

## NAVAGRAHA

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Translated by Chum Mengbong and Asbley Thompson

A number of scholars have undertaken research on ancient Khmer sculpted representations of the called *nabagroḥ* or *phkāy nabagroḥ*. The first person to have studied this topic in detail was Kamaleswar Bhattacharya<sup>1</sup>. Soon after, Louis Malleret wrote a summary of the issues at hand. Figure 1 is a *nabagroḥ* bas-relief panel preserved by local people at an ancestral spirit house near Siem Reap town.

I show this piece as an example, since *nabagroḥ* reliefs generally resemble that in this photo. The panels is sculpted with nine divine figures – hence the appellation of *naba* (or *nava* in Sanskrit), meaning nine. On the other hand, the use of the second term, *groḥ*, to name this iconographic type is not entirely accurate, because, of the 9 figures, some are indeed *groḥ* (planets) while others are just divinities. In Sanskrit, the word *groḥ* or *graha* refers to the planets - places distinct from our earth. The discrepancy I note only occurs in the Cambodian context. In India, the nine divinities are the *navagraha*, corresponding to the seven days of the week plus Rahu who is considered to be a planet connecting two planets, with Ketu, also called a comet.

In the ancient Khmer context, some divinities in the so-called *nabagroḥ* ensemble are actually *lokapāl*, or ‘guardians of the world’. Identifying each individual divinity in a systematic manner is challenging as the reliefs are found from the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE (Sambor Prei Kuk style) until the early

<sup>1</sup> - BHATTACHARYA, Kamaleswar, « Notes d’iconographie khmère », *Arts Asiatiques* III (1956 : 183-193), IV (1957 : 216-220), V (1958 : 220), X (1964 : 91-94).

- MALLERET, Louis, « Contribution à l’étude du thème des neuf divinités dans la sculpture du Cambodge et du Champa », *Arts Asiatiques* VII (1960 : 205-230).

13<sup>th</sup> century (Bayon style).

Four divinities maintain a fixed position over this period: on the far left are the planets Surya and Candra, and on the far right are Rahu and Ketu. Of the other five remaining figures, only some can be positively identified, and their positions are interchangeable. Generally, reading from left to right, the third figure is Yama, the fourth is Brahma, the sixth is Kubera, and the seventh is Agni. The divinity occupying the middle position is Indra, who always appears mounted on an elephant.

Interpretation of the function of the nine divinities panels poses a second challenge due to the fact that few have been found in their original contexts. These few were located inside a 'library' set to the southeast of a temple's main sanctuary. Even this site contextualization has not however allowed for clear interpretation of function.

Figure 2 is another example of the ensemble. This piece, dated to the 11<sup>th</sup> century CE, was found in Ak Yom, a temple buried under the southern embankment of Angkor's western Baray. This panel's lower frame has no artistic relief, but instead bears an inscription, shown in Figure 3. This inscription bears the inventory number K.752.

In order to see the text clearly, I have enlarged the letters, and divided the one-line epigraph into 5 parts (Figures 4-8).

Figure 4 starts with a sign marking the starting point of writing. This is followed by the year 923 śaka.

Figure 5 mvāy ket āśuyujya ādityavāra

Figure 6 citraṅkṣa ni jamnvan

Figure 7 steṅ añ tve tapaḥ ta vraḥ kaṃmrateṅ

Figure 8 śrīgambhīreśvara

### Translation

In 923 śaka (1001 CE), the day of the 1<sup>st</sup> waxing moon, month of *Āsādha*, Sunday, the *nakṣatra* named Citra. This is an offering from Steṅ Añ, who practices asceticism, to the god Śrīgambhīreśvara.

We see here that in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century, an ascetic practitioner had this panel made to offer to the god named Śrīgambhīreśvara installed in the central tower of Ak Yom temple.

Why, we must wonder, did this person made this particular stone panel as an offering to this particular god?



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



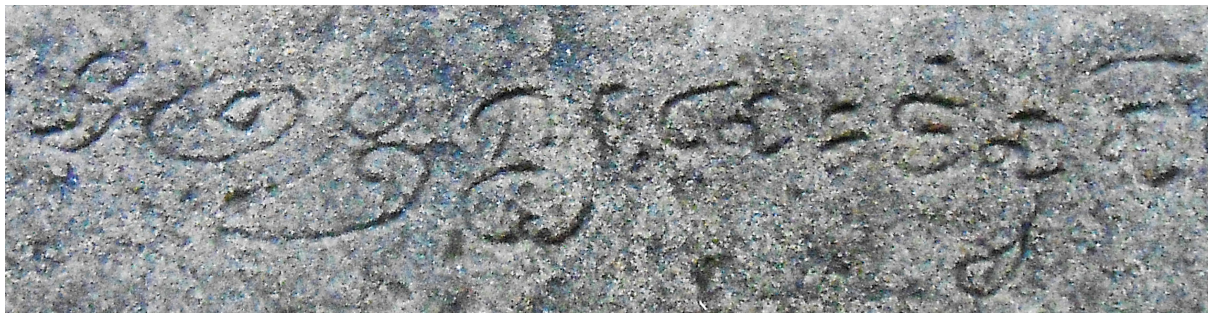


Figure 6

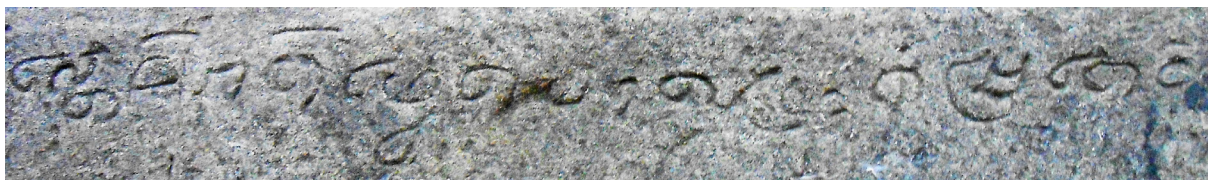


Figure 7



Figure 8

#### References

Bhattacharya, Kamaleswar.

- 1956. « Notes d'iconographie khmère », *Arts Asiatiques* III: 183-193.
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- 1958. « Notes d'iconographie khmère », *Arts Asiatiques* V: 220.
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