

72. Relief with dancers

Quy Nhơn, Bình Định
12th century
Sandstone: H. 30 cm;
W. 69 cm; D. 26 cm
BTC 209-45.6



This fragment of a frieze displays a row of dancers like those on the contemporary Khmer temples of Angkor Wat and Bayon. They stand on one foot with knee bent and the other knee is drawn up high. The pose appears to be a variant of the *ardhaparyanka* (half cross-legged) and known in temple reliefs in Cambodia and Java. A garland or flower hangs between each dancer. The brief skirt, with its elaborate low-slung belt has pendants and a long sash, resembling the figures depicted on the friezes of the 'hall with dancers' in Jayavarman VII's Angkor temples of Preah Khan, Ta Prohm, Banteay Kdei and the Bayon. Such dancing women first appeared at the Khmer temple of Phimai (now northeast Thailand) at the start of the mostly Buddhist Mahidharapura dynasty and the motif was carried over to the Vaiṣṇava temple of Angkor Wat and the subsequent Jayavarman VII temples. Michael Vickery speculates that Jayavarman VII, during his long sojourn in Champa from circa 1150-62, may have personally observed the beautiful dancers of Trà Kiệu the beautiful dancers of Trà Kiệu '... in

a more complete state of preservation than when they were discovered by the French.¹

The relief is not as deeply carved or ornate as its Khmer counterparts, but the dynamic rhythm of the composition is aesthetically striking. Noteworthy is the hand gesture or mudra in which fingers are bent backwards towards the wrist and held in this position for a long period. The technique is central to the choreography of the classical Khmer ballet today and is retained in contemporary Cham dance. The high status accorded to dancers in Cham society is noted by historian Lê Văn Hào notes how Cham musicians and dancers seem to have been a prized target of raids by the Đại Việt court in the 10th century, as well as the royal welcome a large group of captives received in the 11th century.²

Given the collapsed state of most of the Cham temple sites it is difficult to know the architectural context of this broken piece but the Khmer evidence raises the question of whether there was a Cham equivalent of the 'halls with dancers' Jayavarman VII added to his temples.

1 Michael Vickery, 'Bayon: New Perspectives Reconsidered', *Udaya*, p. 62.

2 *Sources of Vietnamese Tradition*, Eds. George E. Dutton, Jayne S. Werner, and John K. Whitmore, page 83.