museum, U Thong, Thailand (U Thong National Museum 2005: Acc. no. 29/2543). The similar dance gesture of Dvāravatī and Cham arts showing somewhat of the art relationship between the two arts as considered by art historians in the context of the cultural communications through the overland route in the whole region.

4 This tree is still common in Central Vietnam, but the residents now use its cotton for pillows.