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Inscribed cult utensils of ancient Southeast Asia

Dossier compiled by Arlo Griffiths and Dominique Soutif

The various 'Indianized' cultures of ancient Southeast Asia shared numerous aspects of their religious lives, notably certain types of utensils dedicated to the cult of the gods. The utensils intended for use in large temples were often manufactured in precious or semi-precious metals under the pious sponsorship of royalty or other members of the social elite. These cultures also shared the habit of recording the donation of such utensils by engraving inscriptions on them. These texts, composed in Sanskrit or in the local language, often contain information about the dating of the object, its ritual function, the person who ordered it, etc., and are hence valuable for the historical investigation of the conditions of manufacture and use of such objects.

These cult utensils fashioned in metal—whether inscribed or not—still await being studied from pan-Southeast Asian comparative perspective, not to mention the comparison of this aspect of Southeast Asian material culture with its

equivalents in the various regional traditions of South Asia, and even in East Asia. Existing studies only rarely exploit all the information that the inscriptions may be made to yield. It is also true that those studying inscriptions often do so without adequate understanding of the material-cultural context from which the inscribed artefacts have emerged.

In an effort to stimulate a conversation between archaeology, art history and epigraphy, while simultaneously allowing for several unpublished works of art to be made known, volume 65 of *Arts Asiatiques* (2010) hosted a dossier of interdisciplinary studies dedicated to cult utensils of ancient Cambodia. The dossier that we now offer to readers of the journal forms a continuation of the same effort, but the scope is here extended to Campā and Indonesia. In this way we hope to lay the foundation stones for comparative studies to be undertaken in the future.

A.G. & D.S.

