

## REINTERPRETING A PRE-ANGKORIAN BRAHMANIC STELE IN THE GUIMET MUSEUM

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This article imagines re-interpretation, for a Cambodian public, of a Pre-Angkorian Brahmanic stele found in Cambodia's Kracheh province and currently held in the collections of the Musée national des Arts asiatiques – Guimet, Paris. It is a revised version of an essay submitted as coursework to an MA module at SOAS. The assignment was to assess the extant museum interpretation of a select object, to then offer a re-interpretation of the same object as if located in a different context.

The stele, inventoried at the Guimet as MG 24618, offers a compelling opportunity for a re-interpretation designed to shed light on the sacred symbolics embedded within ancient Khmer 'art.' Despite its displacement from its original religious context, this stele serves as poignant testament to the yoking of spiritual beliefs and artistic ingenuity in the early Khmer civilization. The essay endeavors to re-examine the stele through a multifaceted lens, considering its aniconic depiction of the *trimūrti*, comprising Shiva, Vishnu, and Brahma, alongside a comparative study of similar pieces highlighting the ancient association of this type of sculpture with water sources. Through these analyses and an imagined relocation to a contemporary Cambodian context, this study attempts to evoke new perspectives on the sculpture. The hypothetical display settings for the stele outside the confines of the Parisian museum enables emphasis on the sculpture's sacred dimensions as these are deeply embedded in Cambodian topography, and an acknowledgement of the loss of context.

In addition to permanent display at the Guimet, the stele has been displayed at the Metropolitan Museum, New York, at the *Lost Kingdoms: Hindu-Buddhist Sculpture of Early Southeast Asia* temporary exhibition in 2014. The stele is described in detail in the 2008 catalogue of the Khmer collections at the Guimet, as well as in the 2014 Met exhibition catalogue. I draw from both of these in my initial presentation of the stele below.

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## Understanding the Stele

As per the Guimet catalogue, this stele was originally discovered at Toul Komnap, in Ta Ok village of Cambodia's Kracheh province (fig 2).<sup>1</sup> It was taken from this site by Adhémard Leclère and transferred to the Trocadero museum in 1897,<sup>2</sup> before being transferred to the Guimet Museum, likely in 1927.<sup>3</sup>



*Fig 1: The 'Khmer court' at the Guimet Museum, with the Brahmanic stele to the left. Photo by the author, 2023.*



*Fig 2: Brahmanic stele, Toul Komnap, Phum Ta Ok, Kracheh province, Cambodia. Prei Kmeng style, second half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Sandstone. 77 x 42 x 16 cm, Musée nationale des Arts asiatiques-Guimet, Paris, MG 24618. Photo by author, 2022.*

<sup>1</sup> Baptiste & Zéphir, *L'art khmer dans les collections du musée Guimet*, 48.

<sup>2</sup> Leclère, "Une campagne archéologique au Cambodge", 741.

<sup>3</sup> Baptiste & Zéphir, *L'art khmer dans les collections du musée Guimet*, 48.

Hindu deities can be represented in both anthropomorphic and aniconic forms, with the *linga* or phallic ‘aniconic’ form of Shiva being the most common of the latter type in ancient Cambodia. An intriguing example of aniconic representation within Khmer sculpture is found in the stele housed in the Guimet Museum. Dating to the latter half of the seventh century, this stele evidences the adoption and adaptation of Indian concepts by the ancient Khmer civilization, manifesting in unique interpretations and applications within their cultural framework.

The stele portrays the *trimurti*, the manifestation of the three fundamental Hindu gods through their distinctive attributes. Shiva is prominently featured at the center, in the form of his *triśūla*, or trident, and likely an axe positioned below the trident to its proper right.<sup>4</sup> Further to Shiva’s proper right, Brahma is depicted in the form of a sacred water vessel (*kamaṇḍalu*), encircled by a rosary (*akṣamālā*), all placed atop a lotus flower. Vishnu, to Shiva’s proper left, is embodied by four well-known attributes of Vishnu in Khmer art: the conch (*śaṅkha*), here sat atop the discus (*cakra*), the club (*gada*), and the Earth (*pṛthivī*) in the form of a ball set atop a tall pedestal resembling the club.<sup>5</sup> These three composite figures are displayed on a single pedestal set within an architectural structure. The figures and their setting are finely carved and polished against a rough backdrop and surround, though elements of the architectural structure appear unfinished. A tenon is carved at the base of the stele, suggesting the sculpture to have been inserted into its own pedestal base or directly erected in the ground. While Baptiste, in the Guimet catalogue description of the sculpture, describes the various elements as symbols of the three Hindu gods, Guy, in the Metropolitan exhibition catalogue builds on this understanding of symbolic reference to suggest the sculptural forms represent actual ritual utensils placed on display at a sanctuary like the one represented on the stele during ritual performances. I would like to insist instead on this stele’s remarkable development of aniconic imagery. Each form does represent an attribute of one of the three gods, but with multiple attributes placed together as they are, they build three composite forms suggesting human bodily form, on the order of what art historian Vidya Dehejia has described as ‘emblematic bodies’ of the Buddha in Buddhist sculpture of the early first millennium.<sup>6</sup> The upper rounded top of each attribute-composition resembles a head and the straight pillar-like structures at the bottom resemble torso+limbs. Through the composition of multiple aniconic emblems, the implication of an anthropomorphic form becomes evident, contrasting sharply with traditional notions of decoration, attributes and human-divine form. Rather than merely decorative or even documentary in Guy’s model, this imagery serves as a reflection or manifestation of the primal event that transpired upon its placement. The rich and unrestrained aniconic character of this imagery offers insight into the appearance of the *trimūrti*. There is no way to confirm if the stele represents actual ritual utensils stacked and configured in this way, as Guy has suggested. We can

<sup>4</sup> Baptiste hesitates over the identification of this element emerging from the base of the trident as an axe or a lotus leaf (Baptiste and Zephir 2008:48). Guy affirms the identification of an axe serving as a reminder of Shiva’s forest hunter manifestation (Guy 2014:163).

<sup>5</sup> Bhattacharya, *Les religions brahmaniques dans l’ancien Cambodge d’après l’épigraphie et l’iconographie*, 103-105.

<sup>6</sup> Dehejia, “Aniconism and the Multivalence of Emblems: Another Look”, 55-56.

however confirm that the unusual arrangement bridges aniconic and anthropomorphic types of representation of divine figures.

### Presentation of the Stele in the Guimet Today

The stele is positioned on left-hand side of the ‘Khmer court’ which takes pride of place in the Guimet, as visitors pass through the entry rotunda into what is effectively the museum’s main hall.<sup>7</sup> It is displayed alongside architectural structural objects from the same pre-Angkorian period. Its labelling provides identification of the *trimūrti*’s attributes. According to museum documentation, this stele is labelled in French, providing information about the object as a representation of the attributes of the *trimūrti*:

*The main attributes of the Trimurti (the three fundamental gods of Brahmanism) are depicted on this stele: Brahma the creator, Shiva the destroyer, Vishnu the preserver. The essential attributes of these gods are figured, from left to right: the rosary and vase (Brahma), the trident (Shiva), the Earth, disc, conch and club (Vishnu).*

What is left out of the succinct museum label is developed well in the catalogue entry. This is what I see to be a crucial aspect of the object: the placement of the ‘emblematic bodies’ within an adorned architectural structure. The scene depicted is clearly that of a worship setting for the three gods: they are set on a pedestal within a simple square edifice supported by two rectangular columns. This architectural design bears a striking resemblance to the Nandin mandapa found in building S2 of Prasat Yiey Poen of the seventh-century southern group at Sambor Prei Kuk temple complex in contemporary Kompong Thom province<sup>8</sup> (fig 3). We see two unadorned pillars standing on a plain base, with a pediment adorned with three arched-like windows or *kudus*, embellished with flaming motifs. This portrayal offers insight into divine display in specific architectural and historical context. The stele seems to be a representation of display inside a like sanctuary, though in the framework provided by the stele in this architectural comparison it is unclear where the stele itself might have been placed. Furthermore, elements such as the basement molding and the *kudu* decorations can be observed in other period sanctuaries, N17 at Sambor Prei Kuk (fig 4), as well as Ashram Maha Rosei (fig 5), and Hanchey (fig 6).<sup>9</sup> These shared features suggest a potential association between the stele and this period architectural style. Notably, the stele also depicts a cloth hanging from the ceiling above the depicted attributes, likely representing a canopy<sup>10</sup>. This detail, along with what appears to be a banner of triangular cloth cut-outs, adds to the realism of the worship scene. This sort of textile decoration is widespread in Cambodian worship settings

<sup>7</sup> The Guimet uses this phrasing, ‘Khmer court’ or ‘Khmer courtyard’ on the webpages advertising reception spaces available to rent for private events. (<https://www.guimet.fr/en/musee-guimet-6-place-diena>)

<sup>8</sup> Ichita, “Prasat Sambor as a Prototype of the Pyramidal State-Temple in Khmer Temple Construction”, 66.

<sup>9</sup> Guy, *Lost Kingdoms: Hindu-Buddhist sculpture of early Southeast Asia*, 163.

<sup>10</sup> Online lecture by Ashley Thompson and Seng Sonetra at SOAS University of London, February 14, 2022.



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today. Guy proposes that the stele was associated at its origins with an as-yet-unidentified Shiva temple of this type in close proximity to Toul Komnap, which lies 97 kilometers away from Sambor Prei Kuk (2014:163).



*Fig 3: the Nandin mandapa of Yiey Poen group of Sambor Prei Kuk, Kampong Thom, Cambodia, mid-7<sup>th</sup> century. Photo by Sambunnarong Srey, 2024.*



*Fig 4: Prasat Kuk Vibear or N17, Sambor group of Sambor Prei Kuk, Kampong Thom, Cambodia, 7<sup>th</sup> century. Photo by author, 2019.*



*Fig 5: Ashram Maha Rosei, Takeo province, Cambodia, 7<sup>th</sup> century. Photo by author, 2019.*



*Fig 6: Hanchey temple, Kampong Cham province, Cambodia, 7<sup>th</sup> century. Photo by author, 2019.*

## Exploring Geographical Context

An additional method of contextualizing this stele, developed to some degree in the 2014 Metropolitan exhibition but with a distinct orientation to identifying Indian prototypes, involves a comparative examination of similar sculptural types. A stele from the same period as that in the Guimet and depicting a similarly formed trident and axe is housed in the National Museum of Cambodia (fig 7), Discovered in Vihear Thom, Andong Svay, Kampong Cham province, south-eastern Cambodia, this stele shows the trident set within a ‘vase of plenty’ or *pūrṇaghāṭa*, and features a unique Sanskrit inscription in two lines on the central blade of the trident. Revealing the practices of Shaiva devotees, the inscription opens with an homage to Shiva to then document the devotional act of which the sculpture was in integral part reads: “After Bhoja’s teeth had fallen from his mouth, when he was eighty years old, he deposited them at the base of the trident, after he had installed here a *linga*”<sup>11</sup>. Guy suggests that this stele would have been erected in the sanctuary courtyard, serving as a kind of representation of the *linga* erected within the sanctuary itself.<sup>12</sup> This observation raises the possibility of a similar erection of the *trimūrti* sculpture within a (still-unidentified) temple complex at Toul Komnap. Should this suggestion prove accurate, it stands as a compelling exemplification of recursive artistic practice, wherein aniconic imagery is prominently featured within a sanctuary with a replication/variation of the image also represented outside the cella itself. However, a lack of more substantial evidence and inscriptions at either of these sites disallows more detailed analysis which could confirm or disprove such a hypothesis.

It is important to note that the majority of pre-Angkorian archaeological sites are situated along the Mekong lowlands and central plains. While the Mekong lowlands offer advantageous spaces for settlement, they also serve as crucial waterways.<sup>13</sup> These sites exhibit a continuity of occupation along the riverbanks, suggesting a significant association with the water source where major religious practices may have taken place.



Fig 7: inscribed stele from Andong Svay, Kampong Cham province, Cambodia, 7<sup>th</sup> Cen., 102 × 40 × 20 cm. National Museum of Cambodia, Phnom Penh, Ka.1741. Photo by the National Museum of Cambodia.

<sup>11</sup> K. 520. Translated by Finot, “Le Triçûla inscrit de Prâh Vihâr Thom”, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Guy, *Lost Kingdoms: Hindu-Buddhist sculpture of early Southeast Asia*, 163.

<sup>13</sup> Lorrillard, “Pre-Angkorian Communities in the Middle Mekong Valley (Laos and Adjacent Areas)”, 203.



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*Map 1: temple sites surrounding Toul Ta Ok.*

*Photo by Viton Akphivath, 2014.*

The stele from Toul Komnap provides limited explicit information, yet its geographical find-spot presents an opportunity for further investigation. Situated approximately four kilometers from the Mekong River (see map 1), the site's proximity to the riverbank holds significant implications. In this spot the aniconic representations of the gods become intertwined with the water source for devotees. The second Shiva trident stele noted above was found in Andong Svay, Kampong Cham province, southeastern Cambodia, in the Mekong delta<sup>14</sup>. The Andong Svay site features an underground cave with a natural spring (fig 8), potentially serving as a water source for daily use or ascetic practices.<sup>15</sup> As Baptiste has noted, in a 1911 publications, shortly after the transfer of

<sup>14</sup> Guy, *Lost Kingdoms: Hindu-Buddhist sculpture of early Southeast Asia*, 160.

<sup>15</sup> This indication drawing from Parmentier initially came to me from a lecture by Ashley Thompson and Seng Sonetra at SOAS University of London, February 14, 2022.

the Tuol Komnap stele to France, Cœdès evoked a relationship between the Tuol Komnap stele and ‘fountain-boundary markers’ known in India and Java.<sup>16</sup> Here, Cœdès associates stele from the Himalayan Chamba region and a Javanese water source marked in a like manner with the sculpted attributes of the *trimūrti*, many of which, he writes, ‘evoke more or less directly the idea of water.’<sup>17</sup> Another similar aniconic stele was found in southern Vietnam, again in the Mekong delta (fig 9).<sup>18</sup> This stone stele depicts a trident rising from the same ‘vase of plenty’ type water vessel, and is possibly one of the earliest regional depictions of the Shaivite aniconic form, dating to the sixth century. It has been suggested that this stele, like the one from Andong Svay, was associated with the Pāśupata Shaiva tradition in early Khmer civilization.<sup>19</sup> A further notable example is a large stele among sandstone blocks of uncertain purpose at Ban Tatsum, Attapeu province of Laos (fig 10). Although not situated along the Mekong delta, this aniconic *trimūrti* resembling that of the stele from Tuol Komnap and held today by the Guimet underscores the significance of water sources in its vicinity, particularly within the Se Kong basin.



Fig 8: the underground cave and spring of Andong Svay, Kampong Cham, Cambodia. Photo from Henri Parmentier 1920: Pl. III B. (Top left)



Fig 9: stele with Shiva trident and water vase, southern Vietnam, 6th century. Kien Giang Province Museum, Rach Gia, Vietnam. Photo from John Guy 2014, p.161. (Top right)

Fig 10: sandstone block depicts the attributes of *trimūrti*, Ban Tatsum, Attapeu province, Laos. Photo Courtesy by Michel Lorrillard (“Pre-Angkorian Communities in the Middle Mekong Valley (Laos and Adjacent Areas)”, 2014, p.192.



<sup>16</sup> Baptiste & Zéphir, *L'art hmer dans les collections du musée Guimet*, 48.

<sup>17</sup> Cœdès, “Bibliographie”, 432-3.

<sup>18</sup> Le Thi Lien, *Nghệ thuật Phật giáo và Hindu giáo ở Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long trước thế kỷ X* [Buddhist and Hindu art in the Cuu Long River Delta prior to the 10th century AD], fig. 92.

<sup>19</sup> Guy, *Lost Kingdoms: Hindu-Buddhist sculpture of early Southeast Asia*, 161-3.



In terms of geography, the examples mentioned above illustrate a recurring pattern of aniconic representation occurring in proximity to water sources, particularly prevalent in the Mekong delta region. Despite variations in the distances between individual sites, they consistently remain closely situated to water sources, suggesting a deliberate placement strategy. This highlights the significance of these sites, indicative of a role in marking water sources and/or purifying water through a transformative process. Water holds sacred importance in ancient Khmer belief, revered as a source of life. For instance, inscription K.441, found on the doorframe of the Yiey Poen group wall at Sambor Prei Kuk, mentions three sacred waterfalls atop an unnamed mountain in *Lingapura*, likened in sanctity to India's revered Ganga River.<sup>20</sup> Although precise inscriptions relating to the aforementioned steles have not been uncovered, the overarching thematic association between this specific type of aniconic stele and water sources reinforces the notion that they were ceremonially erected to sanctify the surrounding environment outside the shrine.

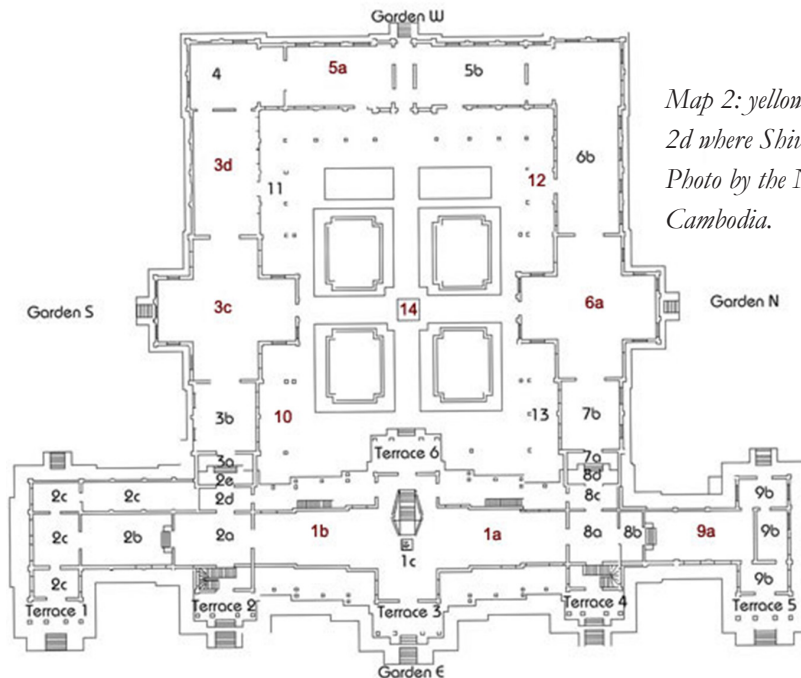
### Re-location and Re-interpretation

Re-location of a museum object can support new interpretation. A productive cycle of interpretation can be set in motion with interpretation for audiences who could actively relate to the stele as a devotional vessel and ancestral heirloom rather than a work of art; in turn, such an audience has the potential to teach us more about the object's meaning from within local frames of perception and local modes of use. The easiest relocation of the Tuol Komnap stele to this end would be the National Museum of Cambodia. There, we can imagine it placed in the first gallery preceding the pre-Angkorian sculpture section. This area, particularly room 2d (see map 2), houses a collection of pre-Angkorian steles and epigraphic artefacts. Notably, the display includes the Shiva trident from Andong Svay, positioned on the left side of the section. Displaying the Tuol Komnap stele alongside the Shiva trident would facilitate comparison and deepen understanding of both steles, as was the case in the New York 2014 exhibition. Yet, the National Museum of Cambodia is very much a museum on the order of the Guimet. In fact, they emerged together in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and so are themselves like colonial artefacts. Despite the transfer of management to the Cambodian government post-independence, the museum retains legitimacy within its historical context, and necessarily retains modes of interpretation developed within colonial frameworks. For this reason, I propose a new display at the Kracheh Provincial Hall. The absence of a Kracheh provincial museum is perhaps fortuitous, allowing for more inventiveness in audience engagement. Returning cultural material to its original site, or as close as we can get to it, here in the Provincial Hall, will transform the values and meanings attributed to these objects. Despite the decades-long discovery and inventory of the stele, research and excavation have been left aside. I suggest therefore undertaking further archaeological research at the Tuol Ta Ok site, to then reconstruct a temple there based on the depiction in the stele or a similar architectural structure near the Mekong Delta; the stele could be placed within the Provincial Hall, where it would be protected but also

<sup>20</sup> Cœdès, "À Propos de deux fragments d'inscription récemment découverts à P'ra Pathom (Thaïlande)", 17.

made available to visitors in association with the reconstructed temple. The reconstruction and re-location would not only facilitate research and comparison of similar aniconic stele examples in the larger Southeast Asian region but also serve to rekindle the sacredness associated with the stele and illuminate its historical worship practices. This could restore the cultural reconnection of the stele into the ritual architecture and give the local community a chance to be engaged with the objects in the very area they came from. Ritual or spiritual practice might reemerge into the site. While certain galleries or exhibitions may permit limited religious practices, a fundamental disparity persists between secular museums and sacred temples.<sup>21</sup> It is undeniable that relocating religious artefacts to a museum setting can lead to their de-sacralization and decontextualization.<sup>22</sup> It is essential to acknowledge that the sacred significance of these objects endures within the beliefs of devotees. Grounded in thorough research and reverence embedded in local topographies, the stele would provide viewers with a deeper understanding and perhaps even new insights gleaned from those who draw upon their memories or religious practices.

These suggestions seek to honor the object's original context while inviting contemporary audiences to delve deeper into its significance, and even contribute to it. Ultimately, the reimagining of the Tuol Komnap stele prompts us to reconsider the ways in which we interact with and understand cultural objects, emphasizing the importance of contextualization and inclusivity in interpretive practices. Through continued exploration and dialogue, we can further enrich our appreciation of Khmer art and its creatively promote its enduring legacy.



Map 2: yellow highlight is the section 2d where Shiva trident is displaying. Photo by the National Museum of Cambodia.

<sup>21</sup> Wang, "Museum coloniality: displaying Asian art in the whitened context", 722.

<sup>22</sup> Duncan, *Civilizing rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, 7.

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