

A WARRIOR-RULER STELE FROM ŚRĪ KṢETRA, PYU, BURMA

John Guy*

Abstract

Beginning to construct a chronology of Pyu sculpture is exceedingly difficult. An extraordinary stone stele, discovered at Śrī Kṣetra in the 1970s presents a new dimension to our understanding of the origins of the Pyu sculptural style. It invites comparison with Indian prototypes of the early centuries AD from Andhra Pradesh, especially the low relief panels favoured for stupa decoration at Nagarjunakonda and related sites of the Iksavakus and Visnukundins rulers (c. third to sixth centuries AD). It also exhibits what one suspects is a strong indigenous aesthetic but for which comparative material is exceedingly scarce. Given the nature of the Pyu cultural context in which this sculpture was found, I would provisionally suggest a fifth century date.

The stele, over 1.5 metres in height, depicts a warrior-king, accompanied by two standard bearers, holding a *garuḍadhvaja* and what appears to be a *cakradhvaja* respectively. Portable standards were used as emblems of rank and in the Indian epics no warrior of note appears without one. Associated with rulers and heroes in early India, *dhvajās* were always displayed by noble warriors as a source of magical power to assure victory. The *garuḍadhvaja* in India is linked with Vishnu and kings, and taken together with the *cakradhvaja*, a warrior symbol, suggests a Vaisnavite allegiance amongst the ruling elite of Śrī Kṣetra (as also supported by sculptural evidence from Śrī Kṣetra). This rests uneasily with the overwhelmingly Buddhist nature of the site in its later history.

This paper is concerned with the cultural activity of the Pyu, who occupied central and upper Burma in the first millennium AD. Little is known about their origin, though they employed a written script which has links to southern India.¹ The bulk of the archaeological data for this period was obtained through excavations of Pyu urban settlements in upper and central Burma (Aung Thaw 1972). It is surely significant that the Pyu were recognized by the Chinese, in the *Hou Han Shu* (2nd century AD), as a civilized people (Wheatley 1983: 167), perhaps reflecting the Pyu's early adoption of Buddhism.

A later Chinese source, *Man Shu* by Fan Ch'ō, AD 863 (Luce 1961: 90), endorsed this view:

* John Guy is Deputy Curator of Indian and Southeast Asian Art, Victoria & Albert Museum, London SW7 2RL.

[The people of] the [P'iao = Pyu] kingdom use a silver coinage. They use green bricks to make the walls surrounding their city. It is one day to walk around it. The common people all live within the city-wall. There are twelve gates. In front of the gate of the palace where the king of [this] kingdom dwells, there is a great image seated in the open air, over a hundred feet high, and white as snow ... The people's nature is friendly and good ... They reverence the Law of the Buddha. Within the city there is absolutely no taking of life. Also there are many astrologers who tell fortunes by the stars.

This graphic description, most probably of the northern Pyu city of Halin, was written by a Chinese official who served in

Yunnan and Annam during the closing years of the Tang dynasty. He describes the urbanized nature of the Pyu settlements, arguably the most advanced in mainland Southeast Asia in this period. The Pyu, however, gradually succumbed to pressure from the rising power of the Burmans and were absorbed into the Pagan state. The last traces of them appear at Pagan in the quadrilingual inscription erected by King Rajakumar in AD 1113. Soon after this, the Pyu disappeared from the records. Yet their legacy survived as a folkloric memory in the chronicles of the Burmans and the name of 'Śrī Kṣetra', linked to their premier capital, assumed a mythic role in later Burmese history making.

The central zone of Burma shows archaeological evidence of continuous occupation at sites associated with the Pyu from as early as the first century AD (Aung Thaw 1972: 9). It is evident from the major Pyu sites investigated to date, namely Halin, Beikthano and Śrī Kṣetra, that the Pyu were among the first people in mainland Southeast Asia to embark upon a high level of urbanization. Their settlements are characterised by walled and moated enclosures, within which (according to the *Man Shu*) the bulk of the population lived. These urban settlements were rectangular, and large by pre-modern standards: the city of Śrī Kṣetra (Prome) is defined by a fired-brick perimeter wall eight and a half miles long; Halin by a six mile wall and the Beikthano urban centre covers an area of three and a half square miles (Luce 1985; Stargardt 1990).

The extent of Pyu culture has only become clear as postwar archaeology has built up a store of information from these sites which have shared characteristics and point to a common culture. Inscriptional evidence confirms the common ethnicity of these peoples. The Pyu, whom we define by the use of the largely undeciphered Pyu script, established their urban centres at sites as far north as Halin (near Shwebo, north of Mandalay), and in Central Burma (Beikthano and Śrī Kṣetra). In addition, there is evidence of a Pyu presence, possibly cohabit-

ing with the Mon, as far south as the gulf region around Pegu.

The Pyu urban settlements contain within their walls (and sometimes beyond) brick structures. Most of these can be identified as religious, notably stupas (Beikthano and Śrī Kṣetra) and assembly halls and cellular monastic residences (Beikthano). It is in association with these structures that the sculptures and other objects chronicling the religious and ceremonial life of the Pyu have been found. These objects, and the handful of surviving (and heavily restored) monuments, constitute the single most important body of knowledge about the life of the Pyu and record the considerable achievements of an otherwise lost early culture of Southeast Asia.

Pyu sculpture

The most substantial artistic legacy of the Pyu is religious sculpture. The bulk of this is Buddhist, but isolated examples of Hindu imagery also survive, some of which appear to date from the Pyu period. By far the largest group of sculptures is from Śrī Kṣetra, lending weight to this city being the focus of sustained patronage and royal endowment (Taw Sein Ko 1914: 113-23; Duroiselle 1915: 141-4, 1928: 118-21, 1930: 171-83, 1931: 127-32, 1933: 105-9). Pyu Buddhism was fused onto an indigenous set of beliefs, including animistic nature cults. An unusual example of the localization of Buddhism is evident in the continued use of stone urns for the interment of royal ashes, as witnessed by large stone urns located within the city walls.² Variants of this custom were widely practised throughout Southeast Asia. Another possible expression of a 'megalithic' legacy is to be seen in the Pyu's insistence on retaining the monolithic stone stele when sculpting religious imagery. This is a particularly striking aspect of the Buddhist stele sculptures, which are monumental slabs, worked on one side in low relief. The megalithic aspect is strengthened by the uniquely Pyu device of forming groups of such stones, usually as

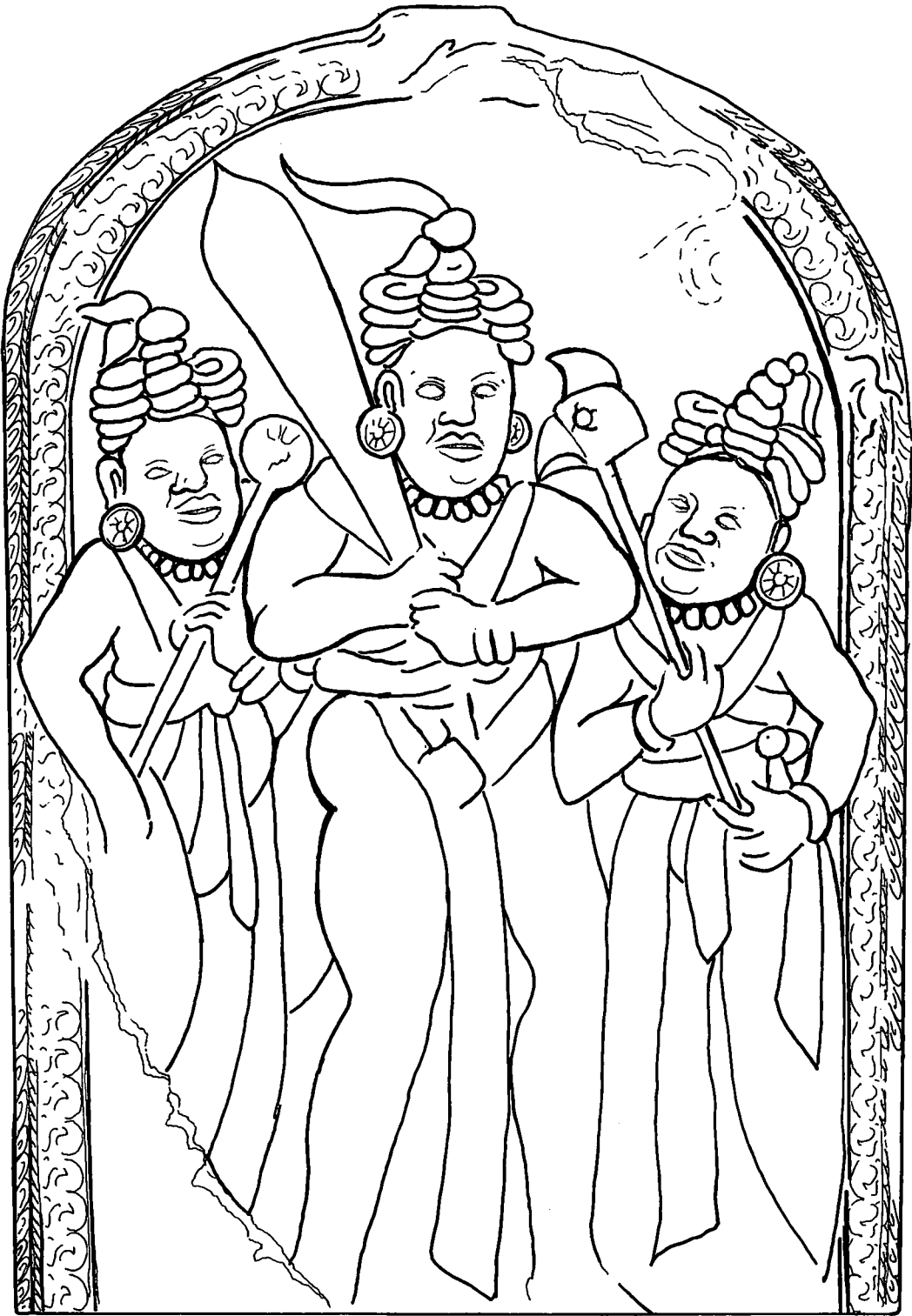


Figure 1. Line drawing of stele relief depicting a warrior-king. Discovered at Śrī Kṣetra in the 1970s. Pyu. Sandstone, ht. c. 1.5 m.

two confronting triads, in an as yet unexplained configuration. Could these belong to a similar tradition seen at Sudhammapura (Thaton) in lower Burma and throughout the Mon kingdom of Dvaravati, where *semas* were installed to signify the boundaries of ritually important spaces?³ In the Mon context, the *baisemas* (lit: leaf boundary markers) were installed to demarcate areas within which Buddhist monks could assemble and perform prescribed ceremonies. Such distinctive practises in the Mon and Pyu context very probably share a common pre-Buddhist ancestry rooted in the installation of ritual stones.

Beginning to construct a chronology of Pyu sculpture is exceedingly difficult. In this context, I want to focus on a stone stele, discovered within the city walls at Śrī Kṣetra in the 1970s (Figure 1). The carved surface of the sandstone stele is over 1.5 metres in height, 96 cm in width and an average of 10 cm in depth. The stele has a rounded top and is decorated in low relief on the front, reverse and sides.

This stele is important for our understanding of the origins of the Pyu sculptural style and for the sets of beliefs that it points to regarding kingship, secular authority and religious legitimization. Its significance is enhanced by the secular nature of the subject-matter, an armed warrior-figure with standard bearers, which I have titled 'warrior-ruler'.

The large figure, who occupies the centre of the stele, clasps a massive club in his right hand, the weight of which rests on his shoulder. Together with his attendants, he is dressed in a short dhoti-style waist-cloth with pendant sash. Other sashes criss-cross the chest and he wears jewellery, notably a heavy torque and bracelets. He also wears a headcloth tied into an elaborate turban which probably conceals long uncut hair, the end of which is seen fluttering from the chignon. Extended earlobes contain large disc or ear-plug ornaments. Direct parallels to this figure and, as I will argue, near contemporary ones, are to be seen in the silver repoussé plaques of club-bearing guardian figures

from the Khin Ba reliquary hoard. They exhibit the same robust physique and posture, flamboyant hairstyles and chest and ear ornaments (Figure 2).

The reverse of the stele depicts a seat and throne back with *makara*-terminal cross-bar as seen on Buddha image thrones of early Pyu sculpture, such as the Khin Ba silver reliquary (Figure 5). The empty throne is flanked by two female attendants who appear to be holding, or perhaps supporting, the seat. A floral medallion pattern fills the upper section of the backslab.

The warrior-ruler is flanked by two figures who are represented on a smaller scale, appropriate to their rank. They exhibit the same costume features as the central figure and may be interpreted as men of authority, perhaps noblemen or sons of the ruler. More significantly, they have a specific role as bearers of the standards (*dhvajās*) of office. They hold a *garuḍadhvaja* and a *cakradhvaja* respectively, standards surmounted with symbols evocative of kingship and religious affiliation. These devices are highly significant in this context, serving to enhance the status and authority of the ruler through the adaptation of an Indian value system.

The portable standards are signifiers of authority and sectarian allegiance. They were used in India as emblems of rank and in the epics and puranic literature no warrior of note appeared without one. *Dhvajās* carried the emblem of the ruling dynasty, usually linked to the household's presiding deity and variously represented as one of the deity's attributes or as his vehicle (*vāhana*). They are regularly associated with kings and heroes in early Indian literature and were displayed as a source of magical power and protection. The display of a *dhvaja* was seen as mandatory to ensure victory.

The *garuḍadhvaja* in India is closely linked with Vishnu – Garuḍa being Vishnu's sacred vehicle. Textual sources speak of Vishnu with a garuḍa-banner, 'the god whose banner bears the bird, discus in hand'.⁴ However, no sculptural depictions of Vishnu with *garuḍadhvaja* are known in this early period. *Garuḍadhvaja* are associated with

kings on Gupta gold coins of the fourth and fifth centuries.⁵ In this stele Garuḍa is represented only by the head of a beaked bird, the body being omitted.

In pre-Gupta Indian art Garuḍa was represented in a variety of hybrid forms, part avian and part anthropoid. In the Gupta Period the hybrid nature of Garuḍa persists, but with a tendency for an anthropomorphic head with beaked nose to replace the eagle's head, whilst preserving the feathered body which increasingly assumed an upright, human-like posture. The bird's head on this relief is clearly at odds with this trend in Gupta representations, analysed by Ellen Raven in her 1991 dissertation (Raven 1994). Whether this form of Garuḍa represents another stream of iconographic development in Indian art, notably the Andhra regions of southern India with which the sculptural style of this relief has clear affinities, or

is an early manifestation of an indigenous Southeast Asian interpretation of this Indian concept, is unclear. A convention did emerge in Southeast Asian art of representing Garuḍa either with a bird's head and an only part-human body (Luce 1985: pl. 49), or fully avian but standing in a human-manner, as often seen in Khmer and Thai art. The Pyu *garuḍadhvaja* under discussion could be interpreted as providing a progenitor for this Southeast Asian convention, widely seen in Mon, Khmer, Cham, Thai and Javanese art.

The second standard is surmounted by a *cakra*, a circular discus or wheel which carries a number of meanings. It is often characterized as a sun symbol and used to evoke a solar aspect of Vishnu's cosmogony. The link between Vishnu as Preserver and the solar association of the *cakra* is by no means clear in the earliest sources and is most



Figure 2. Repoussé images of *dvārapālas* from the reliquary chamber of the Khin Ba mound, excavated in 1926-27, near Kalagangon village, Śrī Kṣetra. Pyu, late 5th century. Silver gilt. National Museum, Rangoon.

probably a later interpretation. Rather, the epic literature stresses the *cakra* as one of the most ancient and fearsome of weapons. Clearly it was intended to evoke a protective aspect when linked to a deity and, by implication, to a ruler. Vishnu's role in the epic and puranic literature is that of divine warrior, armed with this ancient orbicular weapon. When displayed by a warrior-ruler, the *cakra* can be interpreted as symbolising both the protective power of the deity being evoked (so ensuring victory over his enemies) and the protective power which the warrior-ruler *vahana* could in turn extend to his subjects. That the discus was not exclusively the weapon of the gods is made clear in medieval treatises on statecraft which stress the importance of training a prince in 'the five kinds of weapons, beginning with the discuss'.⁶

The *cakra* has a third meaning, that of the wheel, which even more clearly links it to the world of men. The early Indian concept of *cakravartin*, universal ruler or world sovereign, takes its meaning from the concept of a supreme king as one who turns the wheel, the eight spokes of which indicate the directions of the universe, signifying universal supremacy as evoked in the relief from Jaggayyapeta (Figure 6). The *cakravartin* concept also conveys the meaning of one who swings the disc weapon, evoking the *cakra* as a warrior-ruler's symbol.

Finally, the discus may be understood as the wheel which ensures the continued prosperity of the kingdom, specifically in relation to the power of the *cakravartin* to ensure plentiful rains. In this aspect, the *cakra* is linked to Indra (the Hindu god of rain) in the early Hindu iconography of the region; witness two *stambha* capitals from Arakan in western Burma which depict Indra within a *cakra* and, in one, also holding a *cakradhvaja* (Aung Thaw 1972: 27).⁷

The combined presence of the *cakradhvaja* and the *garuḍadhvaja* in this stele can be interpreted as being primarily intended to evoke the martial references associated with these emblems. As noted, the *dhvaja* is characterised as an essential attribute for

warrior-kings in the Indian epic and puranic sources. Ellen Raven's analysis of Gupta gold coins reveals that the *garuḍadhvaja* is predominantly associated with 'those designs that emphasize the martial aspects of Gupta kingship' (Raven 1994: 195). However, it must be stressed that in these Indian depictions, the *garuḍadhvaja* and the *cakradhvaja* never appear together.

These emblems, of magical significance, were clearly borrowed from the Indian cosmology. Invested with these powerful Indian ideas of religious and royal authority, they served to protect and strengthen, even perhaps legitimize, the position of the unknown ruler represented in the stele. Both these symbols are intimately associated with Vishnu, which taken together suggests a Vaishnava allegiance among the ruling elite of Śrī Kṣetra. This view is supported by other sculptural evidence from the city site. A number of sandstone sculptures of Vishnu survive with *cakra* of similar form to that represented in the stele under discussion (Luce 1985: pl. 49a). Further support of this possible Vaishnava allegiance among the first rulers of Śrī Kṣetra is provided by the earliest Pyu silver coins which are decorated with the conch (Luce 1985: 62), another attribute of Vishnu. The warrior stele lends itself to another interpretation, that of an early form of 'hero-stone', a memorial to a great warrior-leader lost in battle. However, the presence of the *dhvajās* and the representation of the throne on the reverse strongly suggests a royal association and supports the interpretation that this stele celebrates not a deceased warrior but a ruler at the height of his powers.

The warrior-ruler stele invites comparison with other club-bearing figures found at Śrī Kṣetra, usually described as *dvārapālas* (door-guardians). Two examples are preserved in the Hmawza Museum, Prome. One fragment of a monumental figure, of which only the head and shoulders (complete with club) survives, may well have shown a similar representation of a ruler, though probably without attendants.

The second example, a largely complete

stele, was retrieved from the Śrī Kṣetra palace site and was published by Aung Thaw (1972: 27) as a *dvārapāla* (Figure 3). However, the stele displays a number of features which indicate that it should be identified as an anthropomorphic Garuḍa. The figure is humanoid, with its only avian feature being small wings which issue crest-like from its headdress.⁸ It stands in an aggressive posture, engaged in deadly struggle with a scaled-serpent (*nāga*) which has ensnared his feet and whose head rears up to the left of the figure. The Garuḍa is represented as a warrior-figure, dressed in a curious mail-like armour and with twisted robes which are suggestive of snake-garlands. Similar patterns, though perhaps more feather-like, appear on the lower body of the Garuḍa supporting Vishnu on a stele from Śrī Kṣetra (Hmawza Museum) (Luce 1985: fig. 49a). A



Figure 3. Garuḍa battling a naga, excavated in the Royal palace zone of Śrī Kṣetra. Pyu. Sandstone. Hmawza Museum.

textual reference to Garuḍa wearing a coat of mail (*kavaca*) is extant from nineteenth century Nepal and may be assumed to reflect earlier Indian sources.⁹ The representation of mail armour in Nepalese art is not confined to Garuḍa, where the heroes in battle scenes such as the *Rāmāyaṇa*, are regularly depicted in such attire.¹⁰

This Garuḍa stele is attributable to around the end of the first millennium. Precedent for such a dramatic anthropomorphic representation of Garuḍa in Indian art is scarce. The nearest prototype perhaps being provided by the sixth-century rock-cut reliefs at Badami which depict an anthropomorphic Garuḍa (without mail) holding a rearing snake (Rao 1914: pl. LXXXIV). This example of Garuḍa clad in mail from Pyu Burma may represent one of the earliest extant examples of this concept in sculpture, from India or beyond.

The problem of dating

Establishing a chronology for Pyu sculpture remains problematic. The only securely datable sculpture of the Pyu period is an image of Buddha seated in *padmāsana* with his hands in *dhyānamudrā*, excavated at Śrī Kṣetra in 1927 (Figure 4) (Duroiselle 1930: 171-83).

It bears an undated bilingual inscription in Sanskrit and Pyu which can be linked by the common appearance of the name 'Harivikrama' to an inscribed stone funerary urn, dated AD 695. Accepting that this is the same person as that named on the bi-lingual inscription, then the sculpture can be accepted as late seventh century. This date stands as a solitary landmark in the chronology of Pyu sculpture.

Epigraphy provides another avenue for dating. The Khin Ba hoard, excavated from a stone slab reliquary at Śrī Kṣetra, contains highly important Pali and Pyu inscriptions, found together with repoussé silver and gold sculptures. The dating of sculptures from associated inscriptions is problematic in Burma, where the scripts are borrowed from India and where their use may outlive



Figure 4. Buddha in meditation, with bilingual Sanskrit and Pyu inscription on four sides of the base. Excavated at Kan-wet-khaung-gon, south of the Bawbawgyi pagoda, Śrī Kṣetra. Pyu, late 7th century. Sandstone. Hmawza Museum.

the parent script. Pyu script is especially archaic, most resembling the Kadamba form of Telegu-Kannada from Andhra Pradesh (Luce 1985: 62 and n. 16). Recent work on the Khin Ba hoard inscriptions has helped to reduce this by combining epigraphic, grammatical and canonical information to limit the date range. This is valuable, as the Khin Ba hoard represents the most important discovery of an undisturbed Pyu relic chamber to date. The recent consensus amongst Pali scholars is that the script on the Khin Ba twenty-leaf gold Pali manuscript most closely resembles that seen on fifth century Pallava copper grants of southern India (Stargardt 1995: 199-213). Textual links between the gold manuscript and the silver gilt reliquary inscription establish they belong to a common era, which may be accepted as the second half of the fifth century.

The Khin Ba silver gilt reliquary (Figure 5) has strong stylistic affinities with south Indian sculpture. The drum of the reliquary is decorated with the raised images of four Buddhas, seated in *bhūmisparśamudrā*, alternating with standing disciples. The Buddha is represented with broad shoulders and slender limbs and wears the robe off the proper right shoulder; the Buddha's *uṣṇīṣa*



Figure 5. Reliquary from the relic chamber of the Khin Ba mound, excavated in 1926-27, near Kalagangon village, Śrī Kṣetra. Pyu, late 5th century. Silver gilt, ht. 66 cm. National Museum, Rangoon.



Figure 6. Relief from the drum of the main stupa at Jaggayyapeta, Andhra Pradesh, depicting Mandhata or Raja Cakravartin with regalia, Limestone. Government Museum, Madras.



Figure 7. Relief depicting a nobleman and attendant. Limestone. Amaravati, Andhra Pradesh, Government Museum, Madras.

is barely discernible, and the feet are layered rather than crossed. These are all conventions associated with Buddhist art of southern India. The Buddha's head is shown with a radiating spiky nimbus framed by the dramatic rearing *makara* of the throne-back. The *makara* throne-back closely resembles the depiction of that motif on the reverse face of the warrior-ruler stele.

These south Indian stylistic connections are strengthened by some additional inscriptional evidence. The lower inscription on the silver gilt reliquary contains two proper names, *Śrī Prabhūvarma* and *Śrī Prabhūdevī*. The name-ending 'varman' is a South Indian royal convention associated both with the Pallavas of Tamil Nadu and the Kadamba dynasty of the Kannada-speaking Banavasi region of the southern Deccan (Sircar 1965: 202-4). It may be presumed that this richly endowed stupa reliquary was donated by the couple named, perhaps the rulers of Śrī Kṣetra in the latter part of the fifth century; certainly the site has the hallmarks of a royal

endowment.

The three figures in the warrior-ruler stele belong, however, to an earlier phase of sculptural development. They invite most direct comparison with Indian prototypes of the early centuries AD from Andhra Pradesh, especially the low relief panels favoured for stupa decoration at Amaravati and other Buddhist sites in the Krishna delta region. The *cakravartin* relief from the Krishna valley (Figure 6) shows the ruler standing in an animated posture, with raised arm and one flexed leg. He and his attendant figures (his chief minister and general) are dressed and jewelled in similar fashion, and a *cakrastambha* asserts his authority as a universal ruler. A related relief from Amaravati shows more clearly the tripartite turban-style of headdress (Figure 7). Other stylistic parallels can be drawn with the sculpture of Andhra: a stele from Halin, the most northern Pyu site, depicts rows of devotees with hands clasped in veneration in a configuration directly comparable to similar subjects depicted in Andhra sculpture spanning from the late Satavahana and Iksavaku periods (second and third century) to that of the Vishnukundin and early Pallava (fourth to sixth century).¹¹

These comparisons point to the Andhra region of southern India as providing the most likely source for the sculptural style of the Pyu. This view is strengthened by the recent interpretations of the epigraphic and textual evidence of the Khin Ba inscriptions which are identified as being derived from southern India in the second half of the fifth century. I would suggest that on stylistic evidence the warrior-ruler stele predates the Khin Ba hoard and may be assigned to the first half of the fifth century, if not earlier.

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Notes

- 1 Written in a script closely related to the records of the Kannada-speaking Kadambas of fourth century Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh (Sircar 1965: 202).
- 2 One large group, arranged in neat rows, remains in situ; others are housed in the Hmawza Museum.
- 3 Thai *sema* = boundary marker, from the Pali *simā*. For examples from Thaton which illustrate Buddhist Jataka tales see Luce 1985: pls. 93-4.
- 4 *Vamana Purana* (3, 14), cited in Raven 1994: 21.
- 5 *Garudadhvaja* appear on five of the twenty-one gold coins issued by the Gupta rulers (Raven 1984: 191).
- 6 *Kalingattu Parani*, cited in Begley 1973: 33.
- 7 For the *cakradhvaja*'s association with the bringing of the rains, see Gutman 1986: 281-2.
- 8 The face is damaged so that we cannot determine the form of the figure's nose or beak, a defining feature of all Garudas, including anthropoids.
- 9 The *Dharmakoṣa-saṃgraha*, fol. 29A (Bhattacharyya 1974: 51-2). I am indebted to Ellen Raven for alerting me to this source.
- 10 As seen for example in a fifteenth century Nepalese embroidered textile depicting the *Rāmāyaṇa* in the Victoria and Albert Museum (IM24-1936), illustrated in Crill 1989: 30.
- 11 Compare Aung Thaw 1972: 13 and Ray 1983: fig. 39, Prasad 1978: pl. 3. For the history of the Deccan in this period, see Sircar 1939.

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