

NSC HIGHLIGHTS

#6

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*Uncovering a Hidden Temple:
Ta Mok Shwegugyi, Kyaukse*

*Legislation on Underwater
Cultural Heritage in Southeast
Asia*

*Sema Stones and Mountain
Palaces from the Dawn of
Angkor*

Book Review:
*Nalanda, Srivijaya and
Beyond: Re-exploring
Buddhist Art in Asia*

UPCOMING EVENT:

*Imperial Rice Transportation of
Nguyen Vietnam (1802-1883)
by Tana Li*

A Dusun-type jar, extricated from the sediments covering the 9th century Belitung Wreck. Several were smashed by looters to access Changsha bowls within. (Photo: Michael Flecker)

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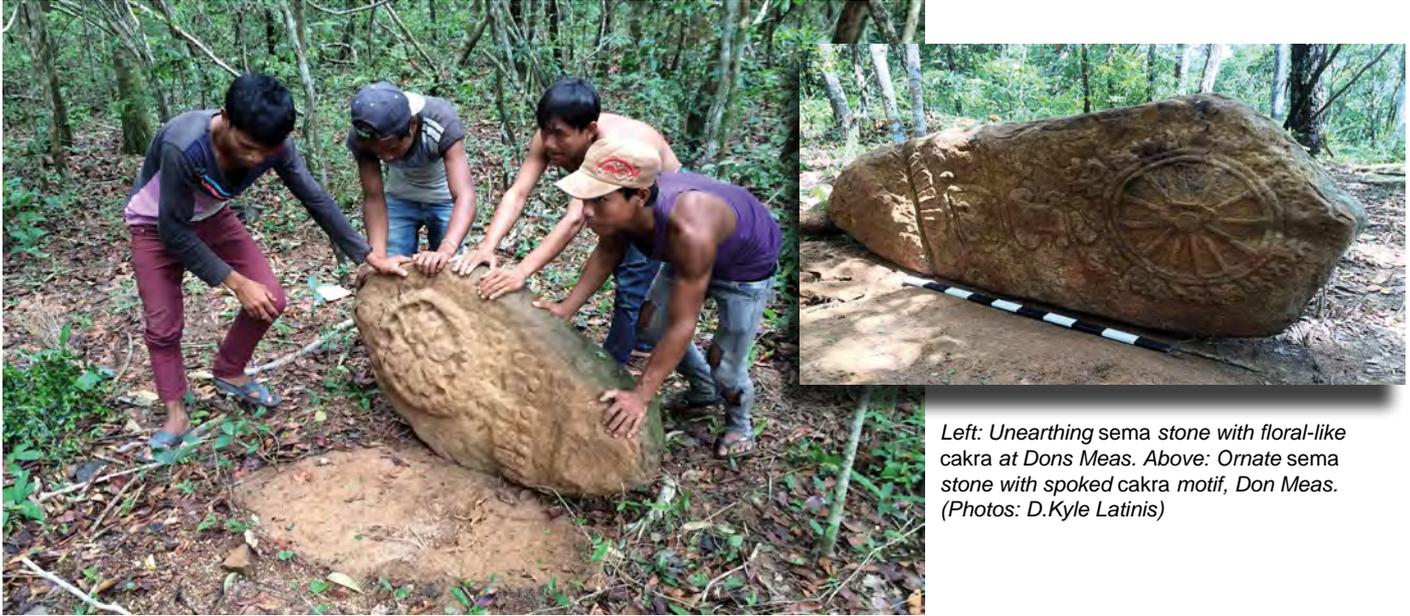
ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute
30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Pasir Panjang 119614
Tel: (65) 6778 0955
Fax: (65) 6778 1735

Sema Stones and Mountain Palaces from the Dawn of Angkor

By *D. Kyle Latinis*¹ and *Stephen Murphy*²

¹Visiting Fellow, NSC

²Curator (Southeast Asia), Asian Civilisations Museum



Left: Unearthing sema stone with floral-like cakra at Dons Meas. Above: Ornate sema stone with spoked cakra motif, Don Meas. (Photos: D.Kyle Latinis)

In 2015, the NSC Archaeology Unit and APSARA National Authority conducted archaeological research at two *sema* stone sites in Cambodia. Further support was provided by the Asian Civilisations Museum.

The *sema* stone sites, Peam Kre and Don Meas, are located adjacent to the Banteay site atop Phnom Kulen (Kulen Mountain; Mahendraparvata) in the Angkorian homeland at Siem Reap. Phnom Kulen is widely considered to be the holy mountain and birthplace of the Angkorian Empire under the reign of Jayavarman II—a Saivite king—where he first orchestrated the renowned *devaraja* ritual in 802 CE. The ritual has critical symbolic and political importance. It remains a topic of great debate concerning possible ‘god-king’ interpretations and the ensuing implications.

Peam Kre and Don Meas *sema* stone sites consist of carved stone slabs ritually arranged to demarcate sacred Buddhist structures or spaces.

The Banteay site comprises several terraces, platforms, pavements, and other landscape modifications. Banteay is now considered to be the ruins of Jayavarman II’s early 9th century mountain palace after LiDAR analysis revealed the ancient urban

LiDAR and ground survey also revealed that Don Meas and Peam Kre are located at the perimeter of the Banteay site. Previously, the spatial connections between the *sema* stone sites and the palace were unknown, primarily

because the extent and nature of the Banteay site had not been established until recently. The close proximities of the sites along with their contemporaneous nature (8th/9th century CE) were likely no coincidence, suggesting that Jayavarman II also supported Buddhist religious groups.

Interestingly, Buddhist monks and perhaps whole communities possibly migrated from the Khorat Plateau. They may have arrived to seek royal patronage and perhaps solidify socio-political and economic alliances between the newly formed Angkorian kingdom and neighbouring Dvaravati polities among other explanations.

Ancient *sema* stone traditions dating from the 7th–10th centuries CE are



Dr. Ea Darith photographing a sema with unique design, Peam Kre. (Photo: D.Kyle Latinis)

landscape and palace-like grounds (Evans 2016; Evans *et al.* 2015). Archaeological research by the NSC and APSARA teams also confirmed subsurface palace architecture during the 2014 excavation campaign at Banteay (brick stairs, pavements, and postholes for wooden structures).



Left: Map of Siem Reap and Phnom Kulen (areas in red indicate LiDAR survey zones; map courtesy of APSARA). Right: Google Earth satellite image of site locations with the LiDAR outline of the Banteay site superimposed; normally invisible from aeriels or satellite. (Photo: D. Kyle Latinis)

predominantly found in the Khorat Plateau of modern day Thailand and to a lesser extent in Cambodia and Laos. Most are affiliated with a Dvaravati tradition. The definition of Dvaravati is not consistent. Different researchers varyingly refer to Dvaravati as an art tradition, archaeological remains, ancient polities, and past cultures belonging to ancient Mon-Khmer ethno-linguistic groups with Buddhism strongly represented in the material culture.

Sema stones are Buddhist boundary markers that demarcate ritual space. They may have had additional functions related to spiritual protection or assigning other types of spatial boundaries. Specific *sema* stone arrangements likely defined the perimeters of *ubosot* (*uposathaghara* in Pali)—a structure where ritual ceremonies such as ordinations took place.

The *sema* stones are generally placed upright in rectangular or square arrangements with the stones located at each of the corners and midpoints. In some cases, stones are doubled for a total of 16. There are also sites where 20 or more stones occur. The greatest length of a site's long axis does not usually exceed 20–30 m. Some sites are built on a platform, foundation or terrace made of hard enduring material such as rock, sand, and clay fill or paving. Centrally placed *ubosot* were presumably made of perishable wood and organic materials, but not brick, stone, or laterite like typical Hindu temples and shrines of that period.

Common morphological types of *sema* stones include slab, pillar, octagonal, and

unfashioned shapes. Sandstone is the most typical material. Stones range in size from approximately 50–300 cm tall and 20–80 cm thick. Some are plain, others have simple motifs, and many have highly ornate carvings of symbols, narrative panels, and inscriptions.

“*Sema* stones are Buddhist boundary markers that demarcate ritual space. They may have had additional functions related to spiritual protection or assigning other types of spatial boundaries.”

The Peam Kre and Don Meas sites were first recorded by Boulbet and Dagens (1973) who described several of the more ornately carved stones. They provided plan views, photographs, drawings,

and descriptions within a broader inventory of archaeological sites at Phnom Kulen. Both *sema* sites exhibit double stone arrangements (16 slab style *sema* stones each). Many of the stones are ornately carved with *stupa-kumbha*, *dharmacakra* (Wheel of the Law), and other unique designs. A few portray intricate scenes from important narratives.

The stones were still upright and mostly intact during the original assessment by Boulbet and Dagens. A few broken stones were repaired. The sites have since been looted with almost all stones having been disturbed and moved. At least one beautifully carved stone depicting Gaja Lakshmi—the goddess Lakshmi flanked by elephants—has disappeared. Fortunately, most stones still remain.

Subsequently, Dr. Stephen Murphy (2010) researched the sites in conjunction with his greater doctoral focus on the ancient *sema* stone

tradition in northeast Thailand and central Laos. An APSARA team also reviewed the sites during a more recent Phnom Kulen archaeological assessment.

Many of the motifs on the *sema* from Phnom Kulen depict *dharmacakra* and/or *stupa* motifs. These designs have their origins in the *sema* of the Khorat Plateau, particularly the *stupa* form. The *dharmacakra* found at Phnom Kulen, however are more elaborate. The rim of the wheel is decorated with either one or two bands of small circular motifs. Some of the wheels are flanked by elaborate floral or flame-like patterns which appear to be almost enveloping the whole



Above: *Sema* stone with *stupa* motif being excavated by local labor manager who also worked with Boulbet in the 1970s. (Photo: D. Kyle Latinis)

dharmacakra. On some examples, the *dharmacakra* is placed on *stupa-kumbha* (pot) motif. In some cases the *kumbhas* are depicted with ample vegetation issuing forth which end in volute type designs reminiscent of those found on the spokes of three-dimensional *cakras* from central Thailand. In these cases, the *dharmacakra* appear to be emerging from the mouth of the *kumbha* pot along with the floral motifs.



Sema stone with a dharmacakra motif, Buriram province, Thailand. (Photo: Stephen Murphy)

On another example, the *kumbha* pot is flanked by a lion and a boar, while on a further example the pot is shown with a monkey climbing up its side. The fact that the *stupa-kumbha* motif is present alongside, or at times as part of the *dharmacakra* motif, illustrates that the artists responsible for the carving of these *sema* were extremely familiar with the existing motifs from the Khorat Plateau. This strongly points towards the idea that a group of Buddhist monks and craftsmen decided to move from this region, perhaps in the vicinity of the Mun River, and settled on Phnom Kulen in an attempt to establish a Buddhist community there. The conflation of the *stupa-kumbha* motif with the *dharmacakra* was most likely a conscious choice, perhaps in an attempt to forge new and more dynamic religious symbolism.

Our recent archaeological research was intended to record further details of the *sema* stones, assess current conditions, and conduct excavations to determine the nature of structural remains, material culture, stratigraphy, geomorphology, and the extent of looting.

Mapping and test excavations indicate that Don Meas was built atop a rock outcrop on a rubble filled platform with a simple stone alignment. Don Meas has a commanding view of the valley and floodplains. Peam Kre was built close to the existing stream at the base of the peak that contains the Banteay site. Peam Kre had no hard platform or foundation, and was likely built on soil fill. The archaeological team also discovered a *sema* stone quarry adjacent to the Don Meas site. Two unfinished or rejected *sema* stone blanks were partially carved out of sandstone outcroppings—the channeling marks of the quarrying techniques are clearly visible. Incidentally, there is an ancient brick and stone Hindu shrine site near Don Meas which bears the same name. However, it may be completely

“This strongly points towards the idea that a group of Buddhist monks and craftsman decided to move from this region, perhaps in the vicinity of the Mun River, and settled on Phnom Kulen in an attempt to establish a Buddhist community there.”

unrelated to the Don Meas or Banteay sites. It has been heavily looted and damaged.

Artefact content at both *sema* sites, notwithstanding the *sema* stones themselves, were minimal—yielding 160 potsherds in 7 trenches at Peam Kre (approximately 60 m² in total were excavated) and 110 potsherds in 1 trench at Don Meas (approximately 15 m² were excavated). However, most of the potsherds are fine paste earthenware. A spout from a *kendi* (spouted ritual water pot) was also recovered. These wares are typical of assemblages from the late Funan period (4th–6th centuries CE) and, less robustly, the Chenla period (7th–8th centuries CE).

Interestingly, despite Phnom Kulen harbouring a vast glazed and unglazed stoneware kiln industry beginning in the 9th century (particularly Khmer green glazed ware) with a massive set of kilns at Anlong Thom only a few kilometres from Peam Kre, no stoneware was recovered from either site. In fact, we know of no stoneware



Another *sema* stone with dharmacakra motif and monkey motif on the right. Peam Kre, Phnom Kulen, Cambodia. (Photo: D. Kyle Latinis)

at the Banteay site. Surface surveys do not indicate any significant stoneware scatters as well, although they are abundant at other Phnom Kulen sites. This leads us to hypothesise that the Banteay palace site and the *sema* stone sites were abandoned by the mid-9th century or earlier—the space not being subsequently reused (perhaps considered taboo).

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