

Thala Borivat



The Mekong crossing from Stung Treng to Thala Borivat

Around 1930 some museum lintels aroused the interest of scholars. In her comprehensive work on the First Khmer art in 1968, Meirelle Benisti discussed the history and contrasting interpretations of the lintels from Thala Borivat, two examples at the Phnom Museum and at Chantaburi in Thailand. The first to deal with these lintels was Lunet de Lajonquière 1902, followed by the details of Parmentier in 1927. R. Dalet (1944) proposed a new style while P. Dupont (1947) considered them as variants of the Sambor style.

The best modern research was performed by M. Benisti who, after examining the arguments of Dalet and Dupont concluded that they belong to a chronological layer before the very beginning of the style of Sambor a level anterior to the foundation of Ishanapura (Sambor Prei Kuk). The 5 lintels have in common a series of characteristics but no evidence of being the variants established by Dupont.

Following the idea of Coèdes that the princes of Chenla controlled the region of Champassac and the accepting Funan suzerainty, it would be easy to think that some sovereign may found a capital at Thala Borivat remote from the rapids of the Khon, but still on the Mekong. This capital was Bhavapura, the capital of Bhavavarman.

The lintels mark a notable evolution of Khmer art, initially with large *makara*, had been conceived and carved before those artists of the new capital of Ishvarapura (Sambor Prei Kuk). In it, new motifs are transforming from the aggressive first *makara* into a small agile full-body animal, a model that persisted through the evolution of Khmer art.

When I and a student were researching visual storytelling in monasteries along the Mekong, having reached Stung Treng a local monk told me of a large new inland monastery being built to replace the old one on the river. I remember having discussed with my colleague the strange lintels displayed at

the National Museum of Phnom Penh, labelled from thereabout. We thus crossed the Mekong to find first a small Hindu temple of Thala Borivat. The ruins consisted of the 4 walls of a brick temple which had probably incorporated the interesting lintels, those of Thala Borivat never before studied, and that could have been an important inter-regional centre following the proto-historic period.

In his 1927 monograph, Parmentier mentioned the presence of several archaeological remains in the area of Thala Borivat of the Mekong. Considering the incomplete demolished conditions I hesitated to attribute my findings and pictures to the temple that he described as Prasat Boran (page 226) rather than another nearby temple in the same location named Prasat Khtop. Aymonier stated that the Van Kantei inscription (k359) of the 7th century was found in the area of Prasat Boran and subsequently lost and rediscovered in 1919. Prasat Boran is characterised by a coarse large stone Nandin (see my pictures). Concerning lintels, Parmentier illustrated in his fig.65 (page 213) is in perfect condition and characteristic of my Thala Borivat lintels. The other lintel is of P.Khtop in his Fig 101 (page 295) difficult to read because taken diagonally. Near P.Boran there is a roughly carved stone statue of Nandin; (his page 229) is pictured in my photographs. By now they are all at the National Museum of Phnom Penh.

It is of interest to note that Parmentier wrote that in the area south of Stung Treng, on the opposite side of Thala Borivat there was the settlement of Tat Badon (his map on page 222) of a complex of 20 brick edifices of small dimensions and to the east, there is a slightly more important sanctuary (*Non Buon*). The French scholar implied that part of his *Art Khmer Primitif* or primitive Khmer art was to be found in this site confirming the presence of early culture. Parmentier lintel Fi 65 (page 213) is of this style of Thala Borivat, although Parmentier preferred Sambor Prei Kuk.

Based on the basic concepts of evolution, the lintels of Thala Borivat have all the elements which will compose and develop the Sambor Prei Kuk style. Considering that at Thala Borivat, the *makara* developed from an embryonic stage to the large form of Sambor Prei Kuk style. Thala Borivat's lintels with *makara* have been previously reproduced, on a much smaller scale, on architectural lintels of the "flying palaces" of Sambor Prei Kuk.

In Hindu iconography, the *makara* is a huge sea animal with four animal legs and the body and tail of a fish. It is the vehicle of Varuna, the god of the ocean and its figure is marked on the banner of Kamsa, god of love. The large mouth with sharp teeth is similar to that of a crocodile, or a shark, a dolphin or an elephant, but it remains a mythic animal.

The Prasat Khtop is a temple in the area of Thala Borivat (we could not visit) from which the lintels are now preserved at the National Museum of Phnom Penh.

The old map of Lunet de Lajonquière of 1898-1901 lists other temples around Thala Borivat, such as Prasat Bohan, Prasat Sok and Prasat Rudiko that we were unable to identify.

The lintels have the arc divided into 4 segments with 3 medallions wide as a ribbon with beaded borders. The second lintel of Prasat Khtop has the *makara* head withdrawn into the neck, and long paws ending with claws. There are some analogies with some lintels of Sambor Prei Kuk. However, the lintels of Thala Borivat are typified by a large central medallion flanked by two gigantic *makara*.

Mixed material from Thala Borivat was examined by Parmentier (1927) and later by R. Dalet and P. Dupond. Dalet believed possible to make a new style, while Dupond preferred to consider Thala Borivat lintels as a "variant" of Sambor. Benisti, working on the 3 lintels of the National Museum of Phnom Penh, as we do, believed them similar and anterior to Sambor Prei Kuk. I do not think it useful to create a new style, and locate the Thala Borivat style preceding the Sambor style, the first Khmer lintels and the first of the Preangkorean art with the design or layout derived from Indian models of

the second half of the 6th century confirms the impression that the lintels under examination be anterior to those of Sambor Prei Kuk (**Mireille Bénisti**, *Recherches sur le premier art khmer, Les linteaux dits de Thala Borivat* Arts Asiatiques Année 1968: 18).

Prasat Preah Ko (Thala Borivat)

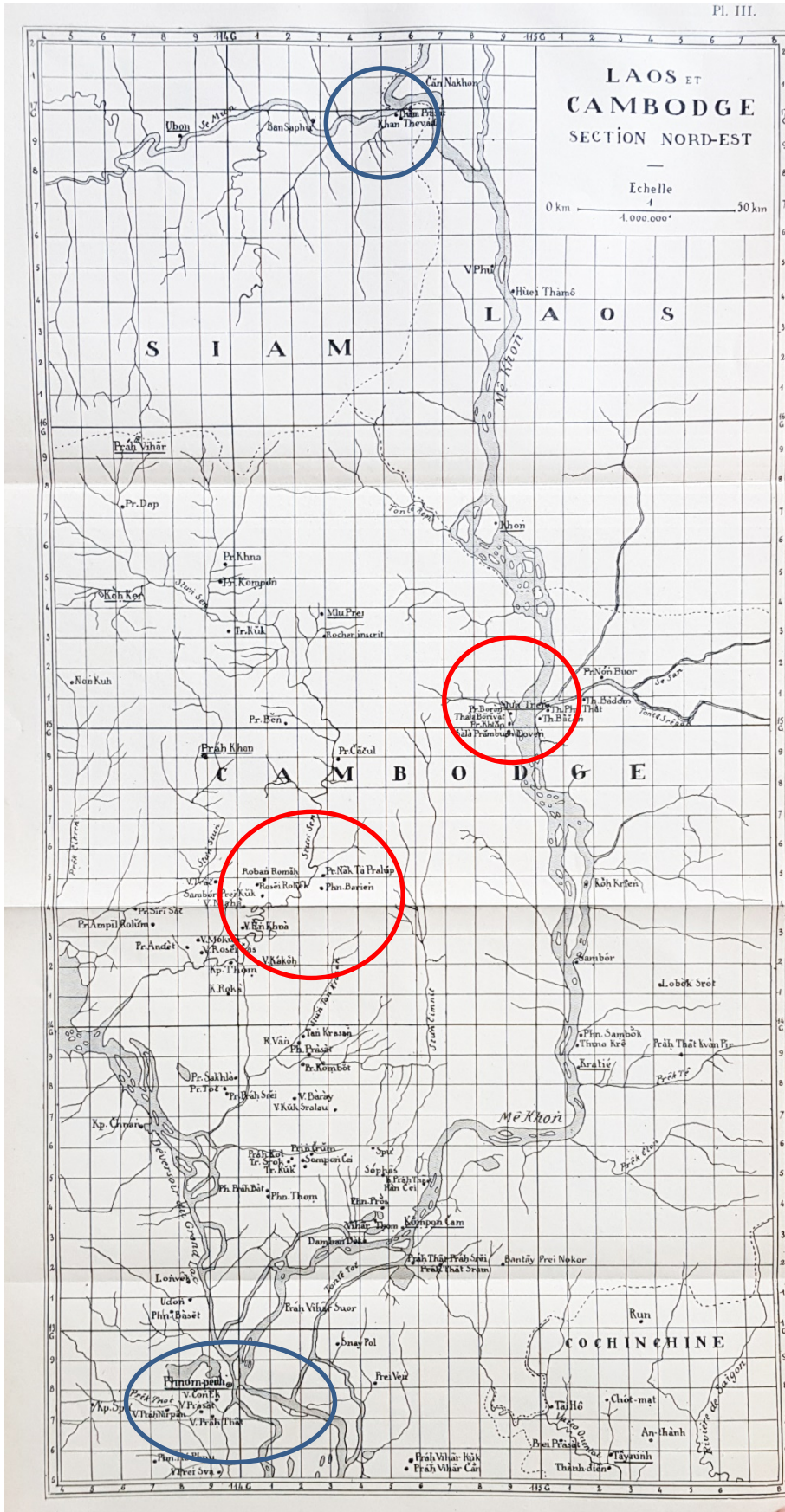
After the comments and observation of Parmentier (1924: 202) we assume that this temple could be his Prasat Prah Ko.



Photographs of Preah Ko as found in 2003 with the base cleared of plastic rubbish (picture by V. Roveda)



Another view of the of the temple, desperately needing restoration



High Blue mark : Wat Phu area - Lower Blue mark Phnom Da to Angkor Borei
 High Red mark : Thala Bhorivat area - Lower mark Sambor Prei Kuk area

After the comments and observation of Parmentier (1924: 202)



Thala Borivat Preah Ko - The eastern approach to the temple with a slab of sandstone belonging to the temple and spare remains of modern culture.





Thala Borivat, Preah Ko - The temple's *somasutra* is isolated with the whole of insertion into the inner wall of the temple and The external exit of the *somasutra* canal



Thala Borivat Preah Ko - What has survived of the temple's decoration consists of brick pillars on the outer wall that was incised at regular intervals, more visible is the horizontal continuing to the top of the wall in the picture below. The flat pilasters on the brick wall have shallow chisel marks, like those illustrated by Parmentier at Hanchei.





Thala Borivat, Prah KoThe massive *Maha Prah Ko* or *Nandi*, is a bull-shaped sculpture in basalt or similar hard rock. It is protected by a wooden shrine, near the temple described here. This is the great bull that gives the name to the temple. Villagers leave offerings.

Thala Borivat Lintels

The Black & White pictures are from the work of Benisti (1968) on the lintels deposited at the National Museum of Phnom Penh at that time. In colour are the pictures that I took in 2003.



The provenance of 3 lintels in the Phnom Penh National Museum is accepted as being from Thala Borivat. (Photo: National Museum of Phnom Penh)



Thala Borivat - Picture from Benisti (1968) this is a lintel displaying Indian-based decorative motifs transformed in the Thala Borivat's layout.



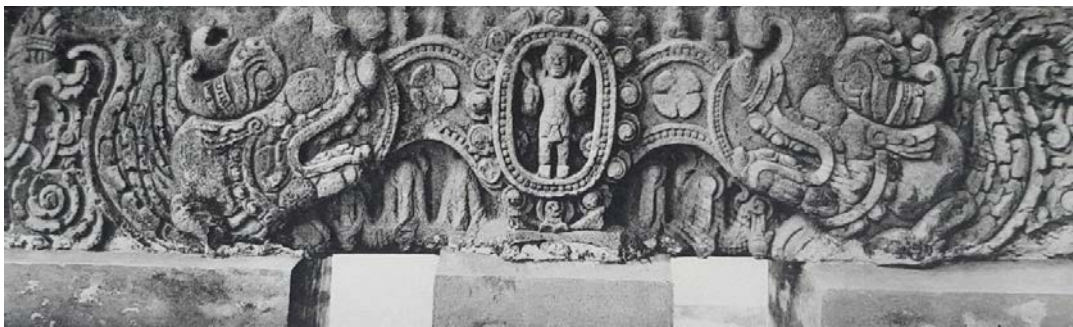
Thala Borivat - Unknown provenance and present location (picture from Internet). The central medallion seems to include a *kala* head (or a skull). The shape predates that of a pediment.



A lintel with exceptionally large convergent *makara* attempting to eat the oval figure holding something. This figure has been identified as Garuda holding snakes. Benisti does not mention the provenance of this lintel which looks almost like the following one. National Museum of Phnom Penh (Vittorio Roveda picture 2002)



National Museum of Phnom Penh (Vittorio Roveda picture 2002)



Parmentier 1937 *art Khmer primitif* (1) : 179

Four of the lintels studied and classified here are still in the Phnom Penh National Museum and Two in the museum of Chanthaburi (modern Thailand). All are from Thala Borivat's because of their style carved with two enormous *makara* disgorging a small piece of an arc supporting at its centre a medallion with the small figure of Garuda holding a snake in each hand.



Wat Phu . An exceptionally wide lintel of Thala Borvat style was discovered at Wat Phu (C. Jacques 1999:174) (exhibited at the Wat Phu Museum)



This lintel at the National Museum of Phnom Penh has the characteristics of Sambor style, but the two large convergent *makaras* regurgitating the arc that has a central large medallion with a seated figure holding a stick in each hand. It could be Garuda holding 2 snakes or another Hindu personage. The decoration under the arc is not clear but seems vegetal. In addition, five human figures are carved: one on the tongue of each *makara*, and others inside the area close to the central medallion. The very large size of the *makara* and the human figures seem to be dancing with raised closed hands. (Courtesy of the National Museum.) The lintel is attributed here to the Thala Borivat family.

The same illustrated by Parmentier in 1927.

Comparisons Tala Bhorivat - Sambor Prei Kuk styles

The *makara*'s characters, and the different designs and sizes at Sambor Prei Kuk, make the *makara* a useful element showing the evolution from the gigantic monsters of Thala Borivat to the small agile friendly beasts at Sambor Prei Kuk, where they are mainly inward, facing each other (and rarely outwards). The *makara* on lintels is a motif that disappeared in the 11th century when they reappeared as the monster disgorged by the naga framing a pediment.

It is assumed now that Thala Borivat belonged to proto-historic settlements that may have become incorporated into a larger one (c. 300-500 CE) which grew into a major Pre-Angkorian centre. Thala Borivat was in a key position for commerce with China and Southern and Central Cambodia along the Mekong River. This is demonstrated by the recent discovery of ceramics chronometrics indicating that they are from 300-500 CE.. as shown in the paper of Piphah Heng (2020).

The age of the brick temples has been considered until now to be of the 7th century, but some can be older, considering that the Sambor Prei Kuk area at large was occupied from the 5th century. An inscription of 658 CE, narrates that the daughter of Isanavarman (ruled c.616—637) married a local chief (*Poñ*) who felt that Thala Borivat would not be favourable to a capital city for King Bhavavarman II (638-657) (son of Isanavarman).

In literature the age of the brick temples of Thala Borivat areas was considered, until now, to be the 7th century, but we believed it may be older, considering that the Sambor Prei Kuk area at large was occupied from the 5th century.

An inscription of 658 CE, narrates that the daughter of Isanavarman (ruled c.616—637) married a local chief (*Poñ*) who felt that Thala Borivat would not be a favorable site to be a capital city for King Bhavavarman II (638-657) (son of Isanavarman).

Iconography

The striking primitive look, and monstrous *makara* and medallions as on the lintels of the National Museum catalogue C.30-26. has never been noticed before. *Makara* evolved into the simpler refined forms at Sambor Prei Kuk. This is the first example of the evolution of motifs on lintels of Khmer art, none having been found at Angkor Borei/Phnom Da of the absence of discovered monuments (till now).

The lintels belonged to some lost temple but the few lintels saved at the National Museum may come from further ancillary temples on the opposite shore with settlements made of houses of perishable materials and a temple in stone. It may have been a centre for fluvial commerce. The presence of a temple's complex leads to confirm that in Preangkorian, or earlier times settlements existed already. Some inscriptions propose that the princes of *Chen La* wanted to extend control of the region southwards of the Khon rapids and further northwest to Champassac and Wat Phu. It was not a war but a transition from a maritime to an agrarian economy. Possibly with was part of the During the 7th century political movement from the southern region of Angkor Borei/ Phnom Da to Ishanapura (Vickery 2002:36) now called Sambor Prei Kuk, related to the end of maritime trade in Southern Cambodia and the expansion of fluvial one (Mekong delta).

Lintels with large central kala (Benisti 1970 - Fig 94)

I start the description with the less-known lintels which may be also the oldest.

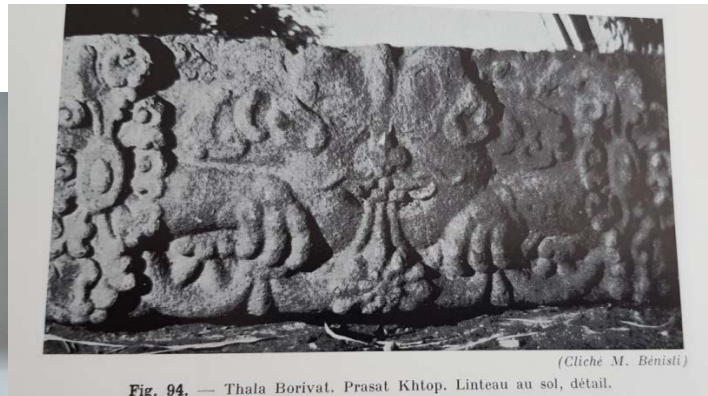


Fig. 94. — Thala Borivat. Prasat Khtop. Linteau au sol, détail.

TOP LEFT – Terra-cotta ornament for roof tiles coming from Oc Ceo area exhibited in the Museum of Vietnam Art by Nancy tingley in 2009(with thanks).

TOP RIGHT - lintel illustrated by Benisti 1970 but of Prasat Khtop provenance

BOTTOM - lintel illustrate in Heng Piphala (2016) attributing this curious lintel to the site of Sala Tamboun Lveng in the area around Thala Borivat.



Comments on Heng Piphah paper on the transition to the Pre-Angkorian period (300-500CE), Thala Borivat. *Journal of Southeast Asian studies*, 47(3):484,2016

The transition from proto-historical to the Proto-Angkorian periods (referred to here as Preangkorian) studied by Heng Piphah is a very interesting new approach. Data from Thala Borivat suggest a pattern of continuity where smaller proto-historic settlements may have become incorporated c.300–500 CE into larger ones which became major Pre-Angkorian centres.

Based on chronometric (radiocarbon) dating of ceramics, Piphah Heng distinguished five main periods of which only the third from 500 to 800CE is pertinent here as it has been highlighted before, because it mentions kings of the Bhavavarman dynasty and the making of Hindu temples. The scientific work of Heng, turns then to concepts of the early rulers and *poñ, matrañs* based on the work of Michael Vickery of 1999, and their patterns of continuity between the elites of the late proto-historic to the Pre-Angkorian periods.

As highlighted before, my work is based exclusively on iconography, I am surprised to see Heng presenting two new lintels photographs in Fig.3 from the Thala Borivat area.

The lintel from Fig 2.1 presents a “*new lintel uncovered near Sala Prambuon (Lveng)*” presents the large central head of a *kala* looking straight at the viewer with the elbows of its arms bitten by two large *makara* with a fully open mouth. The *makara* is of the common animal type (not of the elephantine monster) with elevated curly tail. The central *kala*'s face has curved horns and large protruding eyes. The second photograph illustrates a “*new lintel, found buried near the main complex of Ba Doem*”. These lintels show two *makara* facing each other vomiting the arc composed of a large ribbon with beaded borders, containing flowers; the arc is gently arched until the central medallion probably contains the figure of a Garuda holding snakes. This last lintel discloses similarities with early Thala Borivat style, but with *makara* that are occupying too large space of the lintel.

A strong comment applies to both lintels, both “new” according to Heng Piphah, are unique, never seen in the literature or museums. Furthermore, in Heng's photographs, these lintels look, new, clean and polished raising suspicions about their making. In addition, the exact provenance must be indicated together with their present location (museums, private collections). The author wrote that his research is focused on the transitions into historic periods, understandingly little interest in iconography (page 485).

In conclusion, considering both lintels being Preangkorian, I would locate the first from Sala Prambuon to come from a temple in the Thala Borivat complex with the large *kala* into an unclassifiable type leaning to the Thala Borivat Style layout. The lintel from Ba Doem is uncharacteristic but with a design reminding of a lintel of Thala Borivat style that evolved towards the style of Sambor Prei Kuk.