

In-Box

## SMILING HEVAJRA OR FROWNING RĀVAṆA IN BANTEAY CHHMAR'S 'HALL WITH DANCERS'?

I am grateful to the editors for allowing me to respond briefly to the iconographic study of Banteay Chhmar temple by Phillip Green in *Udaya* 11.<sup>1</sup> Green's knowledgeable contribution to the debate is welcome, our disagreement on the interpretation of a difficult icon notwithstanding. I add here a few details to the discussion and leave readers to form their own view. I also take the opportunity to extend the debate to enquire into the fundamental interest of Banteay Chhmar, namely the unique clues the ruin offers to the secret Mahayana Buddhist cult of its builder. The restoration of Banteay Chhmar, near the border with Thailand, has at last been resumed after many decades, and we can expect this to throw light on the esoteric elements in the Buddhism of king Jayavarman VII (r.1182-c.1218).

Green's paper focuses on some of the Brahmanical narratives on pediment reliefs and leaves aside the dominant Buddhist art of the temple. He offers a *Rāmāyaṇa* interpretation of a carving for which I have proposed an Esoteric Buddhist reading.<sup>2</sup> After nearly four centuries of state Śaivism, it goes without saying that Brahmanical gods, priests and scribes still retained a powerful hold on the Khmer court and its religious ceremonies, but Jayavarman's signal long-term contribution was to turn his country decisively to Buddhism.

The carving in discussion is a still standing, weather-worn artefact above a high central doorway in the 'hall with dancers' structure (BC 80) with which king Jayavarman VII extended the temple,

<sup>1</sup> My thanks for comments go to Christian Luczanits.

Phillip Scott Ellis Green. 'Two Internal Pediment Scenes from Banteay Chhmar' *Udaya* 11 (2013): 99-139.

<sup>2</sup> 'Hevajra in Bantéay Chhmār' (2009) *A curator's choice: essays in honor of Hiram W. Woodward, Jr* Volume 64/65, 2006–7 *The Journal of the Walter's Art Museum*: 49-64.

perhaps in the early 1200s. I suggested the pediment was important as it would be the first known rendering of one of the secret deities, the supreme Buddha manifestation called Hevajra, on a wall of this king's temples. The Khmers in this period cast many Hevajras in bronze and impressed his mandala on libation conch-holders. They also carved a number of stone statues of the secret deity. If we assume from all this material that Jayavarman, and many others, took the Hevajra *abhiṣeka*, he would have aligned himself with two later Asian emperors who underwent the consecration in the course of the 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup>

The *Hevajra-tantra* is an exotic manual of meditation instruction, ontology, secret signs, secret language and transgressive rites -- some capable of 'destroying an enemy army'<sup>4</sup> -- about which initiates are bound by a vow of silence. No inscription to Hevajra has yet been found in Cambodia and only one is known in neighbouring Champa<sup>5</sup>, despite the evidence of icons and paraphernalia for such a cult. The discovery of a bronze Hevajra in Banteay Kdei temple in Angkor is so far the only material link of any kind with one of Jayavarman's temples. My claim was, and remains, that Banteay Chhmar does add to the evidence for an Esoteric Buddhist cult under Jayavarman, and the pediment in dispute is part of it. Green rejects the interpretations of the pediment by Hawixbrock, Roveda and myself and argues for seeing the deity as just another Rāvaṇa, the king of the Lankan demons of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Icons without inscriptions are often long disputed and this one seems likely to be so. Green brings his expertise in the Indian epics to Banteay Chhmar and confines the central Buddhist vocation of the temple to a footnote: '...As a whole, Banteay Chhmar of course has plenty of Buddhist iconography, especially scenes of Lokeśvara (i.e., Avalokiteśvara) and the Buddha'. Yet the core of Banteay Chhmar's meaning can only be unravelled from its Buddhist art. The temple is known principally for its Western Gallery reliefs of eight multi-armed and mostly multi-headed tantric icons of Avalokiteśvara – two of which are still missing from the Western Gallery after an egregious and brazen looting operation in 1998. The future restoration effort will eventually afford better access to another series of tantric-looking Buddhist deities in the now half-collapsed BC 4 sanctuary in front of the cella. These deities, as well as the deity in the disputed pediment, could be key to the future analysis of Jayavarman's cult.

Green sees a sword-bearing Rāvaṇa seated on his throne in Lanka, in the pediment relief above the

<sup>3</sup> Yuan emperor Kublai Khan and king Kṛtanagara of the East Javanese Singhasari dynasty underwent the Hevajra *abhiṣeka* in the 1260s.

<sup>4</sup> Snellgrove, D. L. (1959). *The Hevajra Tantra: A Critical Study*. 2 vols. London: London Oriental Series. I.ii.22.

<sup>5</sup> Vidyanandana, a turncoat Cham protégé of Jayavarman, erected a shrine to Heruka in 1194 at My Son in Champa, as recorded in inscription C.92B, after making himself king of Champa and defeating a Khmer army sent to depose him. Schweyer, A.-V., *Ancient Vietnam: History, Art and Archaeology*. Bangkok: River Books. 56.

north-facing doorway, whereas I see an arms-bearing, dancing form of Hevajra (Figs 1, 2). We both have great difficulty in accounting for the five-headed deity, normally Śiva in Angkorian art, on the proper left of the main deity in Fig.2.



*Figure 1: Doorway with carved pediment still standing in centre of Banteay Chhmar 'hall with dancers'. (Photo P. Sharrock)*



*Figure 2: North-facing pediment in Banteay Chhmar sanctuary BC 80. (Photo P. Sharrock)*



Rāvaṇa, Green feels, is a better fit with other carved pediments in BC 80, such as the south-facing one in Fig. 3 in which one bearded figure holds a baby while another decapitates someone with a sword. Beside them a bearded sage plays a harp, which I think probably indicates that a scene from either the *Mahābhārata* or *Ramāyāna* is being recounted. But there is no harpist storyteller in Fig. 2. I have no comment on Green's differences with Roveda on this narrative carving.



*Figure 3: South-facing pediment in BC 80 where a bearded sage with a harp recounts the scene of Kṛṣṇa beheading Śiśupāla (Roveda) or Kṛṣṇa beheading Śambūka (Green).*

Because of the Buddhist smile, I am inclined to associate Fig. 2 with the tantric Avalokiteśvaras of the Western Gallery, and the icons further along the main east-west axis of the temple in sanctuary BC 4, in front of the central sanctuary, which probably held a nāga-enthroned Buddha. BC 4 holds a unique frieze in which Heruka deities (Hevajra is one of the Heruka deities) that dance beside multi-armed, multi-headed, seated and smiling supreme Buddhas – perhaps the esoteric Buddha Vajrasattva, who emanates the Herukas. (Fig. 4) These icons are all multi-headed and multi-armed, and they all bear the gentle Khmer smile of the giant faces on towers that rise above Jayavarman's major temples. The face-towers were, for the early French historians, the hallmarks of the 'Bayon style', as well as the greatest architectural innovation of Angkor.

The Banteay Chhmar atelier was undoubtedly innovative and their work contributed unique elements to Khmer Buddhist iconography. As well as executing the series of eight life-size Avalokiteśvaras facing Amitābha's western paradise on the Western Gallery wall, the workshop also erected the only known sanctuary dedicated to the esoteric form of the Khmer Prajñāpāramitā, the Buddhist goddess of supreme wisdom. This is known from a photograph in the archive of the French Far East School (ÉFEO) in Paris, but the structure has crumbled and awaits restoration. This pediment



Figure 4: Relief of a 3- or 4-headed seated, smiling *Vajrasattva*(?) Buddha surrounded by dancing, 6-armed *Herukas* in BC 4. (Photos P. Sharrock)

was exactly in the last form of the important goddess with 11 heads and 22 arms, found in a bronze in the Phnom Penh National Museum collection. (Fig. 5)

In Fig. 2, if we leave aside the puzzling Śiva-like figure, the debate turns on the number of heads, their facial expressions, the number of sword-bearing arms and the posture. If this is *Hevajra* in the pediment relief, it would indeed be the only known Khmer *Hevajra* icon *with 20 arms holding aloft at least 10 swords*. Other Khmer *Hevajras* have between 16 and 20 arms (Fig. 6), not always 16 *pace* Green. The Khmer *Hevajra* is sometimes known as a weapons-bearing deity.<sup>6</sup> Just one of perhaps 100 extant bronzes from the reigns of the Mahidharapura dynasty is a weapons-bearing or *śaṣṭradhara* *Hevajra*, that is now in Bangkok National Museum. He has 16 hands, all holding vajras (thunderbolts). A four-legged, 20-armed standing *Hevajra* in the Siem Reap Conservation depot



Figure 5: Bronze 11-headed, 22-armed *Prajñāpāramitā*. (Photo P. Sharrock, courtesy Phnom Penh National Museum).

<sup>6</sup> De Mallmann notes a weapons-bearing (*śaṣṭradhara*) *Hevajra* in the 11<sup>th</sup> century book of mandalas *NSP 5*: 'La forme à une seule face et à deux mains, et celle à huit faces, seize mains et quatre pieds, semblent avoir été les plus fréquemment représentées. L'aspect à seize mains selon *NSP 5* serait appelé *Śaṣṭradhara Hevajra*, le *Hevajra* porteur d'armes, sans doute pour le différencier de l'aspect aux seize coupes crâniennes, *Kapāladhara Hevajra*.' (M-T de Mallmann 1986:185 *Introduction à l'iconographie du Tāntrisme bouddhique* Maisonneuve, Paris).



holds an unusual club and vajras in each hand.

Green sees the deity in Fig. 2 as seated, not dancing, and says this therefore excludes an Hevajra identification. In fact, the lintel below the carving fell long ago into the rocks below, so that we must await the restoration to finally determine the deity's posture. Green says the deity's torso is not sufficiently braced to be dancing and that an object beneath his left leg may be a seat. The stones have separated with the effect of reducing a slight tribhaṅga movement through the body towards the raised left knee. The upper body is square and erect in an identical position to late 'Bayon style' bronzes like the one excavated from the royal palace site in Angkor Thom. The left leg is not in a seated position and I cannot imagine how the right leg could be either, but whether the god is dancing or not does not exclude an Hevajra identification, for Hevajra is shown seated in many clay tablets from this period. (e.g. Fig. 7)

The form of the Khmer Rāvaṇa is even more inconsistent than the Hevajra. Green publishes



Figure 6: Sandstone relief identified as standing Hevajra with eight heads, 20 arms (holding vajras and a club) and four legs from West Baray. (Photo: P. Sharrock, courtesy Conservation of Siem Reap).

Figure 7: Seated Hevajra on tablet. (Photo: P. Sharrock, courtesy of Khon Kaen Museum)

photographs of two seated, 10-armed, sword-bearing deities with a tower of fierce faces in lintels in Vaiṣṇava Angkor Wat and in the slightly earlier Buddhist-Brahmanical Banteay Samre, identifying them as Rāvaṇas. But the content and context of the lintels are both indeterminate and Rāvaṇa's signature context of battles with monkeys in Lanka is absent. In another lintel in Banteay Samre, in which a multi-headed *asura* fights with Hanuman's monkey army, he holds a drawn bow with five of his 10 arms. In the Churning of the Ocean scene in Angkor Wat, the demon king holding Vasuki's heads has at least 24 heads and possibly more. Yet there is one very clear, repeated image of a Khmer Rāvaṇa shaking Śiva's mountain. Green refers to one of these in Angkor Wat (Fig. 8), yet puzzlingly makes no mention of a very similar image of the

polycephalic deity shaking Śiva's mountain with 20 hands, which is situated just 30 metres to the west of the 'hall with dancers' pediment on the wall of the fire shrine sanctuary BC 45 (Figs 9, 10). In the Brahmanical story, a furious Rāvaṇa tried to uproot Śiva's Mount Kailāśa and was crushed under it by a gesture from the supreme deity; the demon king was imprisoned there and constrained



*Figure 8: Rāvaṇa shaking Kailāśa in Angkor Wat: Green 2013:Fig. 9 Udaya 11.*



*Figure 9: Rāvaṇa braces with legs astride while shaking Śiva's mountain on the BC 45 fire shrine. (Photo: P. Sharrock)*



*Figure 10: Rāvaṇa's demon faces. (Photo: P. Sharrock)*



for a thousand years to sing the praises of Śiva. The Banteay Chhmar fire shrine thus perpetuates the centuries old tradition of the Khmer Śaiva state to keep the holy fire of the gods burning across their territory.

One detail that emerges from comparing these two nearby carvings is that the Rāvaṇa of BC 45 has all demonic faces with bulging eyes and a heavy frown, while the principal face of the BC 80 icon bears a beatific smile. The tower of heads in Fig. 2 is abraded by weather but the smile is apparent and it resembles the one on the principal face of one of the Western Gallery Avalokiteśvaras. They could even have been carved by the same hand. (Figs 11, 12) The smile is also close to that of the seated Vajrasattva (?) (Fig. 4) in BC 4. It may have been this smile that prompted Roveda to identify the BC 80 pediment icon as 'Bodhisattva with seven heads & twenty arms'.<sup>7</sup> The huge Buddha faces in the face-towers of the Bayon (59) and Banteay Chhmar (47) are renowned for the Khmer smile. The smile is also the gesture that the Tibetans said marked the first category of *krīyā-tantra*, followed by the gaze (*caryā*), embrace (*yoga*) and union (*anuttarayoga*).<sup>8</sup>

To the proper left of the smiling face in BC 80, a face in pink sandstone has the furrowed eyebrows and bulging eyes of a demon. Such a beatific/fierce mixture in Hevajra's lower tier of faces is specified in the *Hevajra-tantra*, where the central face of the composite is that of the Buddha and the one beside it is the fierce Bodhisattva Vajrapāṇi.



Figure 11: Similar beatific smiles of on the principal face of the BC 80 deity (Left). (Photo: P. Sharrock)

Figure 12 the Avalokiteśvara of the Western Gallery (Right). (Photo: P. Sharrock).

<sup>7</sup> Roveda, V. (2005) *Images of the Gods*. Bangkok: River Books, 274.

<sup>8</sup> Snellgrove 1959:139.

In my 2009 paper I also said that the temple context of BC 80 was appropriate for a central Hevajra icon because this ‘hall with dancers’, like others added to major temples late in Jayavarman’s reign, perhaps indicates an Esoteric Buddhist *yoginī* cult, involving bhakti-style devotional dance. Hevajra in his own maṇḍala dances at the centre of a group of eight vigorous dancers.

I suggested this is perhaps what is signified in the long reliefs of celestial women-bird dancers that enwrap all of BC 80.

As we have seen, there is evidence that Hevajra, and the supreme Buddha Vajrasattva he issues from, must have held discreet but important places in Jayavarman’s pantheon, along with the tantric Avalokiteśvaras, like those carved in eight forms on the Western Gallery of



Figure 13: Hevajra maṇḍala with *yoginī* in miniature sanctuary Ga 2494. (Photo: P Sharrock, courtesy Phnom Penh National Museum).



Figure 14: Celestial dancers in Banteay Chhmar (Photo P. Sharrock).



Figure 15: Bayon dancers. (Photo: P. Sharrock, courtesy of the Musée Guimet).

Banteay Chhmar. In trying to piece together the hierarchy of the deities making up Jayavarman’s royal pantheon, I recently published a fascinating bronze Hevajra urn in the style of Jayavarman’s time and now held in a private collection.<sup>9</sup> (Fig. 16) The urn, perhaps made to hold ritual treasures or ashes, has a dancing Hevajra set in a striking manner high on its cover. Beneath the dancing figure, and still on the cover, is a row of six-armed Buddhas seated in niches, or under arches, who

<sup>9</sup> Sharrock, P. D. (2015). *Banteay Chhmar: Garrison-temple of the Khmer Empire*. Bangkok: River Books. 106.



resemble the supreme seated deity in BC 4 in Banteay Chhmar that I have tentatively identified as Vajrasattva (?). Below them is another row of two-armed Buddhas in niches seated in *dhyana* mudra – the Khmer Amitābha or Vairocana? Below the deep cover, and perhaps therefore in our own phenomenal world of *saṃsāra*, is a row of standing, six-armed figures with resemblance to some of the Avalokiteśvaras on Banteay Chhmar’s celebrated Western Gallery. This array of deities on the vessel, from Hevajra to tantric Avalokiteśvaras, largely mirror the major assemblage of Buddhist deities in Banteay Chhmar -- an assemblage of Jayavarman’s new pantheon that is unmatched in any of his other temples.



Figure 16: Hevajra urn in the Mark Adams Bryce collection with a Hevajra, above tiers of 6-armed supreme Buddhas, meditating Buddhas and multi-armed Avalokiteśvaras. (Sharrock 2015:106).



Green's identification of the deity above the doorway in Fig. 2 as Rāvaṇa is based on its physical proximity to other Brahmanical lintels in BC 80, and on a comparison with some mainly indeterminate, multi-armed deities holding swords and other weapons in Angkor Wat and Banteay Samre. Both points have salience but seem to me less than compelling. His argument for seeing Rāvaṇa also loses force when the beatific face of Fig. 2 is compared with the clearly identifiable fierce-faced king of Lanka located on the nearby fire-shrine BC 45, which he oddly left unmentioned. In overlooking the gentleness of the face of Fig. 2, I suggest he was overlooking the great change that Jayavarman brought to Khmer sacred icons and architecture. The smile in the Bayon period is not trivial. The gentle smile of the Buddha in the face-towers is *the* distinguishing iconographic mark of the Buddhism Jayavarman brought to the country. And that is the smile we find in the series of key Buddhist icons in Banteay Chhmar. In the end, the tantric smile of Hevajra for me, and perhaps for Roveda, holds sway over the counter-arguments.

Peter D. Sharrock

*School of Oriental and African Studies, London*