

Dvaravati : Early Buddhist Kingdom in Central Thailand

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Literary and archaeological evidence confirms that between the 7th to 11th centuries A.D. Central Thailand was the homeland of a Buddhist kingdom called “Dvaravati”. In the 7th century, Chinese historians and pilgrims to India spoke of the existence of a kingdom that they called *To-lo-po-ti* situated to the west of Isanapura (Cambodia) and to the east of Sri Ksetra (Burma)¹. The Chinese name for this civilization was interpreted as representing the Sanskrit word *Dvaravati* meaning “which has gates”. But it was not until 1964 that this interpretation was supported by two inscribed silver coins found at Nakhon Pathom².

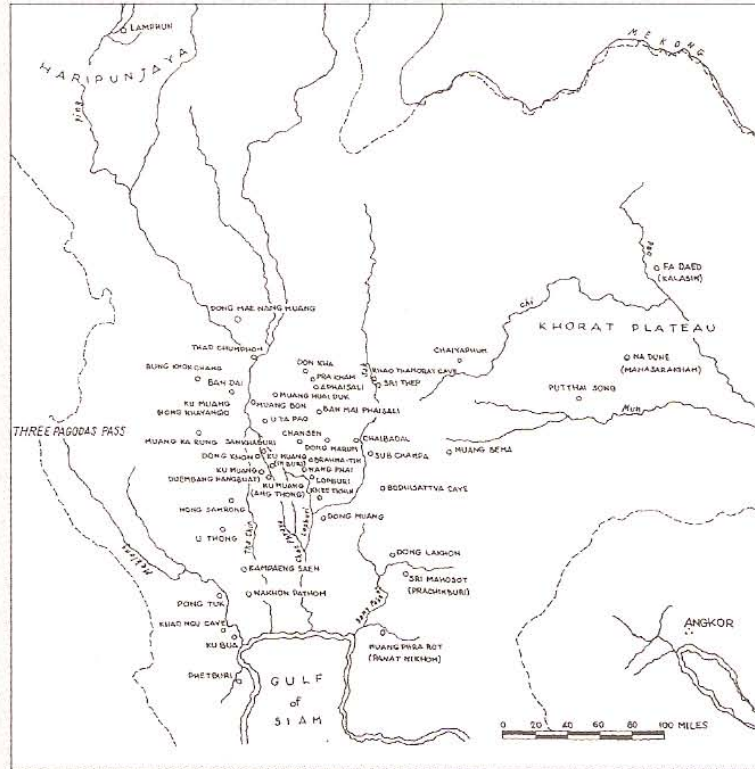
Dvaravati kingdom developed out of the earlier, probably Austroasiatic-speaking³ chiefdoms of prehistoric Central Thailand. Based on archaeological evidence, many Iron Age sites in Thailand, such as Rim Khwae Noi, Ban Don Ta Phet, and Khok Plub in the Maeklong-Tha Chin Valleys, reveal evidence of exchange with India during the Maurya and the Sunga Period (ca. 350-50 B.C.).

During the Proto-historic Period, contemporaneous with the Indo-Roman Period in India (ca.50 B.C.-A.D. 300) trade relation between India and the local people in Central Thailand was more extensive. In India, there was also an active trade between India and the Roman Empire, in alliance with the Roman settlements in India. By this time, local rulers accepted the superiority of Indian cultural paradigms and saw the value of Indian concepts as a mean of legitimizing their own political ends. They therefore brought to their courts the priests and

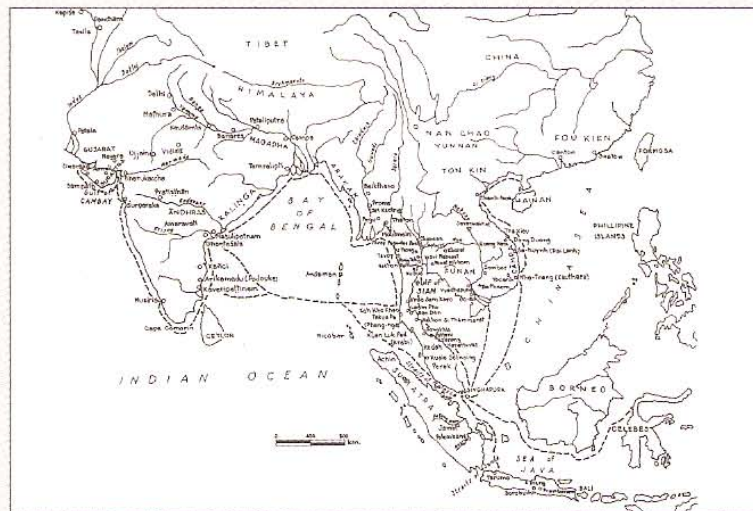
Dvaravati, The Early Buddhist Kingdom in Central Thailand (Map. 1)



The seventh century A.D. saw a large number of moated sites located along the margins of the Central Plain. According to Vanasin and Supajanya, the sea level was higher at that time, and so the settlements were accessible by boat. Most sites were also located near rivers which supplied water to the moats⁴. Large religious buildings were constructed within the moats, while small ones were outside the enclosures. Major moated sites have been found in the Maeklong-Tha Chin Valleys in the Lopburi-Pasak



map. 2



map. 3

Valleys and in the Bang Pakong Valley. Some sites, such as Dong Khon, Muang Bon, U Ta Pao, and Thap Chumphon, were located near the Chao Phraya River.

Sites in the Maeklong-Tha Chin Valleys include a number of important Dvaravati towns such as U-Thong, Nakhon Pathom, and Ku Bua. The paper will concentrate on Nakhon Pathom alone.

Nakhon Pathom situated near the west bank of Tha Chin river is nearer to the Gulf coast than U-Thong. This was a great town covering an area of 3,700 by 2,000 metres (Fig. 1). Situated almost in the center of the town, the central mound was all that remained of the ancient brick monument of Chula Paton. Excavations here by the late Pierre Dupont provided the most important contribution to our knowledge of Dvaravati architecture⁵. The work at Chula Paton brought to light one of the most characteristic types of Dvaravati monument (Fig. 2, 3). This brick structure was modified several times. In its first state, it consisted of a central square platform with little indentation. It was ornamented on each face by five standing Buddhas of stucco, placed in niches. It stood on its own base, of the same plan but a little wider, with facings ornamented with mouldings and, on the projecting angles, *makaras* in relief. The whole was supported on a rectangular terrace. This was ornamented with panels bearing alternatively a *Garuda* and an elephant. Four axial flights of steps, with the bottom step semi-circular, gave access to the terrace. They were flanked by lions carved on the facing and had balustrades issuing from the mouths of monsters. In the second stage, the decoration of the base was simplified. In the third stage, new Buddha images were substituted for the old ones in the niches, and changes were made simplifying the much enlarged terrace.

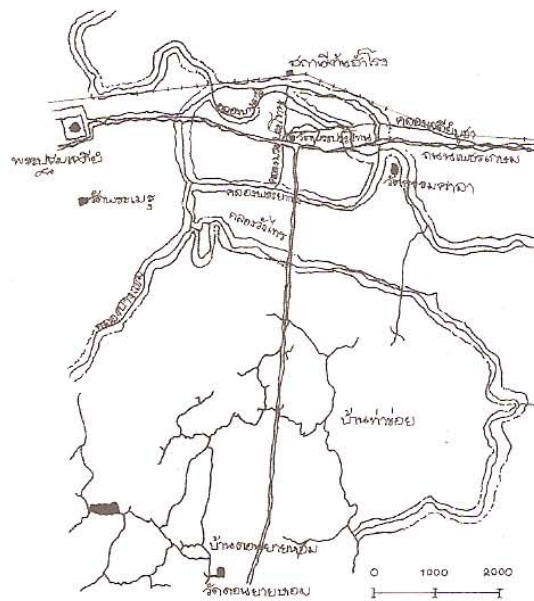


Fig. 1

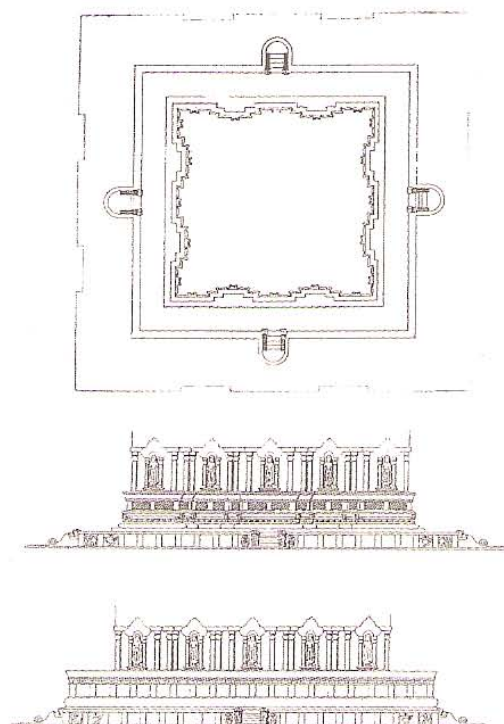


Fig. 2

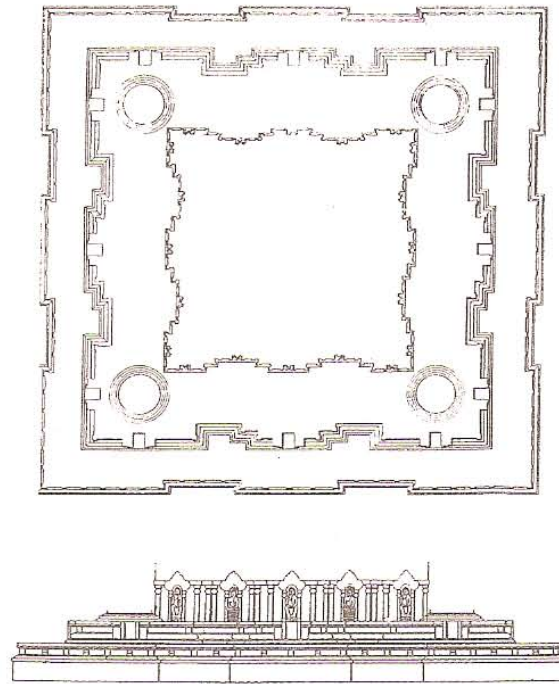


Fig. 3

The most important small finds from Nakhon Pathom are two inscribed silver coins found in a small earthen jar beneath a ruined sanctuary at Nern Hin, west of Pra Praton⁶. On the reverse of each coin are engraved the Sanskrit words *sridvaravatisvarapunya* meaning 'meritorious deed of the King of Dvaravati'. On the obverse of one coin is a 'vase of plenty' (*purnaghata*) from which two creepers are sprouting (Fig. 4). On the other is a cow with its calf, symbols of fertility and prosperity. Coedès who read the inscriptions, stated that they are in south Indian characters of the 7th century and recognized their importance as giving the first confirmation of the actual name of the kingdom referred to by the Chinese pilgrims as To-lo-po-ti.⁷

Apart from being regarded as the capital of the Dvaravati kingdom, ancient Nakhon Pathom had an important role as one of the trading centers of Dvaravati and a large number of terracotta seals and sealings (Fig. 5) and some amulets for merchants are among the finds from this site⁸. Other important finds are over 30 pieces of stone *Dharmacakra* (Wheel of the Law). One with

two figures of crouching deer to symbolize the First Sermon in the Deer Park at Sarnath⁹ (Fig. 6) as well as images of the Buddha made of stone and bronze. Thus the Buddhist monuments at Nakhon Pathom, including Chula Paton, emphasise its importance as a Buddhist center during Dvaravati times. And the Pali texts engraved on some stone *Dharmacakra* mostly with *Pratitya-samutpada-sutra*, provide evidence that the Dvaravati people were familiar with the Pali canon¹⁰.

Later excavations in the occupation area have also expanded our knowledge of this site¹¹. Many artifacts resemble earlier prehistoric objects, such as bronze ornaments, iron spears and spindle whorl. However, the settlement appears to have been founded in the 8th and 9th centuries and was probably abandoned when the river changed its course, not long after the 10th century A.D.



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

Material Culture

The study of the archaeological remains in Central Thailand during the Dvaravati period provided a clear perspective of Dvaravati culture, which digested many elements of Indian culture, such as town plans, buildings, implements, domestic utensils, ornaments and ceramics.

1) Town Plans

Although irregular moated sites have been noted in the dry northeast of Thailand during the late Iron Age¹², the series of large moated towns (Fig. 1) along the margins of the Central Plains of Thailand during the Dvaravati period are undoubtedly due to the high degree of Indianization. In the Ganga Plains of northern India, almost all the principal Iron Age sites were located on the river banks where the inhabitants erected clay embankments to prevent flood waters from entering the habitation area. During the Indian Iron Age (ca. 700-350 B.C.) earthen embankments and moats as flood protective devices are noted at sites such as Kausambi, Varanasi and Pataliputra. During the early historic period (ca. 350-50 B.C.) these were developed into substantial defensive ramparts. Pataliputra and Kausambi are examples where the clay embankments of the early phase, with certain modifications, were converted for defensive purposes¹³

What we find in some Dvaravati towns is an improvement from the irregular, more or less circular or oval nuclei found in earlier Iron Age sites, by extending the original circular site by a wider area of land with new ramparts and moats such as at Muang Bon, Nakhon Sawan Province¹⁴, by the grafting on a secondary enclosure, as at Sri Thep¹⁵ and at Muang Fa Daed, Kalasin Province¹⁶. At U-Thong, a stone wall for defensive purpose, was built on the top of a clay rampart could once be seen¹⁷, although this is no longer standing.

2) Buildings

During the Dvaravati period, houses were generally built of wood while fired brick and laterite were used for religious structures. Furthermore, the larger Buddhist monuments, mostly of brick, were constructed within the moats, while smaller ones stood outside the enclosures.

3) Objects of Trade and Communication

Coins. The distribution of a large number of uninscribed silver coins throughout the Dvaravati kingdom and in contemporary cities like the Pyu cities of Myanmar (Beikthano, Sriksetra and Halin), Mon (Pegu) and the ancient Funan port at Oc Eo, indicates that coinage was used for commercial exchange¹⁸. Most coins bear Indian symbols of kingship and prosperity such as the rising sun or *sankha* (conch shell), and *srivatsa*-the abode of Sri, goddess of fertility (Fig. 7,8)

Seals. Large number of seals made of clay and other materials belonging to kings, royal officials and private individuals as well as of administrative, mercantile and religious organizations have been discovered from the main Dvaravati cities such as Nakhon Pathom (Fig. 5) and Chansen in Nakhon Sawan Province¹⁹. The writing on the seals is usually positive. Some seals have also been found with legends in negative writing, probably used for sealing documents.



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

4) Implements and Domestic Utensils

Among the many artifacts unearthed by excavation in the occupation areas of the important Dvaravati towns, such as Nakhon Pathom, a wide range of implements and domestic utensils are found²⁰. These include polished stone axes, iron tools, stone saddle querns and rollers (Fig. 9) derived from Indian prototypes²¹. The latter were probably used for grinding spices such as garlic, pepper and foodstuffs.

Personal toilet items such as square or rectangular terracotta skin rubbers are found from excavations in domestic areas of most Dvaravati cities, such as the ones found at Sri Mahosot (Fig. 10), Prachinburi Province²². Such skin-rubbers were usually used in place of soap by the Indian communities of the Ganga Valley.

5) Ornaments

A wide range of personal ornaments have been reported, such as large flat tin and lead earrings, bronze bells, bronze rings and beads of glass, carnelian, agate and gold. The stucco images from Ku Bua, Ratchaburi Province, show women-perhaps a princess with her attendant-with elaborate hairstyles, large flat ear ornaments and elegant clothing²³ (Fig. 11).



Fig. 9

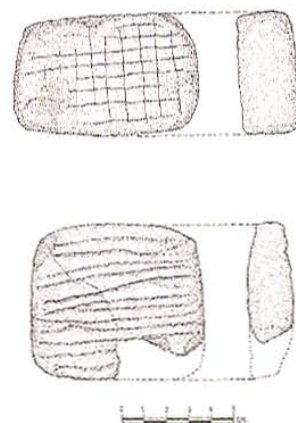


Fig. 10

6) Musical Instruments and Dancing Poses

Many of the stucco human figures from Ku Bua have displayed various court activities which include musicians (Fig. 12) and dancers (Fig 13). It is observed that the musical instruments as well as the dancing poses may have derived from the Indian prototypes.



Fig. 11

7) Ceramics

Dvaravati ceramics are unglazed, mainly wheel-thrown, earthenwares fired in an open hearth rather than in a closed kiln. Analytical studies on Dvaravati pottery has revealed that the raw materials used by the potters were local and the pottery basically continued the forms of the prehistoric period, such as the dish-on-stand; however, strongly carinated vessels with ridges become more noticeable; perhaps following Indian ceramic styles.

Jars with spouts (*kendi*) sprinklers (*kundika*) and small cups used as lamps (Fig. 14-16) also show close similarity both in shape and design to Indian prototypes dating from the early Christian era up to the post-Gupta period (700-800 A.D.)²⁴. Western influences can also be seen in the terracotta Roman style lamps (Fig. 17) in household use during the Dvaravati period.



Fig. 12



Fig. 13

They are thought to be a local imitation of bronze Roman lamps such as the one found at Pong Tuk (Fig. 18) in Kanchanaburi Province²⁵

Decorative techniques used by the Dvaravati potters include incising line and wave designs, the use of cord and mat wrapped paddles, and impression with fingers, snail and shell edges.

A technique of decorating pots in relief using carved stamp was also used by Dvaravati potters following a technique introduced by Indian potters of the Gupta (ca.300-500 A.D.) and the post-Gupta periods (ca.500-800 A.D.)²⁶ Such stamped designs include human figures in different postures, animal figures, and flower motifs (Fig. 19). It is believed that the fashion for stamp decorated pottery during the Gupta period was a local imitation

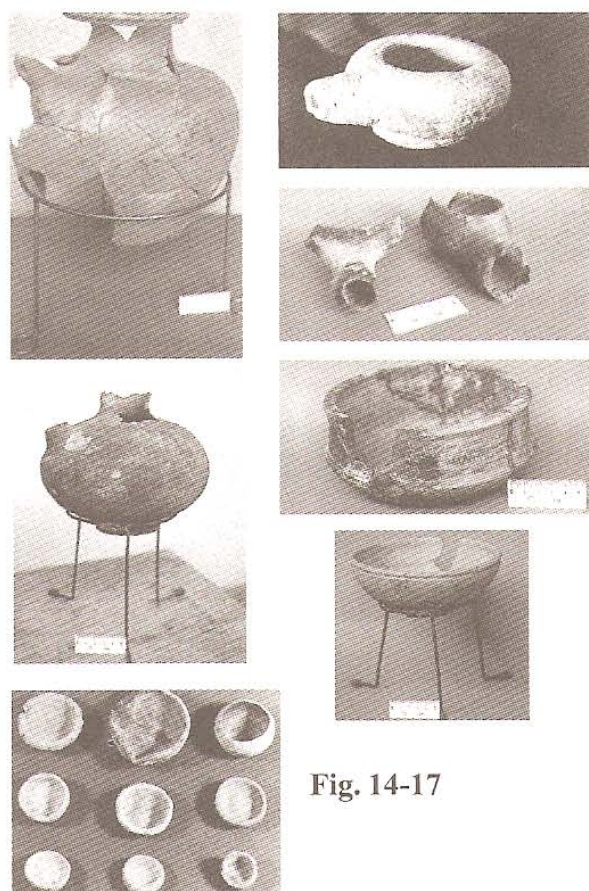


Fig. 14-17



Fig. 18

of Roman stamped pottery such as Arretine ware²⁷, some of which reached India along the maritime trade routes as well as Hellenistic stamped pottery which reached northern India from Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Social Relations

Many of the stucco and terracotta architectural decorations from Ku Bua illuminate social relations during Dvaravati times²⁸. The image of a princess with her attendant mentioned above (Fig. 11) indicates the sophistication of court life during Dvaravati period. Other scenes illustrated show servants bearing objects, musicians (Fig. 12), dancers, (Fig. 13) and a group of prisoners being kicked by their guard (Fig. 20).

Languages

Based on inscriptions, the literate people of the Dvaravati period were familiar with three languages : Sanskrit, Pali and Old Mon. The first two being Indian and, spread throughout most of Southeast Asia at that time. They were official, scholarly, religious languages and probably used in everyday speech.

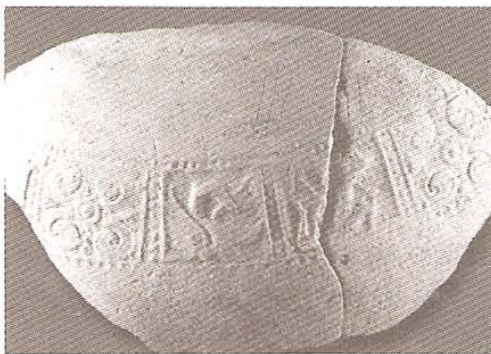


Fig. 19



Fig. 20

Concepts of State and Kingship

Dvaravati coinage confirms that the Indian concepts of state and kingship were accepted by the Dvaravati rulers. The discovery of inscribed silver coins from the main Dvaravati sites such as Nakhon Pathom, U-Thong, Ku Bua, Ku Muang, Brahma-tin, Dong Khon and U Ta-Pao, indicates that kingship really existed during the Dvaravati times. On the obverse of each coin are engraved Indian symbols of fertility and prosperity such as *puṇnaghata* or an animal –cow or deer-with its offspring. On the reverse the words *sridvaravatisvarapunya* meaning ‘meritorious deeds of the King of Dvaravati’ are inscribed. We also have supporting evidence from a large number of uninscribed silver coins (Fig. 7-8) distributed over a wide area, which bear Indian symbols of kingship and prosperity such as the rising sun or *sankha* (conch shell) and *śrīvatsa*-indicating the abode of Sri, goddess of fertility. They have been found throughout the Dvaravati territories and in contemporary cities influenced by Indian civilization from Burma to the lower Mekong Valley.

These coins were issued by Dvaravati kings, as confirmed by the findings of stone moulds bearing the *sankha* symbol from U-Thong, and Chansen and a clay mould bearing the sun symbol from U-Thong²⁹. The kings aspired to expand the economy and to enhance their position at the head of it. This hypothesis is confirmed by the Chinese sources. The description of the Dvaravati kingdom of Tung-tien, compiled by Tu Yu (a Chinese historian) in the late eighth century A.D. recorded that here, if a man casts silver coins without permission, his arm is to be cut off³⁰.

Although the Dvaravati kings were devout Buddhists, it is believed that they were exalted far above ordinary mortals through the magical power of the *Rajasuya* - Royal Consecration-which imbued the king with the divine power. Some objects which were meant for ritual purpose have been discovered, such as stone tablets or trays depicting a series of royal insignia (Fig. 21a) including *camara* (flywhisks), *sankha* (conch shells), *vajra* (thunderbolts), *valvijani* (fans), *ankusa* (elephant goads) and

chattra (umbrellas). These stone tablets are reported from Nakhon Pathom³¹ and from Dong Khon, Chainat Province³². It is presumed that the bone dice from Nern Makok, Lopburi Province is another kind of ritual object (Fig. 21b). According to the *Satapatha Brahmana*, these objects might have been used in a series of rituals performed during the *Rajasuya ceremony*³³. Its main features are as follows:-

1. Offering to the household deities;
2. Sprinkling ceremony (*abhisecaneya*);
3. The king's symbolical walk towards the various quarters, as an indication of his universal rule;
4. Treading upon the tiger's skin, thus gaining the strength of the tiger;



Fig. 21a

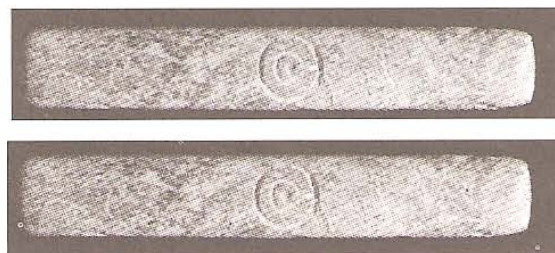


Fig. 21b

5. Enthronement;
6. A mimic cow raid, symbolizing the king as the war leader of pastoral peoples;
7. Narration by priest of the *Sunhsepa* legend of *Aitareya Brahmana*, which reflects the structure of class society;
8. Game of dice-the eighth item of the *Rajasuya*-in which the king takes part to symbolize the division of food.

The stone tablets or trays which depict a series of royal insignia with a small circular depression in the middle might have been receptacles for holding a pot of water to be used in rituals such as the sprinkling ceremony, (*abhisecaneya*); the second item mentioned in the *Rajasuya*. And the bone dice might have been used in the rituals, such as the game of dice : the eighth item mentioned in the *Rajasuya*.

According to Buddhist tradition, Dvaravati kings could also be regarded as Universal Emperor (*Cakravartin*), as recorded in the *Cakkavattisihanada Sutta*³⁴.

“Just as Buddha appears from time to time in the cosmic cycle, heralded by auspicious omens and endowed with favorable signs, to lead all living beings along the road to enlightenment, so does a Universal Emperor appear, to conquer all *Jambudvipa* and rule prosperously and righteously”

This indicates that the *cakra* or wheel (symbol of sovereignty) of the state chariot rolls everywhere without obstruction. It is believed that the Mauryas developed the concept of *Cakravartin*, which was incorporated into Buddhist tradition. One relief from the stupa of Jaggayyapeta (ca.200-100 B.C.) depicts the *Cakravartin* scene with the Emperor in the center, on his right the wheel, symbolizing the Universal Empire, and on his left the Chief Queen, the Chief Minister, and the Crown Prince, and at his feet the imperial elephant and horse³⁵. This paradigm was blended with later Vedic imperialistic ideas, which were then taken over by orthodox Hinduism. In the Epics, numerous kings of legends, such as Yudhisthira and Rama are said to have been *digvijayins*, conquerors of all the four quarters³⁶.

Stone *Dharmacakra* (Fig. 6) which symbolizes the Universal Empire and Buddha images (Fig. 22, 23) including Buddhist monuments of the typical Dvaravati style (Fig. 3) have been discovered at the main Dvaravati sites of Central Thailand and at the other sites where Dvaravati culture spread. These include the northern region of Haripunjaya³⁷, and the northeastern region at Muang Sema, Fa Daed, and Na Dune;³⁸ and the southern region such as Chaiya, and Yarang³⁹. These examples all clearly indicate that the Dvaravati kings had followed the Buddhist concept as recorded in the *Cakkavattisihanada Sutta* and practiced by King Asoka. The Dvaravati kings tried to follow King Asoka in establishing *Dharma* or the 'Law of Piety' (*dharma-vijaya*) in foreign regions, and thus they could be regarded as *digvijayins* -conquerors of all the four quarters.

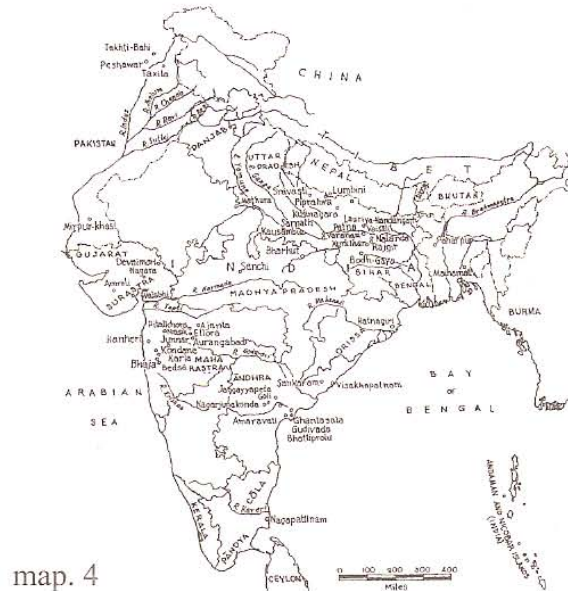


Fig. 22



Fig. 23

Religious Beliefs (Map. 4)



There is every reason to believe that Dvaravati was a predominantly Buddhist kingdom. However, we should not lose sight of the Hindu elements in Dvaravati religion especially at U-Thong where a stone *Mukhalinga* in the Pre-Angkorian style of the 7th-8th centuries was unearthed to the south of the city. The existence of *Saivism* at U Thong is well supported by a mid 7th century copper plate inscription which mentions gifts of a jewel litter, a parasol, and musical instruments to the *Amratakesvara* (a form of *linga*) by *Sri Harsvarman*, grandson of the king *Sri Isanavarman*⁴⁰. Not only *Saivism*, but traces of *Vaisnavism* are also evident in two steles with rough figures of **Visnu** in high relief, probably in Pallava style, which have been kept in the U-Thong *San Chao* or spirit shrine⁴¹. They seem to belong to the same group of the Pallava-derived **mitred Visnus** found at Muang Sri Mahosot in Prachinburi Province⁴².

Nevertheless, the earliest evidence of religious belief at U Thong is still Buddhist. Based on the Buddhist remains at U Thong, most scholars agree that Buddhist beliefs were introduced to the Dvaravati people in this part of Thailand from Nagarjunakonda in the Krishna-Godavari Valleys, under the

Ikshavakus between the first quarter of the 3rd century to the middle of the 4th century⁴³.

The different Buddhist sects which flourished at Nagarjunakonda, such as Mahi-sasaka, Bahusrutiya, Chaityakas which split from the Hinayana sect; and Mahasanghika, Lokottaravadins which were inclined to Mahayana concepts, were introduced to the local people of U-Thong which became the early Buddhist center of the Dvaravati kingdom by the 4th century if not earlier. The influence of different Buddhist sects from Nagarjunakonda could be seen in the architectural and sculptural remains left there and of the Dvaravati sites. As they established Buddhist symbols like *Dharmacakra* such as the stone *Dharmacakra* on a pillar found near *stupa* no.11 at U-Thong⁴⁴. They worshipped Buddha images at the same time. As we have many examples of bronze and stone images from the main Dvaravati sites (Fig 22, 23). They also believed in *stupa* worship. A large number of small *stupas* have been constructed within and beyond the moated sites such as U-Thong, Ku Bua and Muang Bon. Most of them were similar in plan, having a square brick *stupa* base with stairways on each face. And it is noticed that the devout Buddhists preferred constructing the *Mahachaityas* in the center of the important cities such as Chula Paton (Fig. 3) at Nakhon Pathom, Wat Klong at Ku Bua, and Kao Klang Nai at Sri Thep⁴⁵.

We also learn from epigraphical records and from Buddhist remains in the main Dvaravati sites that Dvaravati Buddhism was influenced not only from the Krishna-Godavari Valleys, but also from Buddhist centers in different parts of India. There is, for instance, evidence to show that the religious beliefs of the Hinayana Sammitiya sect, held by the Indian Buddhists of the western region, centered at Valabhi (Gujarat), under the patronage of the Saka-Kshatrapas (ca. 200-400 A.D.), and the Maitrakas (ca. 400-800 A.D.) had much influence on Dvaravati Buddhism.

The Dvaravati people not only constructed a large number of *stupas*, *Mahastupas* and many Buddha images but they also produced a large number of religious objects. Archaeologists have discovered votive stupas, terracotta tablets, votive tablets, terracotta begging bowls inscribed in Pali with the Buddhist creed *Ye Dhamma*, while the stone *Dharmacakras* were inscribed in Pali with the *Pratitya-samutpada-sutra*, -the essence of the Buddha's teaching which was considered as the paramount importance by the Buddhists in India at Valabhi during the 6th and 7th centuries. The Chinese pilgrim I-tsing did not fail to notice this widely prevalent practice. According to his record, when Indian people made images and *chaityas* which consist of gold, silver, copper, iron, earth, lacquer, bricks and stone, they put in the images and *chaityas* two kinds of *Sariras* relics: first, the relics of the Great Teacher, and second, the *Gatha of the Chain of Causation*⁴⁶ (*Pratitya-samutpada-sutra*). The merits derived from enshrining the two kinds of *sarira* were supposedly enormous. The fact that the Gatha was called *sarira* shows that it had assumed the sanctity of a relic of Buddha himself.⁴⁶ The sculptural art of Dvaravati came under the influence of Buddhism from centers flourishing in the northern region, in the eastern region, and in the Deccan. From Sarnath in the north, a wheel flanked by two deer symbolizing the First Sermon in the Deer Park became the accepted emblem of the seals of almost all the *mahaviharas* of India⁴⁷ and this was considered to be of paramount importance by the Dvaravati people. Stone Dharmacakra and deer images have been reported from most of the main Dvaravati sites. The sculptural art of Dvaravati was also influenced by Mahayana Buddhism from the Buddhist center in the Deccan under the patronage of the Gupta and the Vakataka rulers (ca.300-600 A.D.), while the art of the Deccan caves at Ajanta, Karli and Kanheri was imitated by Dvaravati artists. These include the colossal images of Buddha seated in the *pralambapada-asana*- position; reliefs of preaching Buddha; and of the Great Miracle of Sravasti⁴⁸ A number of colossal images of Buddha are recorded from Dvaravati sites such as the quartzite statues of Wat Pra Men, Nakhon Pathom⁴⁹ (Fig. 24)

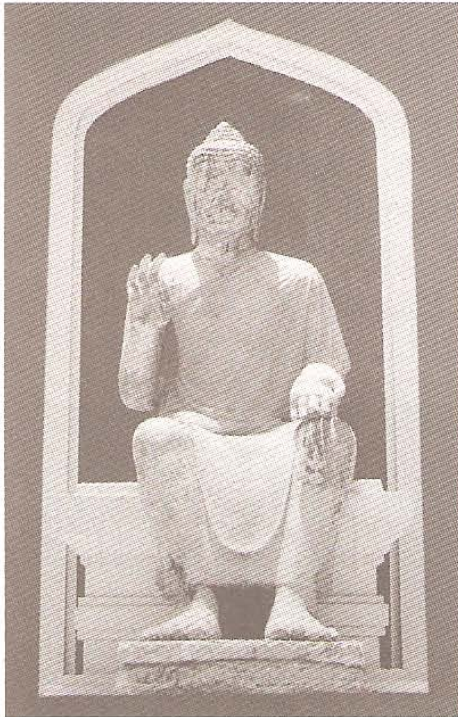


Fig. 24

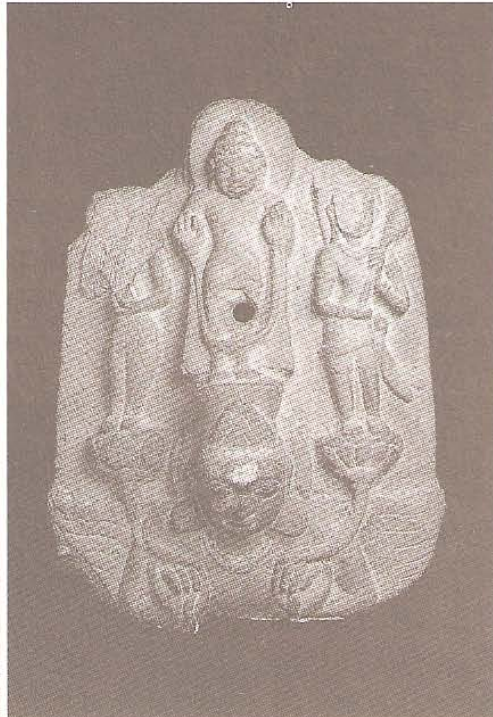


Fig. 25

and the relief carving of the Buddha in the Khao Ngu cave, Ratchaburi Province. Terracotta votive tablets depicting the Buddha giving a discourse on the True Doctrine. (The Lotus Sutra), and the Great Miracle of Sravasti as described in the *Divyavadana*⁵², have also been made by the Dvaravati artists⁵³

A number of stone bas-reliefs are known from Nakhon Pathom, Sri Thep, Sab Champa and some other sites⁵⁴. Each of them depict the curious bird vehicle on which the Buddha and his two attendants are standing. (Fig. 25). The vehicle (*vahana*) is labelled as *Vanaspati* a combination of the characteristics of *hamsa*, *garuda* and bull vehicles of Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva, gods of Hindu Trinity. This combination seems to be a peculiarly Dvaravati conception which was undoubtedly influenced by the Vajrayana school of Mahayana Tantra flourishing in the northeastern region of India under the patronage of the Pala kings (ca. 800-1200 A.D.). The Vajrayanists always displayed a great hatred towards the Hindu gods who were usually shown as the favorite vehicles of the Buddhist gods.



Fig. 26

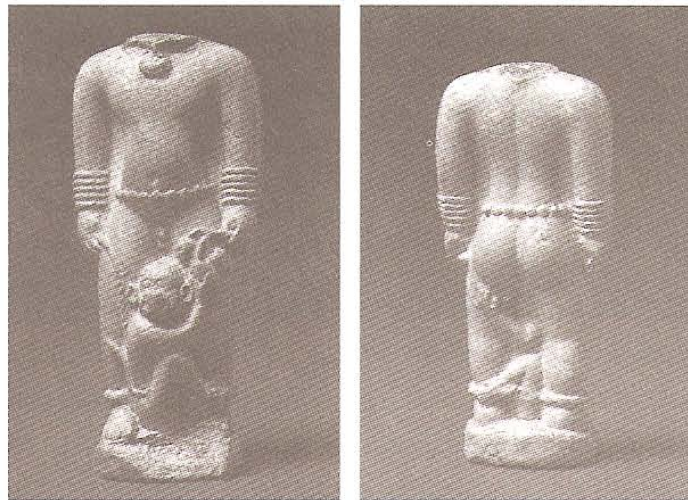


Fig. 27

Lastly, we should mention the amulets that were prevalent during Dvaravati times. The round terracotta medallions found at the main Dvaravati sites depicting *Gaja-Laksmi* (Fig.26) were used to ward off misfortunes and to bestow wealth from trade. Human-shaped amulets were quite popular. A number of headless human figurines both male and female, particularly a headless man with monkey (Fig. 27) have been reported from the main Dvaravati sites⁵⁷. However, it seems that lion amulets (Fig.28) were most popular. The lion not only symbolizes power, but it signifies the Buddha's status as *Sakya Simha*-the lion of the Sakya race⁵⁸



Fig. 28

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Maps

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