

A STONE CASKET FROM SATIṆPRA

By

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Satiṅpra is situated on a low narrow sandspit about 50 km. north of the entrance to the Inland Sea of Soṅkhlā. Since the entrance is silting up very rapidly it would seem that only a few hundred years ago Satiṅpra was actually at the mouth of the Inland Sea, which must then have provided an excellent anchorage. The old town site is quite small, measuring about 350 yards square, surrounded by a low brick wall and moat, at present about 200 yards from the Gulf coast. It seems more probable that it acted as a kind of outpost or emporium for Pataluṅ, on the western shore of the Inland Sea, than that it had much entity of its own. The modern amphū' office is just to the south of the old enclosure, which is mainly occupied by a school and football ground. Everywhere the sandy soil is thickly sown with potsherds, among which I noticed many fragments of Sung celadons. When these are considered in conjunction with the various chance finds that have been donated to the small museum set up in recent years at Wat Majjhimawās, Soṅkhlā, it may be supposed that Satiṅpra flourished in the Śrīvijaya period (VIIIth-XIIIth centuries A.D.).

These finds are said to have been made not in the old town itself, but at various points around, in the course of road-making, well-digging, and other modern developments. They include a number of small Mahāyānist and Śaivite bronzes, a stone Gaṇeśa (height 15 in.) seated in the Indian attitude of royal ease, a fine stone torso of Śrīvijayan style (height 2 ft. 3 in.), as well as a cast of the black stone mitred Viṣṇu found in the neighbourhood many years ago, the original being in the Bangkok museum. There were also specimens of bricks, tiles, and one or two architectural fragments (including a balustrade terminal), which indicate that the remains of sanctuaries must exist in or near Satiṅpra. It was amongst these miscellaneous items that my eye was particularly attracted by the stone casket which forms the subject of this article.

This casket measured roughly $6\frac{1}{2}$ in. square with a height of $4\frac{1}{2}$ in. Its appearance was plain, but for two parallel lines incised on each face, and it was not provided with feet. It was of solid limestone, except that on the smooth upper surface, five square depressions (about one inch deep) had been cut, the central one $1\frac{1}{4}$ in. square with four slightly smaller ones intended presumably to be at cardinal points. These five depressions were devoid of contents. A roughly pyramidal stone lid (somewhat damaged superficially), also of height $4\frac{1}{2}$ in. exactly fitted the upper surface.

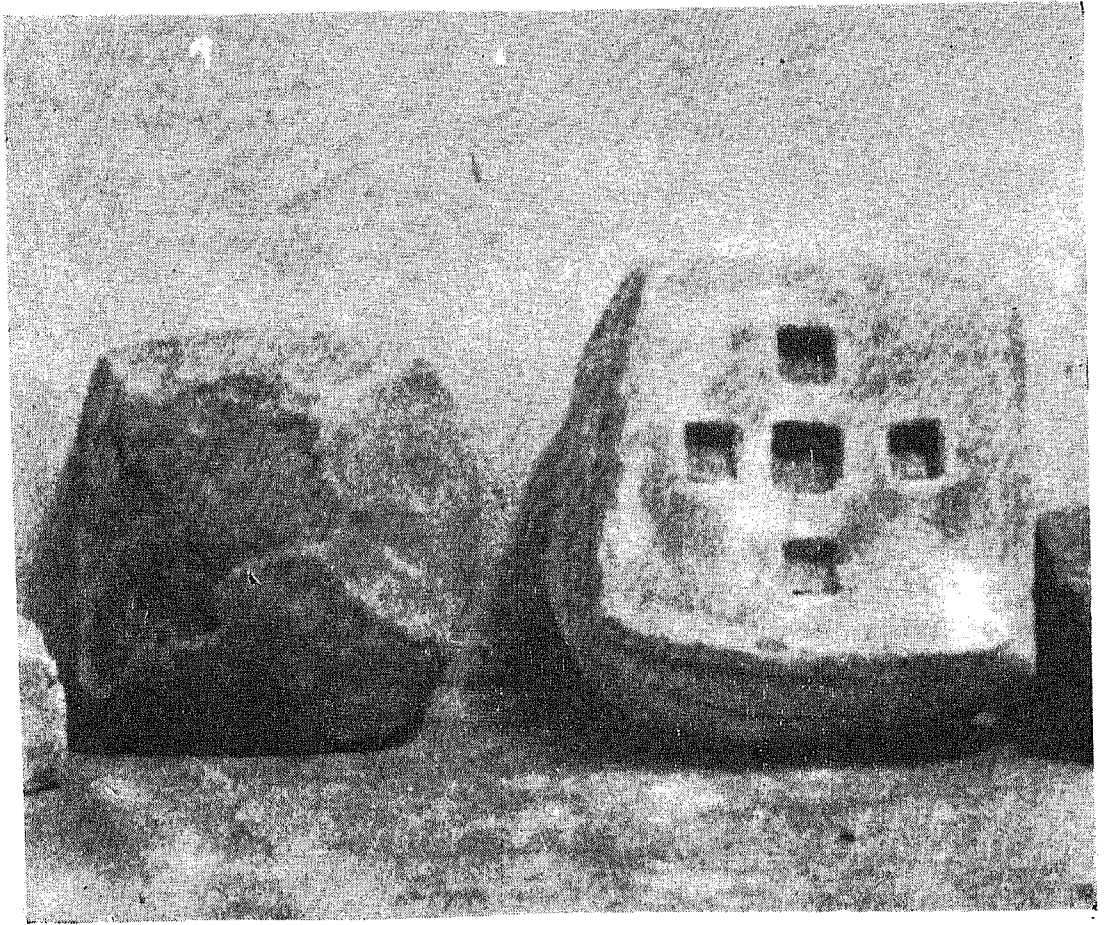
This casket is of special interest because it represents the simplest and probably basic form of a series of comparable objects, the purpose of which has aroused a certain amount of controversy. I am thinking primarily of the nine-chambered stone receptacles, also provided with lids, of which I found two empty ones at Site 8 (Bukit Batu Pahat), Kedah,¹ where Dr. A. Lamb subsequently found six more intact ones containing a number of small objects.² It appeared that these eight receptacles had been buried at the cardinal and sub-cardinal points in the sanctuary wall. I had originally supposed that these caskets had the same function as the nine-holed receptacles buried in *chandis* or tomb-temples in Java, in which the central hole contained a portion of a dead king's ashes. But subsequently³ I corrected this view after M. Coedès had pointed out⁴ that when such receptacles contain only gold or gems, with no trace of ash or bones, they are likely to be only foundation deposits serving to consecrate the temple site in accordance with foundation rites described in the Hindu architectural treatises. Since there was no convincing evidence of ash or bone relics in the Kedah receptacles, it seemed that they were foundation deposits and this view receives support from there being eight such receptacles placed in such a way as by magical means to make the temple a microcosm. Even if there had been a further central receptacle, human relics would be required as evidence for a burial custom comparable to that of the

1 H.G. Quaritch Wales, "Archaeological Researches in Indian Colonization in Malaya" *JRAS* (Malayan Branch), Vol. XVIII, pt. 1, p. 20 and pl. 32.

2 A. Lamb, *Chandi Bukit Batu Pahat*, Singapore, 1960. Section 5.

3 H.G. Quaritch Wales, "Recent Malayan Excavations" *JRAS*, 1946, p. 144.

4 *BEFEO*, Vol. XL, 1940, p. 331, note 2.



Stone casket and lid from Satinpra



Majapahit Javanese. It seemed to me therefore, that the Javanese practice, for which evidence was lacking in Kedah, was an adaptation of an originally Indian usage to the requirements of royal ancestor worship and the tomb-temple.

Dr. Lamb, however, in accordance with the whole tendency of his conclusions to magnify the importance of "Indonesian" as against Indian influences in the ancient cities and routes of the Malay Peninsula, seeks to deny the Indian origin of the multi-chambered casket. He has tried to crystallize this in the title of his book, and on a notice board erected over site 8: "*Chandi* Bukit Batu Pahat." For him, presumably, the Satipra casket would also come from a *chandi*.

With the exception of the Pallava style Viṣṇu, most of the objects found at Satipra are Śrīvijayan products. As I have indicated elsewhere,¹ Śrīvijaya was in general more strongly influenced by India than was Java, so I do not think we should be too ready to attribute an "Indonesian" origin to this casket, nor to suppose that its significance was funerary. Both in Peninsular Siam and in Kedah, where we know that Indian influences were intense, whether coming direct or through the intermediary of Śrīvijaya, we should surely expect to see the results of such influences. Consequently much must depend on whether we can point to an Indian prototype for multi-chambered receptacles.

Dr. Lamb answers this vital question in the negative, mainly on the authority of Dr. Sivaramamurti, curator of the Indian National Museum, who could tell him nothing definite. I also enquired of the same authority, who replied in the same way with the possibly significant amplification that he thought there had been no excavation beneath temples in India, and if there had been such objects might have been mislaid. Still persisting in my search for an Indian prototype I eventually called to mind the *yantra-galas* which I had seen many years before at Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa in Ceylon. These are large stone or brick-built receptacles of either nine or twenty-five (5×5) compartments, and some of them have been

1 *JRAS*, loc. cit., p. 148; *The Making of Greater India*, 2nd. edition, 1961, Chap. II.

found *in situ*. The Archaeological Survey Reports of Ceylon give numerous examples. Thus at Polonnaruwa a nine-holed *yantra-gala* of stone, covered by a stone slab acting as lid, was found beneath a *stūpa*;¹ one with twenty-five compartments was found under a Śiva temple (*Śivadevale*), beneath the spot where formerly an image stood;² while a similar one was excavated beneath the great standing Buddha in the Jetavanarama shrine.³ In this case one row of five compartments still retained its contents, consisting of three tiny elephants and three terracotta plaques, with lotus, vase and swastika emblems. Another similar receptacle, found under the Topavewa *stūpa*,⁴ had the contents of thirteen of its compartments intact. On the basis of the finds, Bell was able to deduce that an intact *yantra-gala* probably also contained three images of each of the other animals of the quarters (lion, horse and bull), and also figurines of the regents of the quarters.

So Ceylon provides adequate confirmation of the original purpose of multi-chambered caskets with their foundation deposits: it was to ensure by magical means that the shrine, image, or *stūpa* erected above them had the power and attributes of a microcosm. This end could be attained by appropriate arrangement and contents even when the number of compartments was elaborated to twenty-five.

In the case of a *stūpa* there existed a natural affinity between a Buddhist relic and the centre of the *yantra-gala*, or foundation deposit receptacle, because such association placed the relic at the axis of the microcosm. In the Pabalu *stūpa*, Polonnaruwa, a glass Buddhist reliquary, from which the relic was missing because the stopper had fallen out, was actually found in the central hole of a nine-holed *yantra-gala*, which was intact with all the animals of the quarters.⁵ But the more usual arrangement is exemplified by a Xth century *stūpa* at Dādigama, Ceylon, where there was a very large

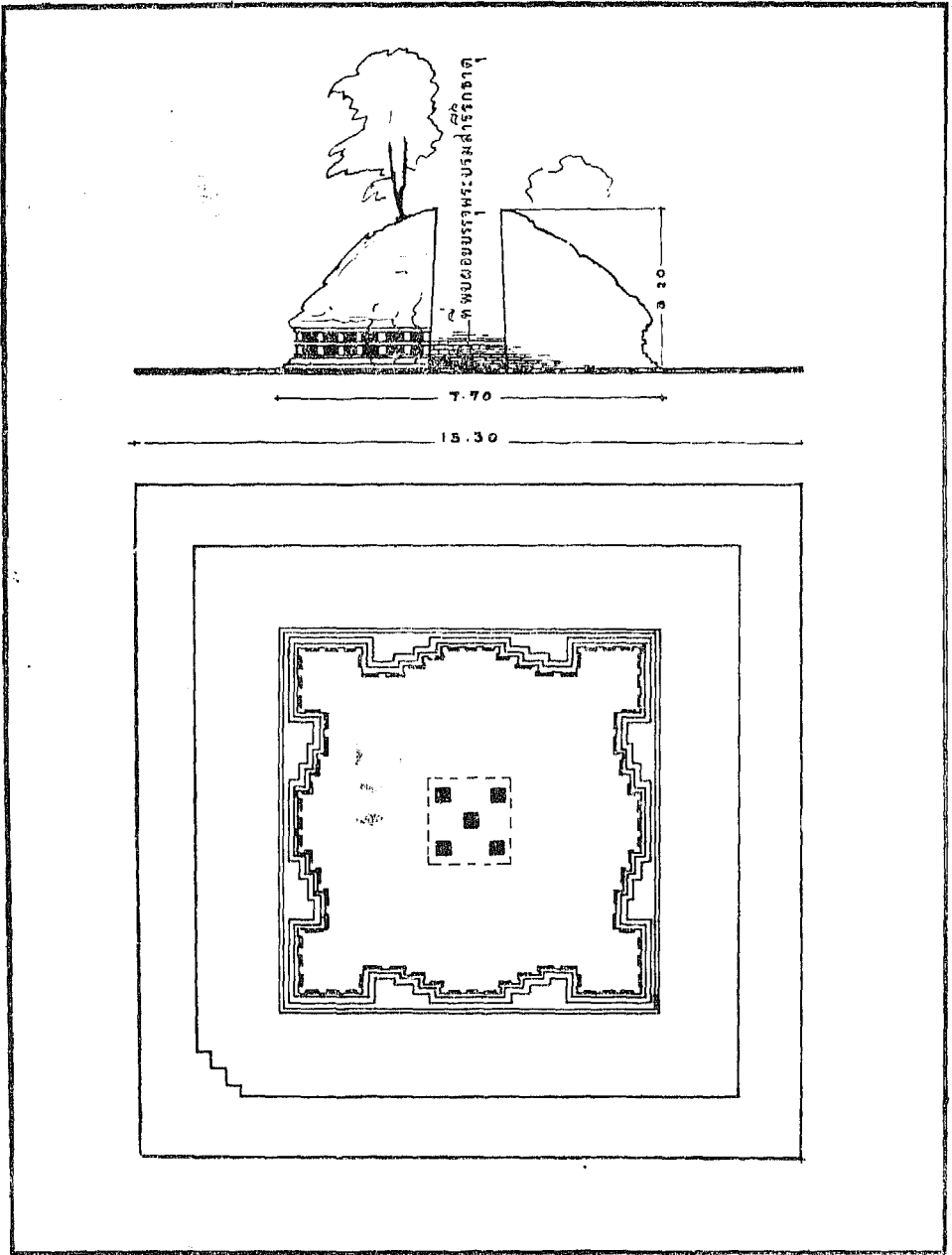
1. *Annual Report, Arch. Survey of Ceylon* for 1897, p. 5.

2. *ibid.*, for 1902, p. 8.

3. *ibid.*, for 1910-11, p. 32.

4. *ibid.*, for 1909, p. 28.

5. *ibid.*, for 1938, p. 19, pl. 4.



Plan of Stupa No. 1 at Ku Bua



nine-compartmented brick-built *yantra-gala* measuring nearly 26 ft. square.¹ Here the Buddhist relic was enclosed in a brick "box-like structure", built above the central chamber of the *yantra-gala*. S. Pavarānavitana in his book *The Stūpa in Ceylon* (p. 23) recognizes that the *yantra-gala* itself is not a reliquary, and is found beneath non-Buddhist edifices also.

A similar relationship between foundation deposits and Buddhist reliquary apparently existed also in Dvāravatī, judging by some evidence provided by *Stūpa* No. 1 at Ku Bua, Ratburi. There the silver and gold containers of the Buddhist relic were found, it seems from the published plan² in or above the central hole of a five-holed "*yantra-gala*". So it would appear that the simplest and probably basic five-holed form was favoured in Siam both at Satijōra and Ku Bua.

The evidence adduced above leaves no doubt as to the Indian origin of the multi-chambered foundation deposit receptacles. Indeed, as we can see to-day among such marginal peoples as Bataks and Dayaks, the *yantra* (or *maṇḍala*), as providing a well-defined image of the universe, was one of the first pieces of superior magical equipment that the peoples of South-east Asia were anxious to acquire from their Indian *gurus*.³ The placing of a Buddhist relic at the cosmic centre in a *stūpa* was a development which undoubtedly smoothed the way for the Javanese to take the further step of adapting the foundation deposit casket to the requirements of royal ancestor worship.

1. *ibid.*, for 1955.

2. Guide to Antiquities found at Koo Bua, Ratburi, Bangkok, 1961, p. 32.

3. Cf. H.G. Quaritch Wales, "The Cosmological Aspect of Indonesian Religion", *JRAS*, 1959, pp. 100-139.

