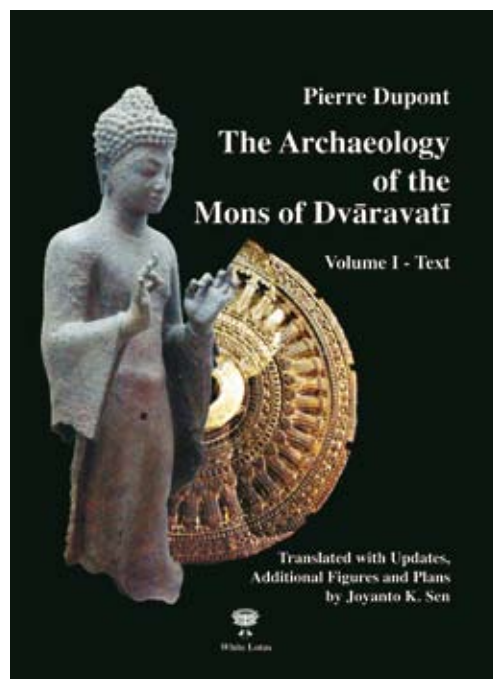


Book Reviews

The Archaeology of the Mons of Dvaravati, by Pierre Dupont. Translated with Updates, Additional Figures and Plans by Joyanto K. Sen. White Lotus, Bangkok, 2006. Two volumes: Vol. 1, 340 pages; Vol. 2, 601 illustrations. Price not mentioned.

The Archaeology of the Mons of Dvaravati is an English translation of a classic text published in 1959, one known to every student of the art history of Thailand but more frequently consulted than read and, when read, seldom done with pleasure. The production of a translation from the French by Joyanto K. Sen is an occasion for gratitude and for hope that it will stimulate a new generation of scholars to better our understanding of 1st-millennium Thailand.

L'Archéologie mône de Dvāravatī: “*L'Archéologie*” meaning, in the older European sense, architecture and sculpture, especially uncovered through excavation, rather than all material culture; “*mône*” referring to the Mon people, because Mon is the only vernacular language evidenced by inscriptions; and “*Dvāravatī*” the name of a political entity that sent tribute to China in the 7th century, and a name that appears on a small number of locally found gold medals. There is a tautological element in the title because there was no Dvaravati state that was not Mon. On the other hand, Mon-language inscriptions have been found in northeastern and in southern (or peninsular) Thailand, where there was Dvaravati, or a Dvaravati-like, culture, but where Dvaravati state power – most likely centred at the city today known as Nakhon Pathom, west of Bangkok – is unlikely to have extended.



The author was Pierre Dupont (1908–55), a generation younger than the leading 20th-century scholar of ancient French Indochina, the epigraphist George Cœdès, and somewhat older than two art historians who wrote on overlapping topics, Mireille Bénisti and Jean Boisselier. Dupont’s stature is probably not as high as that of these other scholars. Despite his erudition and precision, his judgement was sometimes erratic. In his other major publication, *La statue préangkorienne* (1955), Dupont implausibly held that the evidence of a 13th–14th-century inscription could be used to date a major pre-Angkorian image of an eight-armed Vishnu – an opinion that has cast a long shadow over the study of pre-Angkorian art. There are indeed some peculiar proposals in *The Archaeology of the Mons of Dvaravati* – that the Paharpur temple, for instance, is so similar to the late 11th-century Ananda Temple in Pagan that it must be much later than generally thought (a view that Sen, in a long insertion, carefully refutes). But there are none that invalidate the book as a whole.

Archaeology has two main parts, one devoted to architecture, the other to sculpture. Chapter 2 describes

Dupont’s uncovering of Wat Phra Men in Nakhon Pathom in 1939; Chapter 3 the excavation of Chedi Chula Pathon (as it is now called) in 1940; Chapter 6 “Statuary and Iconography of the Standing Buddha”; and Chapter 7 concerns images of the seated Buddha. In the original publication there were 542 illustrations, the first 327 pertaining to the section concerning architecture. All have been excellently reproduced in the volume of plates – though the absence of frames for the sculptures obscures the fact that the proportions of the images do not reflect their true size (dimensions are not provided). Joyanto K. Sen has added another 59 illustrations, many in colour.

Not a single dated dedicatory inscription has ever been found, and as a result there are no fixed points in all of Dvaravati art. For Dupont, the parameters were the 6th–12th centuries. In the section devoted to architecture, Dupont essentially provided only a relative chronology. His approach to sculpture was more complicated. He established no fewer than 20 types of image, giving them letters A–T (some having subgroups, and some consisting only of a single example), defined primarily in terms of the details of the depiction of the monastic robe, the unstated premise being that sculptors adhered in such matters to a model or prototype. The term *samghati* appears many times on a single page (Sen retains Dupont’s usage but explains in an appendix that technically what Dupont was referring to is the second monastic garment, the *uttarasamgha*, not the third). In the description of each type, words such as “later” and “evolution” appear, even when the criterion for determining chronology, other than a perceived difference in quality, is elusive. At many points the text indicates that there is a relationship between items in one group and items in another, in such matters, for instance, as the rendering of the Buddha’s *ushnisha*

(cranial bump). Dates are suggested for the earliest sculptures, of the 6th–7th centuries, and for the latest, of the 11th, on reasonably solid grounds, but almost never is there a specific proposal falling in the intervening centuries. It is possible to imagine Dupont's working method – sorting photographs on a large table and, having formed his groups, writing about each object in turn – and also to imagine a crotchety professor telling him that what he had written sounded more like notes for a thesis than a thesis itself. Nevertheless, no one can read Dupont's analyses without profit, for his corpus of objects, though largely restricted to the holdings of the Bangkok National Museum, remains the largest ever published, and his descriptions are still the foundation upon which any kind of history of Dvaravati art must be constructed.

Chedi Chunla Pathon is a square brick-and-stucco monument, consisting of a basement with reliefs, a main storey that held niches for Buddha images, five on each face, and a superstructure, long collapsed, consisting either of a stupa dome (probably) or a multi-storeyed pyramid with Buddha images in niches (Dupont's view). In Indic spelling, the name is *Cetiya Cula P(r)adona*, the lesser *P(r)adona*, to distinguish it from the main stupa in the monastery compound, thought to enshrine the measuring cup (*dona*) used to divide the relics of the Buddha – as explained in the little-read printed text of an old manuscript chronicle (which also states that the stupa was founded in 1199 of the Buddhist Era, 656 CE, not an impossibility). In 1968, the Thai Fine Arts Department discovered that Dupont, in failing to uncover more than the corners of the original basement from beneath a later addition, remained ignorant of the most interesting and best-preserved aspect of the monument: a sequence of panels with stucco reliefs depicting Jatakas, today on view in the local museum. These were the subject of a 1974 booklet by Piriya Krairiksh,

who provided identifications modified by Nandana Chutiwongs in a review in the *Journal of the Siam Society*, 1978. Another aspect of Chedi Chunla Pathon requiring analysis beyond that of Dupont is the matter of the temporal relationship of the additions to the main storey to those of the basement. Here, Sen has added a section of his own, based upon the opinions presented in Piriya Krairiksh's 1975 dissertation.

In his discussion of Buddha images, Dupont drew upon his deep knowledge of Cambodian sculpture, but that is hardly the case with architecture, as no mention is made, for instance, of the chequerboard diaper as a motif both at Chedi Chunla Pathon State I (but not subsequently) and at 7th-century Sambor Prei Kuk in Cambodia, nor of the connections to be seen in the character of foliate ornament at the two sites, one in stucco, the other in stone. The other monument Dupont uncovered, Wat Phra Men (= *meru*), he reasonably thought, was founded somewhat later than Chedi Chunla Pathon. At Wat Phra Men the main storey is a solid square block, originally with a large stone pendant-leg Buddha on the centre of each face. The superstructure, as Dupont states, doubtless had the form of a stupa dome. In his discussion of the pendant-leg Buddhas (which were taken elsewhere, perhaps in the 14th or 15th century), Dupont related the modelling to that of a standing Buddha image that he considered "Group A" – the oldest of all the standing Buddhas. The most striking feature at Wat Phra Men is the presence of a circumambulation path. It is not clear how high the outer wall of this path extended, or whether it might even have been covered by a brick ceiling, but in the late 1980s a somewhat comparable brick structure was excavated at the site of Yarang, far south on the peninsula, in Pattani province. There, at the monument BJ3, a central sanctuary was surrounded

by a circumambulation path that was enclosed, it seems, by a wall but not covered. Michel Jacq-Hergoualc'h described the structure in *The Malay Peninsula* (Brill, Leiden, 2002) and proposed that it was originally founded in the 6th century. The configuration of the enclosing wall at Wat Phra Men is very hard to understand, on the basis of the archaeological evidence. It held 16 chambers. Perhaps these were very large outward-facing cave-like niches, as seen later in the architecture of Thaton, Burma. But they were originally enterable from the circumambulation corridor, and so if they were enclosed on the outside, they might have been monks' cells (the cells of Paharpur's enclosing wall made integral with the shrine).

Wat Phra Men was twice enlarged, and State III, wrote Jean Boisselier in 1965, must date from the reign of Jayavarman VII, when the Cambodian empire attained its furthest extent, in the late 12th century. That is unlikely, however, and numerous features point to a date in the late 8th or the course of the 9th century: the proportions of the new outermost ogival-shaped axial step (a Khmer, not a Dvaravati feature); the presence of pairs of free-standing lions (which first appear in Cambodian art at Sambor C1, probably of the late 8th century); recovered stuccos, including heads of teeth-baring guardians, somewhat reminiscent of those in Cham temples of the late 8th century; and extensions at the corners that with their multiple re-entrant angles evoke the flavour of 8th–9th-century octagonal-based stupas at the site of U Thong, north of Nakhon Pathom.

If this enlargement occurred at some point in the course of the 9th century, then there are still gaps to fill, in order to understand the subsequent fate of Dvaravati traditions. The Cambodian elements just described were most probably the result of peaceful cultural exchange, but by the middle of the 10th century, there were Cambodian military thrusts westward (earlier than

thought by Dupont). Still, it is not easy to assemble a coherent body of objects and, especially, of architectural foundations that might show what the Mon who rejected Cambodian culture might have been up to from the late 9th century onward – this despite Dupont’s attribution of numerous sculptures to a “late” period. Dupont’s excavation at Wat Phra Men offers a possible clue, however, in the presence of pits excavated in the extant brick foundation along the axes. If these are interpreted as post holes (as Sakchai Saising appears to do in a Thai-language survey of Dvaravati art and architecture published in 2004), that is, holes that were filled with dirt to support the wooden posts of a covered walkway, then the nature of continued veneration at the site would be revealed. We could imagine a promenade, perhaps constructed in the first half of the 12th century, echoing the covered walkways over stairs at the temple of Angkor Wat.

Sakchai Saising’s book exemplifies one approach to Dvaravati archaeology: describe the variety of buildings and sculpture but avoid chronological issues altogether. Another approach is to focus on certain aspects intensively, believing that a total picture can only emerge subsequent to narrowly focused studies: examples are Robert L. Brown’s book on wheels of the law (a topic not addressed by Dupont) and Nandana Chutiwongs’ analyses of attendant figures (in a thesis the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi, saw fit to publish as a book in 2002). The alternative is to hold that the time has already come to try to fit the pieces together, regardless of the pitfalls: Jean Boisselier’s proposed history, unfortunately, was never brought to completion; Piriya Krairiksh has published two books in Thai (in addition to his 1975 Harvard dissertation); and two books have appeared in the Brill *Handbook of Oriental Studies* – one my own (2003), the other, concerning a neighbouring region, by Michel Jacq-Hergoualc’h.

Joyanto Sen has endeavoured with additions to the text and footnotes of Dupont’s work to bring it up to date. In general, his interventions are helpful, but they reflect so small a portion of the archaeological discoveries and of the scholarship of the past 50 years that they will mislead some readers. A number of readers, furthermore, will not be able to understand certain of Sen’s renderings and will want to consult the French text. At his best, Dupont was prescient. Little did he know, for instance, when he wrote of the importance of the persistence of Amaravati-type traits, that c. 5th-century stuccos found at U Thong would confirm the early implantation of Amaravati styles. So little can be said about Dvaravati with certainty that the attentive reader of this translation will find that it stimulates reassessment at every level.

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