

A NOTE ON THE RECENTLY DISCOVERED GAṆEŚA IMAGE
FROM PALEMBANG, SUMATRA

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In a recent issue of *Indonesia* E. Edwards McKinnon published a stone Gaṇeśa found at Jalan Mayor Ruslan, Palembang in 1983 (figs. 1 and 2).¹ He suggested a probable 12th-13th century date for the Gaṇeśa and noted the statue's excellent condition.² In my opinion, McKinnon's dating is too late and a 7th or 8th century date is more likely.³ This earlier dating would place the Gaṇeśa among the earliest images found at Palembang, and in fact in Sumatra. It would also mean that the Gaṇeśa is one of the very few, if not the only, Hindu image from the Palembang area with such an early date, as the other earliest known material from the region is Buddhist.

My 8th-century dating for the Gaṇeśa is based on comparisons with Indian images, one of the closest comparisons being with the 7th-century Gaṇeśa from the Bala-Brahmā temple at Alampur (fig. 3). It is frequently as difficult to date Gaṇeśa images in India as it is in Southeast Asia: the body type is usually determined by unchanging iconographic rather than stylistic considerations, and the elephant heads often vary radically, even within the same area and period. The Alampur Gaṇeśa is, however, part of a set of *saptamātrkā* that allows us considerable additional comparative material. Dr. Katherine Harper Lorenzana, who is preparing a detailed study of *saptamātrkā*, suggests an early 7th century date for the Alampur *mātrkā*s and the Gaṇeśa, because she believes they relate most closely to the Ellora Cave 21 and 14 sets of the latter half of the 6th century.⁴

In comparing the Alampur and Palembang Gaṇeśas we can note the general similarities of body proportion and relative head size. Both gods wear their hair piled in a *jaṭāmukuta* that sits well back from their foreheads. The attributes they hold are the same. They each hold a rosary (*akṣamāla*) in their upper right hand and an axe (*paraśu*) in their left. Not only are the general size and shape of these attributes the same (compare particularly the almost identical construction of the axes), but the way they are held with the bent central fingers is also similar.

1. E. Edwards McKinnon, "Early Politics in Southern Sumatra: Some Preliminary Observations Based on Archaeological Evidence," *Indonesia* 40 (October 1985): Plate 9. I want to thank Dr. McKinnon for information regarding the Gaṇeśa and for the photographs published here as figs. 1 and 2.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

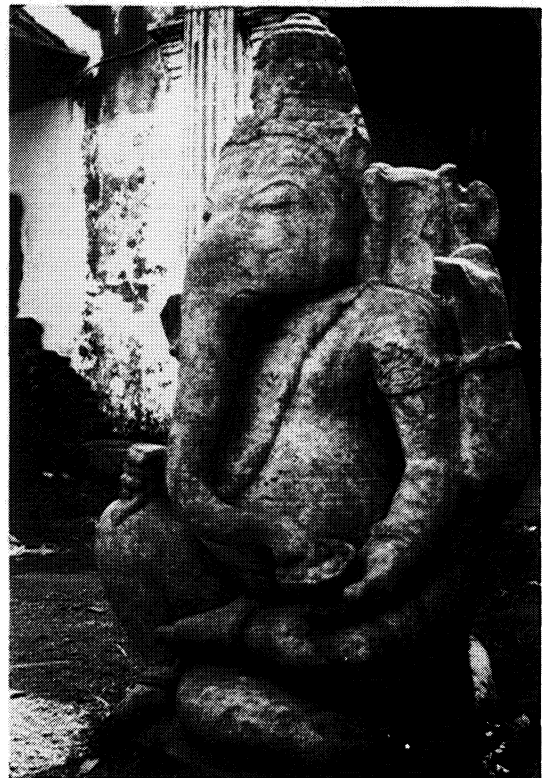
3. Dr. McKinnon in a personal letter says that an earlier date for the Gaṇeśa could be indeed a possibility.

4. I want to thank Dr. Lorenzana for discussing the dating of the Bala-Brahmā Gaṇeśa with me.



Fig. 1. Gaṇeśa. Jalan Mahyor Ruslan, Palembang, Sumatra. 7th-8th century. Stone. (Photo: Dr. E. Edwards McKinnon)

Fig. 2. Gaṇeśa. Jalan Mahyor Ruslan, Palembang, Sumatra. 7th-8th century. Stone. (Photo: Dr. E. Edwards McKinnon)



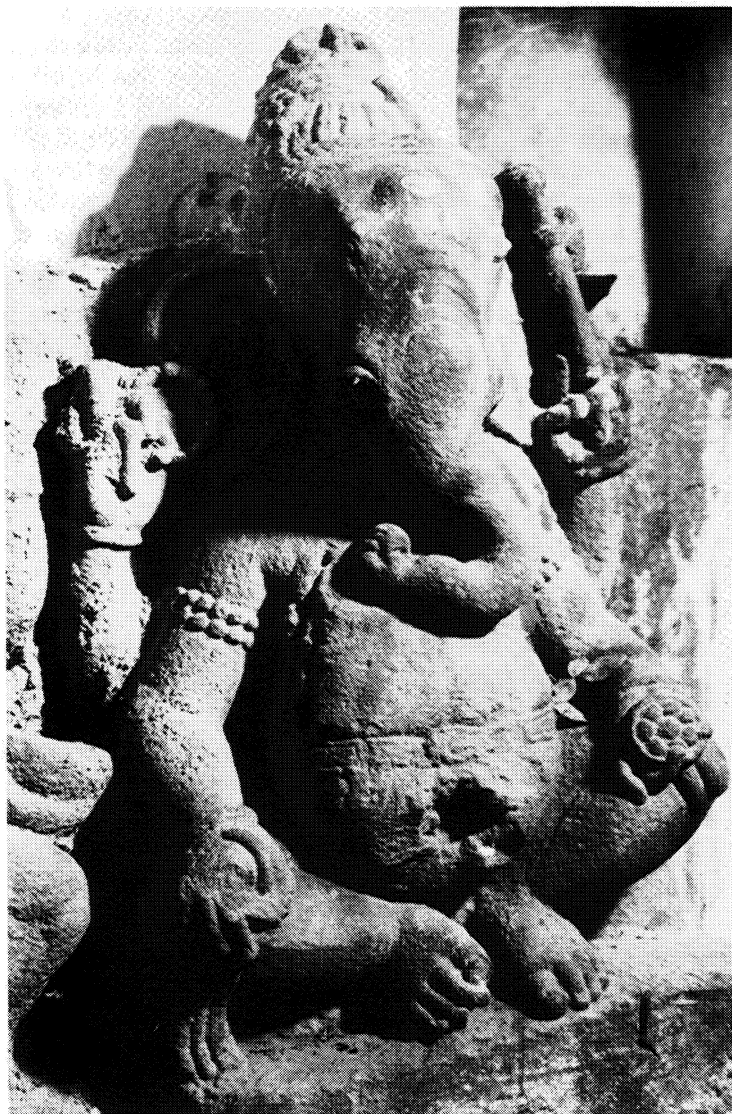


Fig. 3. Gaṇeśa. Bala-Brahmā Temple, Alampur, India. Early 7th century. Stone. (Photo: Archaeological Survey of India)

The *modaka* bowl held in the lower left hand of the two images is particularly telling. Appearing like a cut fruit with its seeds revealed, the Alampur *modaka* bowl is unusual in Indian art. The Palembang Gaṇeśa's bowl closely reflects this Alampur attribute type. Furthermore, as a general rule, Southeast Asian Gaṇeśas hold empty *modaka* bowls.

The final attributes, those held in the lower right hand, cannot be identified with certainty for either image. It is clear, however, that they are not tusks. That of the Alampur Gaṇeśa could perhaps be a cloth. Gaṇeśas from other Calukyan sites, such as Badami and Aihole, hold a variety of attributes in their lower right hands that often cannot be easily identified: they sometimes appear to be money bags, garlands, vegetables (radishes?), or pieces of cloth. Judging from the photograph, the Palembang Gaṇeśa's attribute may be broken on top. Nevertheless, it shares with the Alampur attribute a pliable quality not out of character with Calukyan prototypes.

If we were to broaden the comparison to other Calukyan art we would find additional similarities with the Palembang Gaṇeśa. For our present purposes, however, the point is that the Palembang image must be close in date to the Alampur Gaṇeśa, and it could not be more than a century later. In my opinion, the Palembang Gaṇeśa is so completely Indian in style, iconography, and general feel that its importation from India must be considered a possibility. Initially arguing against this possibility is the image's size, approximately 180 cm high, larger, I think, than any other Indian image found elsewhere in Southeast Asia. The immigration of Indian artists to Southeast Asia is, of course, a different matter.

Could the Gaṇeśa have been made locally? Other monumental stone sculpture has been found in the Palembang area, as McKinnon points out in his article.⁵ Three of these are large inscribed steles that, as with the elegant Sabokingking stone with its *nāga* heads, are sophisticated lithic achievements. The Sabokingking stone argues for a local (or at least Sumatran) manufacture, as its unique form does not occur elsewhere in Southeast Asia. The Palembang inscription, along with four others from Southern Sumatra, give us both a time frame (682-686 AD) and place name (Śrīvijaya) for their manufacture. Their dates would, apparently, fit well with the Palembang Gaṇeśa.

The Bukit Seguntang Buddha at over 360 cm is the largest stone sculpture from the Palembang area; Nik Hassan Shuhaimi has suggested that it dates to the late 7th-early 8th century.⁶ A second large stone image (H: 172 cm) from Palembang is a four-armed Avalokiteśvara,⁷ which could also, in my opinion, date to the 7th-8th centuries. Both images are, I think, decidedly Southeast Asian products, but Shuhaimi has proposed influence from Pāla-period Eastern

5. McKinnon, "Early Politics in Southern Sumatra," *passim*. F. M. Schnitger's 1937 monograph *The Archaeology of Hindoo Sumatra* (Leiden: Brill) still remains the standard discussion of the Palembang finds.

6. Nik Hassan Shuhaimi, "The Bukit Seguntang Buddha: A Reconsideration of Its Date," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 52, 2 (1979): 33-40. A good illustration is published in Bennet Bronson and Jan Wisseman, "Palembang as Śrīvijaya: The Lateness of Early Cities in Southern Southeast Asia," *Asian Perspectives* 19, no. 2 (1976): Plate III.

7. For an illustration see McKinnon, "Early Politics in Southern Sumatra," Plate 8.

India for the Buddha,⁸ while Sinhalese influence is usually mentioned for the bodhisattva.⁹ Can we now propose yet a third monumental image from Palembang, and a Hindu one at that, of the same time-period and with Calukyan influence?

One possible explanation for the diverse character of these sculptures would be that all three images were imported from different areas. This is in line with Bennet Bronson's and Jan Wisseman's redeposition theory, in which they speculate that "the 7th century inscriptions and the 6th-10th century statues . . . are present [in Palembang] because they were brought in from somewhere else during the 14th-17th centuries."¹⁰ Bronson and Wisseman were at the time attempting to reconcile the early date of the inscriptions and sculpture with what they believed was a total lack of physical evidence for the occupation of the site before around the 14th century. McKinnon's notice of late first millennium Chinese potsherds from Palembang¹¹ and the 1984 discovery of an extensive ancient habitation area west of modern Palembang¹² may revise Bronson's and Wisseman's conclusions as to how early there were settlements in this area, but even if evidence surfaces that these existed from the 7th century on, we are still left with the odd stylistic mix of artistic objects from the site, and, unless considerably more sculpture is discovered,¹³ with the puzzle of why so few objects, including several important statues which imply sophisticated workshops, have been found.

Finally, if the Palembang Gaṇeśa was imported, could it have come from somewhere other than India? If this were so, the possible alternatives would be Sri Lanka or, more likely, elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Briefly, Sinhalese Gaṇeśas tend to be later and follow Tamil (primarily Chola) styles. In Southeast Asia, one might look to Malaysia and Southern Thailand or Java. A number of Gaṇeśa images are known from the Malay and Thai Peninsula that date to the 8th century.¹⁴ These are, however, modest images that show little relation to the Palembang Gaṇeśa. Likewise the Gaṇeśa images from Java appear not to provide a likely source. The earliest Javanese Gaṇeśas may be those from Dieng, which

8. I am not prepared to accept completely Shuhaimi's arguments for stylistic influences on the Buddha. His tortuous discussion relies completely on analysis of the Buddha's robe. He does not mention the head at all which, although damaged, does not appear to me to be Pāla but closer to Sinhalese or South Indian images.

9. McKinnon, "Early Politics in Southern Sumatra," p. 13.

10. Bronson and Wisseman, "Palembang as Śrīvijaya," p. 233.

11. E. Edwards McKinnon, "A Note on the Discovery of Spur-Marked Yueh-Type Sherds at Bukit Seguntang Palembang," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 52, 2 (1979): 41-47.

12. McKinnon, "Early Politics in Southern Sumatra," pp. 15-17. This site, called Karanganyar, is also discussed by O. W. Wolters in "Restudying Some Chinese Writings on Srivijaya," *Indonesia* 42 (October 1986): 1-41.

13. The discovery of the Gaṇeśa makes this now an actual possibility.

14. See, for example, Piriya Krairiksh, *Art in Peninsula Thailand Prior to the Fourteenth Century A.D.* (Bangkok: The Fine Arts Department [1980]), Plate 16, and Chirasa Khochachiwa, "The Oldest Gaṇeśa Sculpture in Thailand," *The Journal of Silpakorn University* (1986), illustration on p. 82 (text in Thai).

date to around the 8th century.¹⁵ While they are not, in fact, without similarities to Calukyan images, they are already Javanese in style, with such characteristics as the seated position in which the soles of the feet press together before the body. By the 9th century Javanese Gaṇeṣas have a highly distinctive style that does not at all relate to the Palembang Gaṇeṣa.¹⁶

If the Palembang Gaṇeṣa were imported, therefore, India remains the most likely source. Another alternative exists, however: that the image was in fact carved in Sumatra by an Indian or Indian-trained artist. To prove this using art historical analysis is, obviously, difficult.¹⁷ The assumption might be that the object would necessarily display some non-Indian characteristics. Indeed, the Indian art historian might note that it is unusual for Indian Gaṇeṣas to have the elongated trunk, the human eyes with their raised eyebrows, or the two small skulls in the headdress. As I said above, however, the variety among Indian Gaṇeṣas must give one pause in being categorical about such specific characteristics. The question of provenance for the Gaṇeṣa as well as for the other Palembang stone sculptures may be most amenable to a technical solution. A relatively simple microscopic cross-sectional analysis of the stone, which requires a very small sample, would immediately tell if the sculptures are from different stone sources. If samples were obtained from Sumatra's apparently restricted stone sources as well, very specific answers could be formulated. Such an analysis has been carried out by Richard Newman for areas of India,¹⁸ but it is particularly appropriate for Sumatra with its limited quarries and number of sculptures.

In summary, two possibilities present themselves for the Palembang Gaṇeṣa: either it was imported from India or it was made outside of India, probably in Sumatra, by an Indian or Indian-trained artist. In either case, the image probably dates to the 8th century and thus adds a new early and significant Hindu face to Sumatran Śrīvijaya.¹⁹

15. See Alice Getty, *Gaṇeṣa: A Monograph on the Elephant-Faced God* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1936), Plate 30 c and d.

16. For a discussion of Southeast Asian Gaṇeṣa images see my "Gaṇeṣa in Southeast Asian Art: Indian Connections and Indigenous Developments" forthcoming in a volume on Gaṇeṣa throughout Asia edited by A. K. Narain.

17. The most consistent attempt at such an analysis for Southeast Asian art is A. B. Griswold, "Imported Images and the Nature of Copying in the Art of Siam," in *Essays Offered to G. H. Luce by His Colleagues and Friends in Honour of His Seventy-Fifth Birthday*, 2 vols., ed. Ba Shin et al. (Ascona: Artibus Asiae, 1966) 2:37-73. While his conclusions appear to be widely accepted, I feel many of them should best be considered tentative.

18. Richard Newman, *The Stone Sculpture of India: A Study of the Material Used by Indian Sculptors from ca. 2nd Century B.C. to the 16th Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Art Museums, 1984).

19. Dr. McKinnon in his letter tells me that a second but damaged Gaṇeṣa was found at Palembang about a century ago. He also says he is writing an article on Śivaite remains from Sumatra which will, certainly, be very helpful in assessing the Gaṇeṣa discussed here.