



Style and Origin of Upholders as Carrying Dwarfs at the Khlang Nai Archeological Site, Si Thep, Phetchabun Province

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Received: Sep 11, 2024; Revised: Nov 17, 2024; Accepted: Nov 30, 2024; Published online: Dec 30, 2024

Abstract

This article presents a study of the style and origin of stucco patterns of upholders as carrying dwarfs decorated on the base of religious place at Khao Klang Nai archaeological site located in Si Thep Historical Park, Si Thep District, Phetchabun Province. Results based on the investigation of style and origin suggested that the patterns of upholders as carrying dwarfs were influenced by the South Indian art that came to play a role in Southeast Asia in the same period of the Dvaravati and ancient Khmer arts which blended with the Si Thep local culture and skills of artisans to develop its uniqueness known as the Si Thep school of art.

Keywords: Upholder, Carrying Dwarf, Si Thep, Dvaravati

Introduction

Khao Khlang Nai archaeological site is a Buddhist religious place assumed to be a stupa or a vihara built with laterite. It was located in the Si Thep Historical Park, Si Thep District, Phetchabun Province. Khao Khlang Nai is a significant archeological site in the inner city of Si Thep since the early construction of the city until the 18th Buddhist century. It was a combination of Dvaravati art and ancient Khmer art and developed into the unique style of the Si Thep artisans. Initially, Khao Khlang Nai was built according to Theravada Buddhism in respect of the first Dvaravati culture. Later, possibly in the 14th century it changed to Mahayana Buddhism due to the discovery of many Bodhisattva sculptures and signs of repairs made during that period, including the stucco decoration on the base of the building in the shape of carrying dwarfs and Kranok Pak Kud as remains on the west and the south.

The origin of the name Khao Khlang Nai that followed the local name of an area of mounds, a feature of the ancient site that was once covered by trees. The word "Khlang" came from the belief that the place was once a storage site for valuable items or weapons in the city. It was thus called a different name to another place referred to as Khao Khlang Nok (Fine Arts Department, 2001).



Figure 1 A scene of the Khao Khlang Nai archaeological site
Source: Thanawat Taonoke, 2024

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Dwarf sculpture was presumably influenced by the ideology that spread from India and Lanka. Dwarf sculpture in Brahmanism accompanied gods but in a lower position. In India, dwarf sculpture had been constructed since ancient times, mostly as sculptures of important images commonly found in the Amaravati and Gupta periods with dwarf figures decorated on the base of the building. They might originate from the native people or a group of laborers being made as upholders to guard religious places. The upholder or carrying dwarf was an ideology carried on from Greek Mythology for "Atlas" who held the earth on his shoulders, reflecting that the stupa is similar to the center of the universe. It was assumed that Si Tep artisans had probably received the idea through India (Praphat Chuvichean, 2023).

The main interests were at the southern and western bases that were decorated with stucco sculpture decorations in the patterns of flora, carrying dwarfs and animals, and likely the exquisite decoration on the whole stupa with other stucco figures such as Buddha image, disciples, fairies, animals in Himmaman forest, and other patterns of the ornaments as well. The dwarfs at Khao Klang Nai were created in human and animal heads alternately as the features of ancient craftsmanship. It was assumed that originally Khao Khlang Nai had a stupa and a vihara on top with the same features as the ancient site at Wat Khlong, Mueang Khu Bua, Ratchaburi Province.

The dwarfs at Si Thep city are unique and different from elsewhere in that they were the stucco in the shapes of carrying dwarfs, carrying animals including elephant, lion, monkey, cow, and buffalo. The carrying dwarfs have various facial expressions and emotions such as calm, smiling, and stressful different from elsewhere with only plain face, as found at Wat Nakhon Kosa in Lopburi, the archeological sites in Nakhon Pathom, and the ancient city of Khok Mai Den in Nakhon Sawan.

The emotional facial expressions of the dwarfs at Si Thep city were created by craftsmen in those days with a sense of humour, thus showing their skills and wisdom. Each carrying dwarf and carrying animal had a unique character and dress. They wore a piece of cloth similar to a loincloth but not a shirt, a hat or a turban around or on their heads. They wore a piece of cloth similar to a loincloth but not a shirt, a hat or a turban around their head. They wore neck jewellery and big round earrings reflecting abundances as influenced by Indian art. As for the stucco of carrying animals, it was assumed that in the past there were different types of animals living in the forest around this area, or different types of animals were raised for agricultural use. Observations on animals' facial expressions and poses made it possible for the artisans to convey these appearances beautifully (Thawatchai Chanpaisansil, 2014). The survey of carrying dwarfs on the south and western sides reported a total of 40 retained figures; 35 on the southern and 5 on the western sides (Anurak Depimai, 2014).



Figure 2 Image of a carrying dwarf with human head, smiling face, and slight neck bend
Source: Thanawat Taonoke, 2024



Figure 3 Image of a carrying dwarf with human head and looking straight ahead
Source: Thanawat Taonoke, 2024

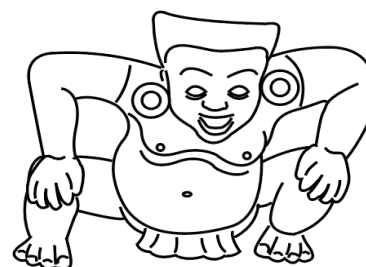


Figure 4 Image of a carrying dwarf with human head, smiling face, and slight body bend
Source: Thanawat Taonoke, 2024

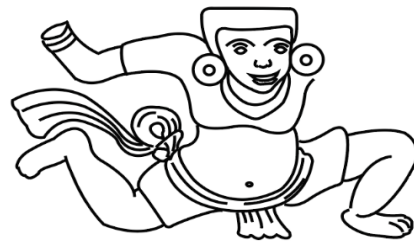


Figure 5 Image of a carrying dwarf with human head, getting down on one knee
Source: Thanawat Taonoke, 2024

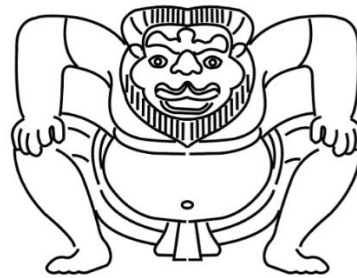


Figure 6 Image of a carrying dwarf with lion head
Source: Thanawat Taonoke, 2024

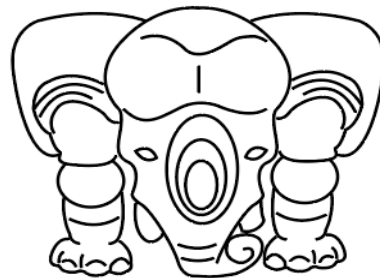


Figure 7 Image of a carrying dwarf with elephant head
Source: Thanawat Taonoke, 2024

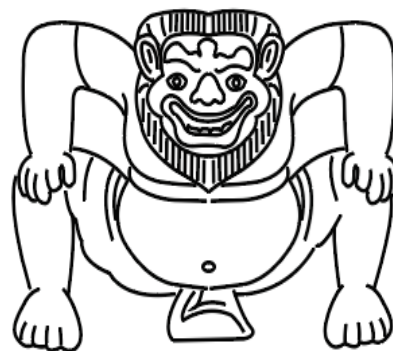


Figure 8 Image of a carrying dwarf with lion head, smiling face
Source: Thanawat Taonoke, 2024

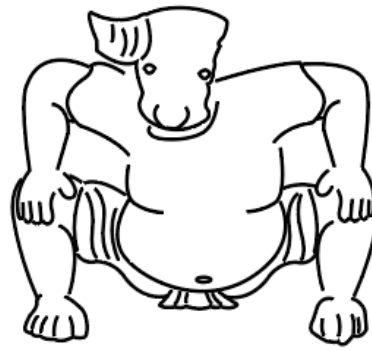


Figure 9 Image of a carrying dwarf with cow head, neck bend
Source: Thanawat Taonoke, 2024

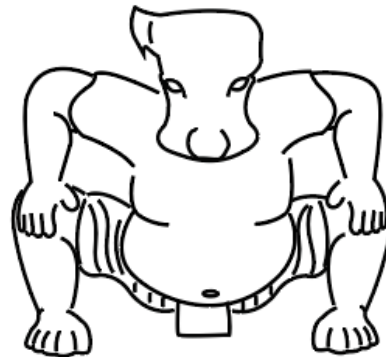


Figure 10 Image of a carrying dwarf with cow head, looking straight ahead
Source: Thanawat Taonoke, 2024

Conclusion

The style and origin of upholders as carrying dwarfs at Khao Klang Nai archaeological site of Si Thep, Phetchabun was a study that collected data on the style and origin of stucco patterns of upholders as carrying dwarfs decorated on the base of the Khao Klang Nai religious place at Si Thep Historical Park, Si Thep District, Phetchabun Province. Results based on the investigation of style and origin suggested that the patterns of upholders as carrying dwarfs were influenced by South Indian art that came to play a role in Southeast Asia in the same period of Dvaravati art and ancient Khmer art which blended with the culture and skills of local Si Thep artisans to develop its uniqueness. Their figures had different facial expressions and poses, presumably due to the sense of humor of artisans who created the works.



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