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► **To cite this version:**

Phongsathon Buakhampan, Wisitthisak Sattaphan, François Lagirarde. An Inscription on the Pedestal of a Buddha Image Kept at the State Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg. *Aséanie, Sciences humaines en Asie du Sud-Est*, 2010, 25, pp.139-145. 10.3406/asean.2010.2130. halshs-02543244

HAL Id: halshs-02543244

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02543244>

Submitted on 4 Mar 2022

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Citer ce document / Cite this document :

Buakhampan Phongsathon, Sattaphan Wisitthisak, Lagirarde François. An Inscription on the Pedestal of a Buddha Image Kept at the State Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg. In: Aséanie 25, 2010. pp. 139-145;

doi : <https://doi.org/10.3406/asean.2010.2130>

https://www.persee.fr/doc/asean_0859-9009_2010_num_25_1_2130

Fichier pdf généré le 11/07/2021

An Inscription on the Pedestal of a Buddha Image Kept at the State Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg

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The Oriental section of the State Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg holds an important collection of Siamese (Thai) art consisting of more than 300 items dating from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century and which have been preserved at the Hermitage for almost eighty years. Most of the collection is made up of religious wooden, bronze and clay sculptures that have already been duly presented to the academic world (Deshpande 1998). A rather modest selection of northern Thai (Lanna) and Laotian Buddhist sculptures should certainly be distinguished from this main collection of Siamese Buddhist sculpture.

The inscription we are concerned with in this article has been engraved on the back of the pedestal of a Buddha image acquired in 2008 by the Hermitage¹. It is part of a large private collection of Oriental art objects (about 250 items, originating from India to Japan) gathered by a known Russian collector, Mr. Sergey P. Varshavskiy (1906-1980) from Leningrad (modern Saint Petersburg). The precise provenance of this image is unknown and it was formerly classified as Siamese art. Only after its coming to the Hermitage was this image considered as a Laotian work. This opinion is confirmed by its inscription written in a Thai-Lao ancient script called *Lao Doem* in Laos or *Thai Noi* in Thailand. This script was used in Lanchang and in the

1. The presentation of this Buddha image, the reading of the inscription and the decoding of the text and calendar data have been done with the help of many friends and colleagues: Olga Deshpande, Chris Eade, Kannika Wimonkasem, Michel Lorrillard, Prasert na Nakhon, Sakchai Saisingha and Peter Skilling. We sincerely thank them all.



Fig. 1. The Lao Buddha image (© The State Hermitage Museum / Vladimir Terebinin).



Fig. 2. The Lao Buddha image from the back (© The State Hermitage Museum / Vladimir Terebin).

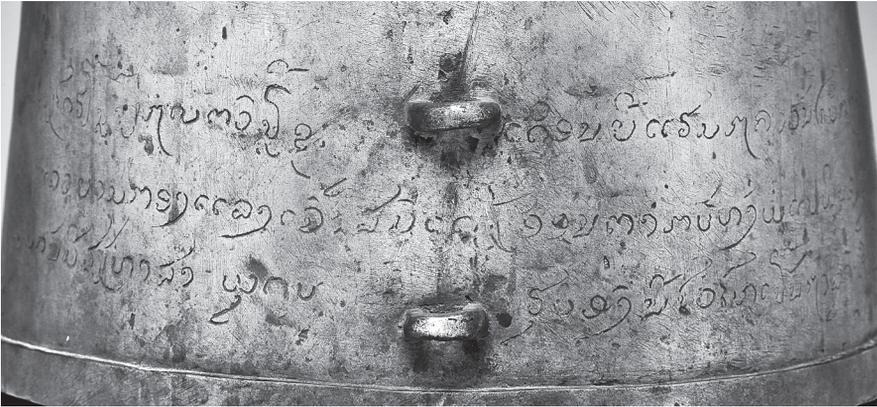


Fig. 3. The pedestal with the inscription (© The State Hermitage Museum / Vladimir Terebin).

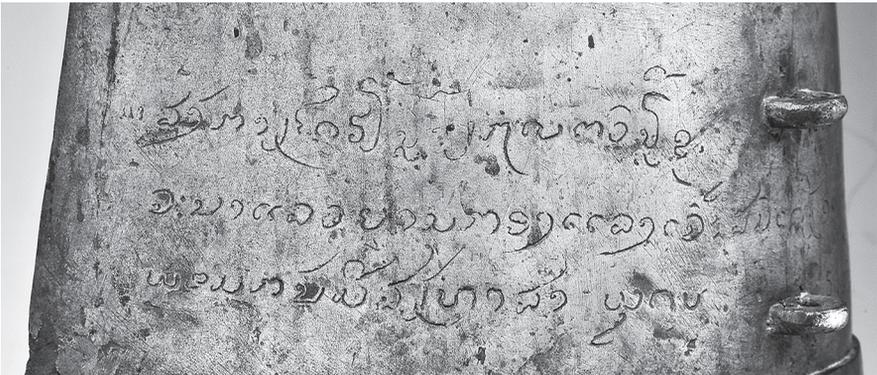


Fig. 4. Left side of the inscription (© The State Hermitage Museum / Vladimir Terebin).

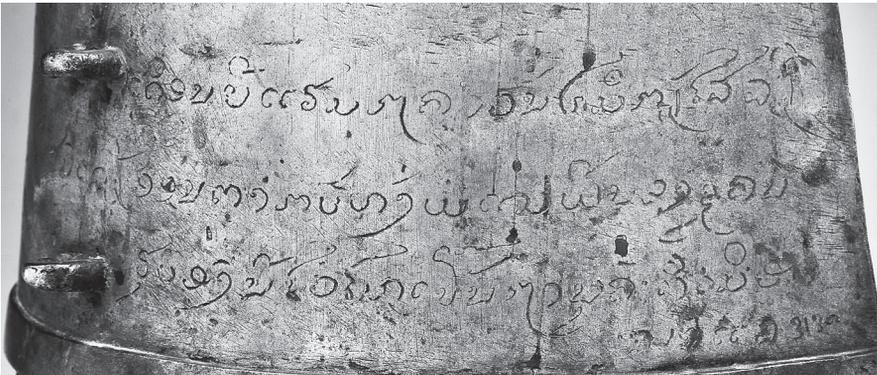


Fig. 5. Right side of the inscription (© The State Hermitage Museum / Vladimir Terebin).

northeast of Thailand between the fifteenth and the eighteenth centuries AD and is a later development of the Sukhothai and the so-called Fakkham scripts (Kannika 1999, 310).

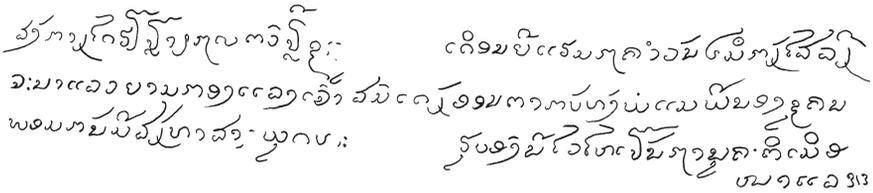
The image (inventory number IS-2145), made of brass, is 51 cm high. It is a Buddha seated in *māravijaya* (fig. 1) on a high but simple pedestal. The navel is encrusted with glass and the fringe of the robe was originally inlaid with silver. On the back, two rings were added to hold the rod of a small umbrella intended to shelter the Buddha (fig. 2). This accessory has been lost.

Fig. 1
p. 140

Fig. 2
p. 141

The inscription

Facsimile



Transliteration

- I. สังกาษไต่ร้อยปฺลาย ๗๙ ติวปฺลีส เดือนยี่ แรม ๗ คำ วัน ๔ มีกษัไสล ษี
- II. จะนาแลวยามกองแลง เจ้าสึมเดชะออนตากับทั้งพ่แม่พี่น้องชู้คน
- III. พอมกนมีศรัทธาสา(ง)พุทธรูปองค์นี้ไว้ให้เป้นัถาณุกะติ เมื่อ
- IV. หน้าแล

Remark: \bar{x} = mai kong, \overline{xx} = ligature.

Transcription (Modern Thai)

- I. สังกาษไต่ร้อยปฺลาย 79 ติว ปฺลีส เดือนยี่ แรม 7 คำ วัน 4 มีกักัดใส่ รีด-
- II. จะนาแลวยามกองแลง เจ้าสึมเต้จออนตากับทั้งพ่แม่พี่น้องชู้คน
- III. พร้อมกันมีศรัทธาสรางพุทธรูปองค์นี้ไว้ ให้เป้นฐานุกติ เมื่อ
- IV. หน้าแล

English translation

- I. In the year one hundred and seventy-nine of the Chulasakarat era, a year “ja”, the second month, seventh day of the waning moon, day four, a *kat sai day*
- II. this inscription was made at the “drum time.” The Somdet Chao named Onta with father, mother, brothers and sisters, everyone
- III. together by faith have supported the making of this Buddha image for *thānugati* in
- IV. the future.

The text of the inscription

Figs. 3, 4 & 5
p. 142

The inscription covers the back of the Buddha image on three main lines plus an extra fourth short line on the right lower side ending the text (figs 3, 4, and 5). The script is *Thai Noi* or *Lao Doem*, similar to inscriptions from Isan and Laos, especially from the Vientiane area. The purpose of this inscription (given as the action of *līṣcaḥṇā* [pāli *racanā*] to “arrange a text,” to write, to engrave) is to record the support given in the making of the Buddha image, e.g., in financing the casting and decorating the image. The supporter of this project is a group or a family surrounding a high ranking monk or a local civil dignitary called Onta [Āntā] and bearing the title of Somdet Chao. Onta and his group express their faith, supposedly in the teaching and in the person of the Buddha, although this later detail is not mentioned: the word for faith used here is *sāṣḍā* pronounced *satthā* (pāli *saddhā*). The ultimate purpose for the making of this Buddha image is revealed as *thānūgaḥṭi* (that we interpret as *ṭhānugati*), which is an unusual word in this context. It can be understood as a compound word *ṭhāna* + *u(g)gati* meaning an exalted position, a lofty state that would be the expression of a wish, for instance, in a good rebirth, in getting access to a paradise, for the attainment of a high condition of arahant or Buddha, for nirvana and other felicities.

The date of the inscription

The year 179 of the Chulasakarat era should be understood without hesitation as 1179 here (*sāṅkāsa* is the word used for Chulasakarat era). This is an ox year (Salu or Chalu), the initial consonant “ja” could be considered slightly incorrect; it was actually pronounced “sa.” In the main Lao tradition, the second month (*duean yi*) is Phussa (Finot 1917, 31) or Pausha, corresponding to December-January. In the Lanna tradition, sometimes present in Lao texts, a *yi* month would be Kattika or Karttika (October-November), but we have no reason to think that this image had a northern Thai (Yuan) or northern Lao (Lue) origin. According to Dr. Lorrillard and Professor Sakchai Saisingha, both the style of the image and the script of the engraving are typical of the Vientiane art and the paleography of the period (early nineteenth century). We should therefore hold to a Pausha month of the Lao tradition. The day numbered four is a Wednesday (here the seventh of the waning moon, actually a *ruang mao* day, whereas the text has *kat sai* for reasons that cannot be recovered). Therefore the date corresponds to Wednesday 28th of January, 1818, between 16h00 and 17h00 (“drum time”).

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