

73. Phong Lê Temple foundation gold deposits

Cấm Mít and Phong Lê
temples,
Đà Nẵng City
12th century
BTC 2459; BTC 2460;
BTC 2461



These gold pieces cut into elephant shapes were found at Cấm Mít temple. The museum's collection of temple foundation deposits (*dépôts sacrés*) emerged from the excavations at Phong Lê and Cấm Mít in Đà Nẵng City in 2011-12. Earlier discoveries of *dépôts sacrés*, with numerous gold and silver objects in mostly intact condition, were made in Po-Nagar of Nha Trang (Parmentier 1906, 1909) and at Đại Hữu of Quảng Bình (Arrouseau 1926). In other cases, it was reported that the *dépôts sacrés* had been looted before excavations began, as in the temples of Mỹ Sơn (Parmentier 1918: 588, 589) and Trà Kiệu (Claeys 1927: 473-475). Phong Lê and Cấm Mít were similarly looted.

The excavation at the foundation revealed a square cavity or foundation cell whose substantial walls were built of brick (Phong Lê temple, fig 1) or a hard-pressed mixture of clay and broken brick (Cấm Mít temple, Fig. 2).

The objects collected from Phong Lê and Cấm Mít are not the principal treasures placed at the centre of the foundation cells, which must have been looted. Rather they were objects found in niches at the bottom of walls of the foundation cells. The foundation cells of Phong Lê (a single main temple) and Cấm Mít (three-temple-complex) have the similar structure with eight niches at the bottom level, two in each wall.

The collection includes five groups: (1) the tiny pieces of gold, which were put at the bottom of the niche; (2) square bricks and egg-shaped pebbles, placed on the pieces of gold; (3) small blocks of quartz, which were set in front of the niche; (4) the transparent beads in the sand of the cell bottom; (5) gold pieces cut in the shape of elephants and found in broken ceramic pot. Groups 1, 2, 3 were present in both the Phong Lê foundation and the Cấm Mít foundation. Group 4 and 5 were found in the excavation of Cấm Mít relics.

These objects deposited in the foundation of Cham temples reflect Brahmanical temple prescriptions in architectural texts such as the *Kāśyapaśilpa* text of the 11th-12th centuries. This text describes key steps of *Prathameṣṭakā-nyāsa* (placing of the first bricks), *Garbha-nyāsa* (placing of the consecration deposit) and *Mūrdeṣṭakā-nyāsa* (placing of the crowning bricks). The *Garbha-nyāsa* ritual governs the placement of a 'consecration deposit' to ensure the protection and blessing of the deities of the place. 'The temple is said to be the body. The consecration deposit is its "life-breath". One should have the *garbha* installed in the same location where the first bricks are placed.' (Slaczka 2007). The eight niches with pieces of gold, as discovered at Phong Lê and Cấm Mít, appear to relate to the eight cardinal directions of the *Vāstuśilpa-śāstra*, the ancient temple construction manual.

Fig. 1 Foundation cell of Phong Lê temple.

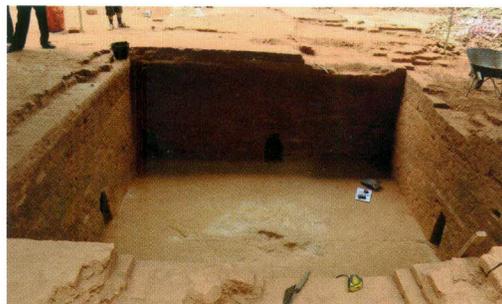


Fig. 2. Foundation cell of Cấm Mít temple.

