Study of a Four-armed Gilt Bronze Standing Avalokiteśvara Unearthed in Jambi, South Sumatra

Ito Naoko

Introduction

The four-armed gilt bronze standing Avalokiteśvara statue (no. 04.093), which belongs to the Museum Negeri Propinsi Jambi, is considered to be an important work representing the Śrivijaya style. As far as I can see, prior research on the piece is very limited, so I intend to present a formal analysis of it in this paper.

This statue was discovered on February 3, 1991, by a farmer in the district of Rantaukapastuo in the village of Muara Tembesi in Batanghari, State of Jambi, South Sumatra, Indonesia. The museum records date the statue to the 10th–11th century. The square face and full lips, necklines, wide shoulders, slender waist, and straight and thin legs are generally thought to be typical of the Śrivijaya style.

Together with this statue, another four-armed gilt bronze standing Avalokiteśvara statue was found, which I will discuss in another paper to follow.

General Features

The current statue is 39.4 cm high, with a maximal breadth of 14.5 cm (from the left to the right elbow). It is made of a single piece of molded gilt bronze, which has been slightly damaged all over and shows signs of greenish corrosion. Of the four hands, only the first left hand remains intact. The other three hands are missing from the elbow downward. The toes on both feet are missing. The left hip is turned slightly to the right, giving the body a subtle S-shaped line. The body is ideally proportioned: The distance from the forehead to the chin is about 10% of the total height. Also, the distances from the shoulders to the elbows and from the elbows to the hands are almost equal. The dimensions of the body and limbs prove to be carefully calculated.

The front and back of the figure are almost flat with no modulation and fairly static. The
figure has broad shoulders and a slender waist that twists slightly to the left, bearing the main weight of the body on the right foot. Although the toes are missing, it is possible to stand the image upright easily by making adjustments beneath the feet, which shows that it is an extremely well-balanced work. In contrast to the intricate bodily construction and careful workmanship of the face, the figure is adorned relatively simply, bearing only a few bodily decorations, such as breast ornaments and armlets. The statue’s distinctive features are its locks of hair curled at the end and the tiger skin that is wrapped around the waist and covers the skirt.

Specific Features

From the top of the head to the chin measures 8.3 cm. The hair is done up in a conical bun that is 2.2 cm high. The distance between the hairline and chin is 3.9 cm. The distance between the ears, including the pinnae, is 5.2 cm and the distance from the tip of the nose to the back of the head is 4.4 cm. On the front side of the headdress is a transformed Buddha image with a damaged face. On the backside of the hair, four U-shaped coils of hair hang down from the top of the head, one upon the other. The statue wears a Buddhist crown that consists of three upright ornaments decorated with floral patterns. The crown was tied at the middle of the back of the head, but only a rough-edged square remains where the knot has broken off. Two locks of long hair curled at the ends hang down from the top of the crown over the right and the left shoulders.

The face is slightly square and the eyebrows arched. Each brow is engraved in a long single line from the base of the nose, but they are not joined in a mono-brow. The eyes are equally sized at 1.1 cm long and 0.6 cm wide. The upper lids droop downward in the center, just where the pupil is located. There are contour lines above and below the pupils and engraved lines along the upper lids. The nose is damaged and parts are missing along the bridge and nostrils. The lips are thick with contour lines on the upper and lower lips and the corners of the mouth are raised. There are losses in parts of the forehead, underneath the eyebrows, on the nose and the cheeks. The neck is marked with three lines. A breast decoration with a flame-like pattern is tied in a square knot on the figure’s back.

A thin sacred thread hangs diagonally from the left shoulder to the right thigh. The nipples are round with recessed areolae encircled by outwardly radiating lines.

A long horizontal crack crosses the back from the right shoulder to the left shoulder and
an ellipsoidal hole is formed between the shoulder blades. There are also lateral cracks at the base of the left and the right arms.

Of the four original hands, only the primary right hand remains. The other three hands are missing from the elbow. The primary right arm measures equally 4.8 cm from its base to the elbow and from the elbow to the wrist. The statue wears unadorned armlets and its surviving hand forms the wish-granting gesture (varadamudrā). The tip of the thumb and all of the four other fingers are missing. There are two creases in the palm along the hollows of the hand.

The narrowest part of the waist measures 4.3 cm; the widest point on the hips is 6.2 cm. A narrow band encircles the body above the round navel. The lower abdomen bulges slightly and below it a thin skirt is gathered together below the navel. A tiger skin is wrapped around the waist with its face appearing on the figure’s right thigh. The skirt is light enough to accentuate the shape of the figure’s legs. Double lines indicating the folds of the cloth extend on opposite sides of the center to the left and right sides of the body. Double folds flow across the back from left to right. Above the cloth fold is a rope-like belt with a flower in the middle. The left paw of the tiger rests on the belt and the face appears on the right thigh. Its hind foot is on the figure’s left thigh and wraps around the waist.

Both feet of the figure are missing their toes and the heels protrude prominently. The soles of the feet are covered with numerous air bubbles that are green with corrosion.

**Hand-held Attributes**

The statue described above can be compared with another four-armed standing Avalokiteśvara image,\(^1\) which was also unearthed in Indonesia, this one in Palembang, Sumatra. It is a stone figure, dated to the 7th–8th century (no. 247. D215; Museum Pusat Nasional, Indonesia). The body length is 186.0 cm. The figure wears a Buddhist crown that consists of three upright ornaments. Both hands at the right side and the primary hand on the left side are missing but there are fragments of prayer beads (aśamāla) on the right shoulder and a sutra scroll (pustaka) in the secondary left hand. A tiger skin is wrapped around the waist over the skirt.\(^2\)

Another statue worth mentioning is a four-armed standing Avalokiteśvara that is located in Central Java and is part of a stone relief on the northeast wall of Candi Mundut, which was built around the 8th–9th century. The primary right hand forms the wish-granting ges-
ture and the secondary holds akṣamālā; the primary left hand holds a lotus stem (padma) and the secondary left a pustaka. Both of these statues demonstrate that images of the four-armed Avalokiteśvara had already been created in Indonesia in the 8th century.

As far as figures in metal are concerned, twenty-seven images have been confirmed as having been unearthed in Central Java, East Java, West Borneo, Sumatra, and Lombok. Most of them are made of bronze, four images are gold-covered, two are made of gold and one of silver. They are dated to the 7th–12th centuries. The silver figure is the tallest with a height of 98.1 cm (end of the 8th to the beginning of the 9th century; unearthed in Central Java, 509 A238; Museum Pusat Nasional, Indonesia). The other statues are as small as 10.0–28.5 cm.

Furthermore, most figures that have all four arms intact form the varadamudrā with the primary right hand and hold akṣamālā in the secondary right, a padma in the primary left hand and pustaka in the secondary left, identical to the stone relief of Candi Mundut. All eleven undamaged four-armed standing Avalokiteśvara figures hold them in this combination and the sixteen figures with partially missing items also show evidence of the same gesture of varadamudrā and holding akṣamālā, padma, and pustaka.

There is also one example of an undamaged four-armed Avalokiteśvara with unusual attributes: a discus in the primary right hand, akṣamālā in the secondary right hand, a water bottle (kamandalu) in the primary left hand and a pustaka in the secondary left hand (no. 1403-2384, Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde).

Another four-armed standing Avalokiteśvara with no feet and the secondary left hand missing from the wrist, with large cracks at the elbow of the primary right and secondary right arms and at the side of the thigh, was found together with the figure that is the focus of this study. It holds the attributes in a different arrangement from the figures mentioned above. The order is as follows: varadamudrā, pustaka, padma (?), and an unknown object. The figure holds the pustaka in the secondary left hand, which is unusual.

Seated four-armed Avalokiteśvara figures also usually show the same combination of attributes. One example is the seated Avalokiteśvara in the Gaṇḍavyūha relief on the wall of Candi Borobudur, Second Gallery, which was built in the 8th–9th century. The items appearing there are: varadamudrā, an unknown object, stem of padma (?), and pustaka. The stone image at Candi Plasosan, Central Java, built in the 9th century, also holds varadamudrā, akṣmālā, padma, and pustaka. The combination of items is thought to be identi-
cal to that of four-armed standing Avalokiteśvara figures.

As far as metal statues are concerned, the twenty figures that have been investigated show that varadāmudrā, aksamālā, padma, and pustaka are the most common combination with the exception of a single figure that shows the gesture of meditation (dhyāmadrā).

At present, two other four-armed standing Avalokiteśvara figures with a tiger skin wrapped around the waist are known. One of them is a 15.4 cm-high bronze figure that was unearthed in Kalimantan. It is dated to the end of the 8th century (no. 1403-1841, 1845; Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde). Its attributes are an unknown object, aksamālā, padma, and pustaka. The other figure is a 13.3 cm-high silver figure that was unearthed in Borneo and is dated to the 8th-10th century (no. 1956,7-25.9; British Museum). The hands form the varadāmudrā and hold an unknown object, padma, and another unknown object.

This comparision of four-armed standing and sitting Avalokiteśvara images in Indonesia shows that these figures are usually equipped with almost identical items. The primary right hand displays the varadāmudrā, the secondary right hand holds aksamālā, and the primary and secondary left hands hold a padma and a pustaka. The primary right hand of the statue described in this study also displays the varadāmudrā. Therefore, it can be deduced that the missing attributes of this figure were aksamālā in the secondary right hand, a padma in the primary left hand and a pustaka in the secondary left hand.

**Artistic Style**

The warabite hairstyle, with its tight knots on the top of the head and long locks hanging over the shoulders that curl at the ends, is typical of the Nālandā and Pāla Empire and the coastal areas of Vietnam. The origin of this hairstyle is still unknown and will be a subject of future research.

The facial anatomy of Buddhist sculpture is presumed to have originated in the Dvāravatī culture from the Malay Peninsula, which was dominant in Sumatra before the island came under the influence of the Indian Pāla empire. In Sumatra, three well-known and excellent Buddha statues were found. All of them now belong to the Museum Pusat Nasional, Indonesia: a Buddha unearthed from the Komering River in Palembang (40.0 cm high and dated to the 9th–10th century; no. 6023), a Maitreya (25.0 cm high with the lower half of the body missing, dated to the 9th century; no. 6025c149) and an eight-armed Avalokiteśvara (53.0 cm high and dated to the 9th–10th century; no. 6024).
Comparing the four-armed standing Avalokiteśvara of this study with the figures mentioned above, it becomes obvious that the main features are similar, for example the outstanding workmanship and the body height, which is unusually tall for works from Java. But there are several differences in the facial anatomy, the bodily proportions and some other minor aspects. South Sumatra is geographically close, but the artistic style seems to be of different origin.

Conclusion

The overall body of the four-armed standing Avalokiteśvara is curved in an S-shape, but compared to the upper part of the body, the lower half of the body looks almost static. The skirt is thin and creates an impression of movement in the legs, which can be considered to be Indian influence. On the other hand, the facial anatomy and the protruding heel bones are thought to have their roots on the Malay Peninsula.

The author has investigated about 1,000 gilt bronze Buddha statues on the island of Java. Most of them are made of bronze and not taller than 20.0 cm. Compared with these statues, the image unearthed in Jambi, South Sumatra, is twice as tall and finely crafted. Also, the face shows features different from Javanese works, suggesting that the statue is not descended from Java, but a work in Śrīvijaya style. The three images discovered in Sumatra are dated to the 9th to 10th centuries. The four-armed standing Avalokiteśvara of this study is no less technologically advanced, supporting the argument that this figure was also manufactured in the 10th century.

Notes

1) In this study, all figures bearing miniature Buddha figures (kebutsu) on the headdress are considered Avalokiteśvara figures.

2) Indonesia kodai ōkoku no shihō インドネシア古代王国の至宝 (Tokyo: Indonesia-Nihon Yūkōsai '97 Jimukyoku; Tōkyō Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan), p. 19. (exhibition catalogue)

3) Itō Naoko 伊藤奈保子, Indonesia no shūkyō bijutsu: Chūzōzō, hōgu no sekai インドネシアの宗教美術: 鏡像・法具の世界 (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 2007), p. 148.

4) A. J. Bernet Kempers, Ancient Indonesian Art (Amsterdam: C. P. J. van der Peet, 1959), pl. 43.

5) Itō, Indonesia no shūkyō bijutsu, p. 148.

6) Itō, Indonesia no shūkyō bijutsu, pp. 147–148.

7) Marijke J. Klokke and Pauline C. M. Lunsingh Scheurleer, Ancient Indonesian Sculpture (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1994), p. 59.
Study of a Four-armed Gilt Bronze Standing Avalokiteśvara Unearthed in Jambi, South Sumatra (N. 110)  

8) Kempers, *Ancient Indonesian Art*, pls. 174–176.

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(Associate Professor, Hiroshima University)
Study of a Four-armed Gilt Bronze Standing Avalokiteśvara Unearthed in Jambi, South Sumatra (N. Inō)

Figure from the front

Figure from the back

Face (detail)

Waist (detail)