

## SERPENT SCULPTURE ON TELAGA BATU INSCRIPTION: AN INTERPRETATION BASED ON PEIRCE'S SEMIOTIC APPROACH

### FIGUR ULAR PADA PRASASTI TELAGA BATU: UPAYA PEMAKNAAN BERDASARKAN PENDEKATAN SEMIOTIKA PEIRCE

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#### ABSTRAK

Sriwijaya adalah kerajaan yang berkembang antara abad ke-7 sampai dengan 11 M. Prasasti menjadi tinggalan arkeologis sekaligus sumber tertulis yang dapat merekonstruksikan sejarah kebudayaan Sriwijaya. Prasasti Telaga Batu menjadi berbeda dengan prasasti lainnya, karena satu-satunya yang memiliki ornamen berbentuk makhluk hidup dan isinya yang paling panjang di antara yang lain. Ornamen yang terdapat pada Prasasti Telaga Batu adalah berbentuk ular berkepala tujuh. Kajian ini berusaha untuk menjawab makna figur ular berkepala tujuh tersebut dengan metode semiotika triadik Peirce. Makna tersebut dapat merekonstruksi konsep di balik pembuatan figur ular berkepala tujuh beserta alasan mengapa perlu dibuat figur tersebut digambarkan pada Prasasti Telaga Batu. Dalam menjawab pertanyaan tersebut digunakan rangkaian tahapan penelitian arkeologi, meliputi pengumpulan data, analisis data dan interpretasi. Figur ular pada Prasasti Telaga Batu pada akhirnya dapat dimaknai sebagai perwujudan pelindung Datu dan juga wujud sang Datu sebagai Buddha.

**Kata Kunci:** Buddha; Datu; Dewaraja; *Mucalinda*; Sriwijaya

#### ABSTRACT

Sriwijaya is a kingdom that developed between the 7th and 11th centuries AD. The inscriptions become archaeological remains as well as written sources that can reconstruct Sriwijaya's cultural history. The Telaga Batu inscription as one of Sriwijaya inscriptions is different from other inscriptions because it has the only ornament in living creature shape and it is the longest inscription among the others. The ornaments found on the Telaga Batu Inscription are in the form of a seven-headed snake. This study attempts to answer the meaning of the seven-headed snake figure with Peirce's triadic semiotic method. In answering these questions, a series of stages of archaeological research are used, including data collection, data analysis and interpretation. The snake figure in the Telaga Batu inscription can eventually be interpreted as a manifestation of the Datu's protector and the form of the Datu as a Buddha.

**Keywords:** Buddha; Datu; Dewaraja; *Mucalinda*; Sriwijaya

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## INTRODUCTION

Kedatuan Sriwijaya is a Hindu-Buddhist kingdom that developed from the 7th to 11th centuries AD. The area of influence of Sriwijaya is estimated to stretch from Sumatra, Java, the Malay Peninsula and even to the plains of southern Thailand (The Kra Isthmus). Sriwijaya was also the holder of trading power in the Malacca Strait, which connects traders from the western world (India) to the eastern world (China). Buddhism flourished in Sriwijaya, evidenced by the discovery of archaeological remains linking to Buddhist religious practices, either in the form of features or artifacts (Poesponegoro and Notosusanto, 2010, pp. 82-85).

Written sources, foreign records, and inscriptions, also prove the existence of Sriwijaya. Chinese chronicles from the Tang and Song dynasties are often used as a reference for foreign sources regarding the history of Sriwijaya, for example the travel notes of I'Tsing or Chao Ju Kua. Other foreign sources also came from the Middle East, one of which came from the records of Abu Zaid (Hall, 1985, p. 92). Regarding the source of the Sriwijaya inscription, generally the inscriptions issued by the 'kedatuan', the kingdom, came from Palembang, Bangka, Lampung and Jambi. The first Sriwijaya inscription studied by archaeologists is the Kota Kapur inscription. Hendrik Caspar Kern in 1913 read the inscription and mentioned the name "Sriwijaya" as the name of a king. George Coedes in 1918 then published his article entitled "*Le Royaume Sriwijaya*" and refuted Kern's interpretation by stating that Sriwijaya was a kingdom (Coedes, 2014, pp. 1-28). Other inscriptions from the Sriwijaya era that archaeologists have found include the Kedukan Bukit Inscription (682 AD), Talang Tuo (684 AD), Karang Brahi, Butut, Palas Pasemah and Telaga Batu and many more (Poesponegoro and Notosusanto, 2010, p. 70) -73).

The Telaga Batu inscription is one of the Sriwijaya inscriptions which has its own privileges. The peculiarity of the Telaga Batu Inscription was revealed by the results of the translation of the script and the translation carried out by JG de Casparis (1956, p. 35). The inscription contains the curse of Datu Sriwijaya on all Sriwijaya officials, from a *rajakumara* to a royal washerman. The description of the curse of the Telaga Batu Inscription is the longest compared to other inscriptions of the Sriwijaya era. Apart from its contents, the specialty of the Telaga Batu Inscription lies in its shape. The Telaga Batu inscription has snake figures on its top (Kartakusuma, 1993, p. 18). The shape of the snake makes the Telaga Batu Inscription the only inscription from the Sriwijaya era that has ornaments, especially in the form of living things.

The existence of the snake figure on the Telaga Batu Inscription is important to study. The formation of the snake figure on the Telaga Batu Inscription is not unreasonable. As mentioned by Agus Aris Munandar (2019, p. 70), inscriptions are not only written but also shaped to such a degree, motivated by a certain concept. The concept behind the making of the inscription is called meaning, so that archaeologists need to interpret the meaning of the inscription form further.

Studies on the meaning of the form or in this case the whole Telaga Batu Inscription have actually been carried out several times by previous researchers. Richadiana Kartakusuma (1993), in his writing entitled *Dapunta Hiyam Sri*

*Jayanasa: Study of the Meaning of the Telaga Batu Inscription*, tries to find the meaning of Telaga Batu to reconstruct Dapunta Hiyam (*Hyang?*) Sri Jayanasa's way of politics. The Telaga Batu inscription, according to Kartakusuma, is a monument indicating the possibility that the capital city of Sriwijaya in the 7th century was around Telaga Batu. Herman Kulke (1993) also interpreted the snake figures on the Telaga Batu Inscription as a form of Datu Sriwijaya. The depiction of Datu Sriwijaya in the form of a snake is related to the concept of *primus inter pares* shared by the Sriwijaya community at that time. Dedi Irwanto Muhammad Santun (2013), in his writing entitled *The Symbol of the Glory of the Capital of Sriwijaya from the Three Sriwijaya Inscriptions in Palembang*, discusses the shape of the Telaga Batu Inscription. Santun mentions that the snake in the Telaga Batu Inscription is a symbol of evil, referring to the form of a "snake-wrapped man" in the megalithic remains of Pasemah.

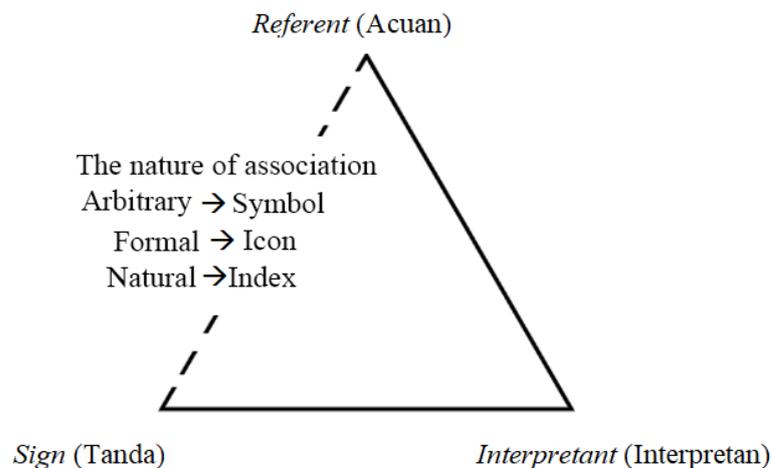
Previous studies regarding the Telaga Batu Inscription apparently have not specifically discussed the snake figure on the inscription, especially relating it to the contents of the inscription. Even though the inscription has been interpreted, the references are considered not relevant to the concept that should have developed the idea of the Kedatuan Sriwijaya as the center of Buddhism. The study aims to interpret the snake figure by relating it to the contents of the inscription and referring to Buddhist religious concepts. This study is also to understand why the concept is embodied in the form of a snake figure depicted on the Telaga Batu Inscription. The problem raised in this study is to reveal the meaning behind the snake figure on the Telaga Batu Inscription.

To find out the meaning of the snake figure on the Telaga Batu Inscription, a semiotic approach is needed. Semiotics is the study of signs, regarding humans as the *animalus symbolicum*, which interprets everything in life. Signs are seen as a cognitive process that is captured by the senses, used as a way to understand cultural symptoms (Hoed, 2003, p. 3). Semiotics was first proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). Semiotics in cultural studies was developed by Charles Sanders Peirce (1834-1914). Saussure in his semiotic study focuses more on the discipline of linguistics, while Peirce focuses on philosophy (Lantowa et al., 2017, p. 1). Semiotics in archeology has just been developed in the world of archeology in Indonesia for the first time by Munandar in his dissertation entitled *Efforts to Give Meaning to 14-19th century Balinese Palaces* (1999) and his book entitled *Proxemic Relief of the 8th-10th Century Temples* (2012). Munandar, in his dissertation, discusses the provision of meaning with a semiotic approach to parts of the great palaces in Bali. While, in his book Munandar discusses the meaning of distance in reading reliefs based on semiotics. The semiotic study in this study uses the Peirce's Triadic approach, as in the two writings. The importance of using Peirce's Triadic approach in this study is due to several advantages that exist in this approach, which include the following:

1. Has a definite theoretical basis, namely semiotics as a science that interprets artifacts
2. The relationship between objects and their references becomes clearer
3. Secondary archaeological data becomes clearer position in archeological studies (Munandar, 2002, p. 190).

## METHODS

The archaeological method is the method used in this study. The method consists of several stages, namely the stage of data collection, data analysis and data interpretation (Sharer and Ashmore, 2003, p. 156). Data collection was carried out by describing the shape of the snake figure on the Telaga Batu Inscription and presenting the contents of the inscription. The data collection used literature study with several reference sources. The collected data were then analyzed through the Peirce's Triadic semiotic approach in interpreting the archaeological remains as conveyed by Munandar (2019, pp. 77-78). The analysis stage was carried out by determining the archaeological data and its surrounding aspects (such as form and content) as signs. Aspects or variables in the inscription that have been used as signs are then connected with references that have relevance. The nature of the association between the sign and the reference will be determined, whether it is arbitrary (forming symbols), formal (forming icons) and natural (forming indexes). The predetermined referent is then interpreted with a certain concept or extract. The *interpretant* can be understood as a way of interpreting through certain cultural experiences. The result of the interpretation (*interpretant*) can be a *sign* new if it has a *referent*, so that a semiosis is formed. The semiosis can continue until the *interpretant* has no *referent*, that no new *sign* is formed. Further understanding of Peirce's Triadic semiotics can be seen on the chart as follows:



**Figure 1.** Peirce's Triadic  
(Source : Munandar, 2019, p. 78)

After the data is analyzed, the results of the analyzed data are interpreted to determine the meaning of the snake figure on the Telaga Inscription Stone. Interpretation is carried out using the Peirce's Triadic approach and based on the postulate which is considered the strongest argument. The argument was formed based on the meaning of the snake figure in general and the contents of the Telaga Batu Inscription.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

### Telaga Batu Inscription

The Telaga Batu Inscription was found in Telaga Batu Village, Sabokingking Dua Ilir, Palembang, South Sumatra. The inscription is now kept as a collection at the National Museum of Indonesia, with an inventory number D.155. Telaga Batu inscription height is 222 cm, 149 cm wide and 140 cm thick. (Utomo et al., 2009, p. 52).

The seven snakes on the Telaga Batu Inscription are in the form of snake heads, giving the impression that the seven snakes have one body. The figures of the seven snakes are fused with the inscription back. The seven snakes are depicted with extended position. The width of each snake's head is on average 18-33 cm. The average height of each snake figure is 8-12 cm. Each snake has a "mustika"-a magic jewel, in the middle of its head. The *mustika* of each snake has a round shape and an average size of 5-6 cm (see Figure 3).



**Figure 2.** Telaga Batu Inscription

(Source: [https://id.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berkas:Telaga\\_Batu\\_inscription.JPG](https://id.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berkas:Telaga_Batu_inscription.JPG))



**Figure 3.** Detailed View of the Snake Figures on Telaga Batu Inscription  
(Source: Personal Documentation)

The Telaga Batu Inscription in general contains a matter of curses, which are transcribed as follows:

"om! Make good! all of you, whatever you are, sons of kings, leaders, commander-in-chiefs, *nayaka*, *pratatya*, confidant of the king, judge, overseer of a group of workers, overseer of low caste, cutter (gardener?), *kumaramatya*, *catabatha*, *adhikarana*, scrivener, sculptor, ship captain, merchant, commander, washerman and king's slave. All of you will be killed by the curse, if you do not submit to me. Also, if you act like a traitor, collude with those who come in contact with my enemy or when you come to Datu who is an enemy spy, you will be killed by the curse. When you enter into the group of enemies or the Datuk who spies on me for other people, or my family and friends, or my slaves, or other leaders who are spying on people. And if you come into contact with traitors who plot against me before they are with you, those who conspired against me and my kingdom and if you go to them, you will be killed by the curse. Besides, if you plan to destroy this inscription or steal it, whoever you are, from the low middle or high class, on that basis, or you plan to attack my palace, you will be killed by the curse. Besides, if you disturb my harem to gain experience about the contents of my palace and come into contact with those who brought my gold and belongings or you come into contact with people who worked in my palace before that person retired or with men who delivered my belongings, out of the kingdom and it turns out that from you who took him away to Datu who spy on me, you will be killed by the curse. Besides, if you die before you succeed in destroying my kingdom or going to ask for help you will be killed by being cursed. Or if you want to spend gold and jewelery to spend it to destroy my palace or to be used together among you or given to someone who can make other people sick, and you are disloyal and submit to me and my palace, then you will be killed by the curse. And if you tell your family member to conspire, to make a bowl of blood, you will be killed by

the curse. However, if you plan to fight me from a foreign country, you will be killed by the curse. Whoever makes someone crazy, by various means, such as ashes, medicine, incantations, except according to my orders, my image, leprosy, love magic (pellets), or something that gives strength to others; and or you invite someone to join your side, you will be killed by the curse. Or if you order someone to do this heinous treatment, then you will be killed by cursing. If you have punished this person yourself, I will not bother you. If you rule over those whom I have made Datu and have the function of *Parvanda*, you will be cursed. If anyone under your responsibility does something to me (?), then you will be cursed. If you make a rebellion, then you will not be killed with a curse. If you use a spell to make my colonies free, you will be killed with a curse. If you are drunk, then you will be punished. However, if you return to your own place of residence, then you are not punished. Whoever is appointed by Datu, must submit to me. If you are in the company of my enemies, you will die by the curse. If someone instigates your family, your clan, your friends or your descendants against me, you will not be punished. If you are guilty of living with the crown prince (or other princes), you will be punished. If you order the troops to attack me, you will die because of the curse" (de Casparis, 1956, pp. 36-46)<sup>1</sup>.

## DISCUSSIONS

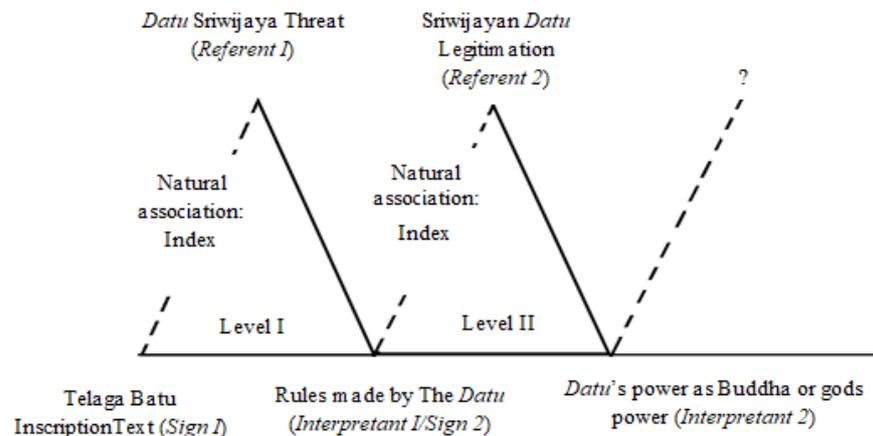
### The Meaning of the Content of the Telaga Batu Inscription

The inscriptions issued by the Kedatuan Sriwijaya by researchers are often referred to as persumpahan inscriptions, because their contents contain curses to anyone who goes against the power of the king. The Sriwijaya king in the inscription swore in front of the gods (including a local deity named *Tandrun Luah*), so that anyone who opposed the king would die instantly because of a curse. The curse that the king swore could be understood as a threat. Apart from its position, the Sriwijaya inscription also contains a message that the king will be guaranteed if he does not make trouble in his kingdom (Munandar, 2017, pp. 139-140).

The Telaga Batu inscription, as previously mentioned, contains Datu Sriwijaya's utterances against several parties and is the most detailed description of it compared to other cursing inscriptions. The making of the curse is certainly based on certain concepts that need further interpretation. The meaning of the curse of the Telaga Batu Inscription can be known through semiosis as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> Through the transliteration process by the author from the original translation of the inscription



**Figure 4.** Semiosis of the Telaga Batu Inscription  
(Source: Alnoza, 2020)

Figure 4 illustrates that the curse of the Telaga Batu Inscription as *sign 1* has an arbitrary association with Datu Sriwijaya's threat (*referent 1*), as previously mentioned by de Casparis (1975). Datu's threat in this case becomes the rule made by the Datu (*interpretant 1 = sign 2*) considering that the curse on the Telaga Batu Inscription was issued by Datu Sriwijaya himself (Kartakusuma, 1993, p. 18). The rules made by Datu Sriwijaya have a natural association with the datu's legitimacy (*referent 2*). Datu's legitimacy in this case comes from the power of the datu as the power of a god (*interpretant 2*). The power of Datu Sriwijaya as divine power originated from the concept of *Buddharaja* which developed in Southeast Asia at that time. The king was considered to be the embodiment of the gods in the world, so that the power of the king is the power of the gods in the world (Mabbet, 1969, pp. 202-204; Middleton, 2015, p. 127). Datu Sriwijaya's power as the power of a god/Buddha has no more *referents*, so semiosis stops at the second level.

The contents of the Telaga Batu inscription are thus an index of Datu Sriwijaya's power as Buddha's power. Datu Sriwijaya at this level is considered the embodiment of Buddha in the world. The previous incarnation of the king as Buddha has been known since the time of the early Buddhist kingdoms in India. The concept of a king as Buddha (*Buddharaja*) is part of the concept of an ideal king in Buddhism, which is parallel to the criteria of other ideal kings in Buddhism, namely *Cakravartin* and *Dharmmaraja* (Halkias, 2013, p. 501). This concept was generally carried out by Mahayana Buddhist kings, such as Raja Srong Brtsan Gam Po of Tibet (617-650 AD) (Halkias, 2013, pp. 501-504) or Emperor Wu Zetian (684-705 AD) of China. (Middleton, 2015, p. 127). In South East Asia King Suryawarman I of the Khmer is an example of a king who

considered himself the embodiment of Buddha in the world. The legitimacy of this position was realized with the construction of a temple in Bayon, Cambodia (Marcus, 1965, p. 189). Thus, the Telaga Batu inscription can also be interpreted as a form of Datu Sriwijaya's power in issuing inscriptions. Datu Sriwijaya also has the power to make laws that apply to people under his control, which in this case is related to the context of efforts to strengthen royal integration through certain threats (Coedes, 2014b, p. 73). The two forms of power in the Telaga Batu Inscription are certainly a manifestation of Buddha's power as well. The word *datu* on the Telaga Batu Inscription is considered as the word of the Buddha (*Buddhatatwa*). The parable emphasizes Datu Sriwijaya's words as words that need to be obeyed, just as a good Buddhist obeys the teachings of the Buddha.

### **The Meaning of the Seven Headed Snake Figure**

The oldest known *naga*-dragon mythology is the Sumerian dragon mythology. Many researchers argue that dragon mythology from the Sumerians later became the origin of dragon mythology in medieval Europe, as stated in the Old Agreement (Boulay, 1999, p. 15).

The concept of the dragon in Indonesia can be traced to the origin of the dragon concept from the Hindu-Buddhist period. The dragon concept in Hindu-Buddhist culture can be traced to its origins from ancient Indian civilizations, namely the Mohenjo-Daro, Harappa and Lothal Sites. The site of ancient Indian civilization indicates that the concept of the dragon in Hindu-Buddhist culture has existed since 2000 BC and developed in Dravidian society. The dragons at the Mohenjo-Daro, Harappa and Lothal sites are depicted in terracotta form. This terracotta is often juxtaposed with other sacred animals, such as elephants, rhinos and so on. At this time dragons also received special treatment so that they were worshiped in a certain sect that cultured dragons (Hartel, 1976, pp. 663-665; Viswanatha, 2013, p. 23).

The concept of dragon in later times passed through many changes. The Aryan nation who came from Central Asia has carried out cultural diffusion to the Dravidian community through Vedic teachings. Researchers agree that dragons in the Aryan era experienced a decline in status, so that their position was no longer a god, but only as a demigod (Hartel, 1976, pp. 665-669). The word "*dragon*" is then more often replaced by the word "*ahi*". Dragons at that time were described as beings who lived in their own world which were called *Nagaloka*. This place called *nagaloka* is located in the "underworld" or under the *manusaloka* (human realm) (Oldham, 2020, p. 50).

In the early days of AD, the concept of dragon began to undergo changes again, due to the development of new teachings in India. Dragons in Buddhism are described as beings who submit to Buddhism. Evidence of this can be found in the reliefs of Buddhist pillars in Brahut, India. In the relief, it is depicted that Buddha is worshiped by *Naga Erapattra*, which is a dragon with a human head

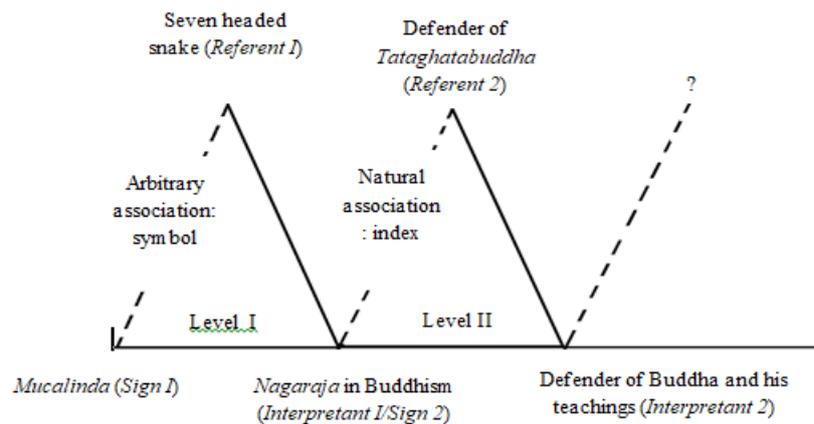
(Ferguson and Burgess, 2013, pp. 62-63). Dragons in India can also be found in Hinduism, especially in the Mahabharata. In the rules of Hindu iconography, Lord Vishnu is often depicted in a leaning or sitting position on a seven-headed snake that positions itself coiling its tail (Marcus, 1965, p. 186; Hartel, 1976, pp. 669-670; Zimmer, 2018, pp. 59- 61).

Dragons in Indian mythology have several different naming variations, for example *nāgadatta*, *nāgāmbikā*, *nāgabhatta*, *nāgarāja*, *nāganikā*, or *nāga* and *nāgi*. The variations in the names of the dragons come from several naming modifications that exist in North and South India. Pairing the dragon's name with other names (can be humans, places or other objects) is also often done in several areas in India in ancient times. The pairing of dragon names with other names was first revealed in the inscriptions found at Sanchi and Amaravati. Dragons are also respected as sacred subjects in India, outside of Hinduism and Buddhism, both in Jainism, Sikhism and even Islam (Gupta, 1939, p. 215; Krishna, 2010, pp. 215-217).

Dragons in Hindu-Buddhist culture are often depicted in the form of a cobra. The cobra is depicted in a standing position with a head that expands (forms like a spoon). The depiction of a dragon as a cobra is based on what is mentioned in the Brahma books, that the *ahi* or cobra in Indian society is seen as a creature that is both frightening and admired for its beauty (Hartel, 1976, p. 666).

Dragons are also often depicted in the form of a complete snake or sometimes in the form of a half human. Dragons are sometimes also depicted wearing crowns (Wessing, 2006, p. 208). The dragon is said to have originated from the marriage of a half-turtle-man with Vinata (Heaven) and Kadru (Earth). Kadru is the wife of a half-turtle man who brings down dragons of various kinds around the world. Naga's position as the son of Kadru confirms the dragon's position as in control of the fertility, wealth and prosperity of the earth. The myth of the birth of the dragon was later adapted by several tribes in the archipelago, for example the Sundanese, Javanese, Malay and Balinese (Wessing, 2006, p. 208). In addition to several areas in the archipelago, the concept and dragons originating from India have also spread to several countries, such as Nepal, Tibet, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and mainland Southeast Asian countries (Gupta, 1939, p. 215; Krishna, 2010, p. 217).

The seven-headed dragon, which in this case is related to the figure of a seven-headed snake on the Telaga Batu Inscription, has a connection with Hindu-Buddhist culture. The seven-dragon headed or *Mucalinda* can be found in various regions of the world, for example India, Cambodia and Thailand (Marcus, 1965, p. 188). Regarding the meaning of *Mucalinda*, in this case it can be interpreted through semiosis as follows:



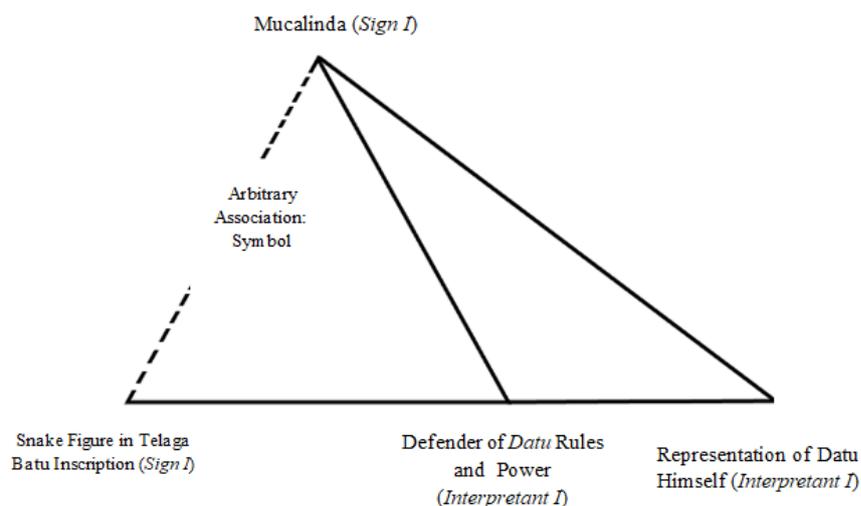
**Figure 5.** Semiosis of the *Mucalinda* Figure  
(Source: Alnoza, 2020)

Based on Figure 5, it can be seen that the "seven-headed dragon" as *sign 1* has a natural association with *Mucalinda* (*referent 1*). Margaret F. Marcus (1965, pp. 185-187) mentions that *Mucalinda* is a seven-headed dragon which is usually placed as the seat of the Buddha. *Mucalinda* in this case can be understood as a *nagaraja* figure in Buddhism (*interpretant 1 = sign 2*). The *Nagaraja* has the duty to protect the Buddha's order (*referent 2*). Adelbert J. Gail (2017, p. 148) also mentions that *nagaraja* is also sometimes a manifestation of the Buddha's "worldly" form or often referred to as *Nirmanakaya*. *Nagaraja* as protector of *tataghata* Buddha's can be understood as protector of the Buddha along with his teachings (*interpretant 2*). The concept of *Nagaraja* as the protector of the Buddha and his teachings has no *referents* more, so semiosis stops at the second stage.

The seven-headed dragon can thus be interpreted as an index of the Buddha's protective country and teachings. This meaning is based on the context of the existence of a seven-headed dragon figure on a royal inscription that breathes Buddhism. It becomes irrelevant when put together in the context of a royal culture that breathes Hinduism.

## Interpretations

The understanding of the meaning of the snake figure on the Telaga Batu Inscription based on the meaning of the shape and content of the inscription can thus be traced through the following:



**Figure 6.** Snake Figures Triadic of the Telaga Batu Inscription  
(Source: Alnoza, 2020)

Based on figure 6, it can be seen that the snake figure in the Telaga Batu Inscription as *sign 1* has arbitrary association with *Mucalinda* (*referent 1*). *Mucalinda* is defined as a figure that protects the power and law of Datu Sriwijaya (*interpretant 1*). *Mucalinda* at this level can also be interpreted as a form of Datu Sriwijaya as the embodiment of Buddha in the world. The two concepts that interpreted *Mucalinda* have no reference anymore, so reasoning stops in one Triadic with two *interpretants*.

Thus, the snake figure on the Telaga Batu Inscription can be interpreted as a symbol of the protector of power and law of Datu Sriwijaya or Datu Sriwijaya in the form of a Buddha. The connection between the snake figure on the Telaga Batu Inscription and the meaning of the Telaga Batu Inscription is that the snake figure is a symbol of the king's legitimacy in issuing rules for the people of his kingdom. This meaning is based on several arguments that strengthen the interpretation of the snake figure on the Telaga Batu Inscription. The argument that supports this comes from the meaning of the figure of a seven-headed snake and the contents of the Telaga Batu Inscription. Based on its shape, the seven-headed snake in the context of Buddhist iconography means an index of the Buddha's protector and teachings. This role stems from the myth of existence *Mucalinda's* in Buddhism. *Mucalinda* is a *nagaraja* who in myth deliberately doubles her head to be seven to cover the Buddha (Marcus, 1965, p. 187). *Mucalinda* or dragon in general is also considered as a creature who has power over prosperity. This role has made many kings who ruled in the area put a dragon as a form of self-manifestation, with the hope of prosperity for their country. The Jataka scriptures in Buddhism in this case further explain the role of the dragon for a kingdom. Dragons are seen as figures that give fortune and guarantee the power of the king (Bloss, 1973, pp. 37-39).

The important role that this dragon has led some kings to claim to be descendants of dragons or even to marry *nagini* (female dragons), for example

the kings of India and the Khmer (Gupta, 1939, pp. 216-217). The existence of the dragon in the king is also sometimes seen in the sculpture of the king, for example Raja Suryawarman I (1002-1050 AD) and Jayawarman VII (1181-1215 AD) from the Khmer in his sculpture often depicted leaning and under the umbrella of *Mucalinda* (see figure 7). The depiction of statues of kings is related to the concept of Dewaraja, who ruled at that time as an embodiment of Buddha (Marcus 1965, p. 190).



**Figure 7.** Jayawarman VII Embodiment Statue with *Mucalinda*  
(Source: Gail, 201, p. 149)

The existence of *Mucalinda* on the Telaga Batu Inscription Corresponds to the content of the Telaga Batu Inscription which is an index of the power of Datu as Buddha's power. *Mucalinda* on the Telaga Batu Inscription has undergone a shift in meaning, from being the guardian of Buddha and his teachings to being the guardian of datu and the laws he made. Datu in this regard is seen as the embodiment of Buddha in the world, so all the words of datu are Buddha's words protected by *Mucalinda*. Evidence of the embodiment of Datu Sriwijaya as the embodiment of Buddha is contained in the Talang Tuo Inscription which contains Buddhist characteristics from Datu Sriwijaya (Kartakusuma 1993, p. 25).

Yenrizal (2018) states that there are several environmental points in the Talang Tuo inscription which in this study are considered to represent the existence of the Dewaraja Concept in the depiction of the Sriwijaya rulers. First, Datu Sriwijaya played a role in controlling waterways making the previously infertile land become fertile. Datu is also described as having the ability to regulate the environment so that all living things can live in it. Environmental striving is related to the datu's devotion to *Buddhatatwa*. Datu in this case acted in balancing nature so that it is always in harmony.

The interpretation of the snake figure on the Telaga Batu Inscription in this study forms a different perspective from the previous interpretation. Richadiana Kartakusuma (1993, p. 28) in his interpretation mentions the existence

of a snake on the Telaga Batu Inscription as a naturally frightening figure to humans. This argument needs to be reconsidered considering that the snake figure on the Telaga Batu Inscription does not reflect a snake in nature (seven-headed). This argument also does not explain why the snake was used as an figure *ugra* in inscriptions and not another animal. In short, the seven-headed snake is certainly an imaginative human result based on a certain concept, which in this study is interpreted as *Mucalinda*.

The interpretation of the snake figure on the Telaga Batu Inscription also comes from the opinion of Dedi Irwanto Muhammad Santun (2013, p. 144). According to Santun, the snake figure on the Telaga Batu Inscription is a symbol of evil that needs to be avoided. The argument is based on the shape of a human statue being wrapped around a snake in the Pasemah area. Santun mentions that snakes are deadly and should be avoided. The interpretation in Santun's study is basically contrary to the concept of a snake in this study which views a snake or dragon as a sacred figure. The use of archaeological data from the megalithic era to interpret archaeological data during the Hindu-Buddhist period cannot be considered accurate, given the cultural differences between the two periods.

Another interpretation comes from Herman Kulke (1993, p. 166) in his study entitled "*Kadātuan Śrīvijaya*" -*Empire or Kraton of Śrīvijaya? A Reassessment of the Epigraphical Evidence*. Kulke mentioned that the Telaga Batu Inscription has an impression of the concept of *primus inter pares* very strong, so it is thought that this inscription is one of the objects used for ceremonial equipment in the cult. The concept of *primus inter pares*, according to Kulke, is reflected in the use of the title "datu" by the Sriwijaya rulers instead of a title that is more with Hindu-Buddhist culture. The local name is thought to have been used to persuade local rulers who were neighboring Sriwijaya (who probably did not have a Hindu-Buddhist culture) to submit to Sriwijaya rule. The name 'datu' is also considered an attempt by the Sriwijaya rulers to assert their power. Naming 'datu' is turned by the Sanskrit name was more commonly found in the names of office under Datu Sriwijaya, as *yuwaraja* (crown prince/viceroy), *rajakumara* (ordinary prince) or *nayaka* (minister of the kingdom).

An understanding of the concept of *primus inter pares* it directs Kulke against the interpretation that the snake in Telaga Batu is a figure of Datu Sriwijaya himself. This snake figure at the cult ceremony *primus inter pares* is anointed with water during the oath of allegiance to the Datu (Kulke, 1993, p. 167). This interpretation certainly still needs to be questioned, considering that Kulke never mentioned why the seven-headed snake was used as the embodiment of Datu Sriwijaya and the reasons why there was a need for the Datu manifestation on the Telaga Batu Inscription.

Kulke's interpretation in this study basically strengthens one of the *interpretants* in the triadic snake figure on the Telaga Batu Inscription, namely the embodiment of datu as Buddha. The part that needs to be considered is the concept behind the existence of the snake figure on the Telaga Batu Inscription which is the concept of dewaraja. This argument is based on the understanding that *mucalinda* as the snake figure reference in this study can also be understood as a form of the worldly body (*nirmanakaya*) of the Buddha (Gail, 2017, p. 148). If it is assumed that Datu Sriwijaya is the embodiment of Buddha in the world, then

the snake figure on the Telaga Batu Inscription can also be considered the worldly body of Datu Sriwijaya as well. In the end it can be answered why the snake figure is used as the embodiment of the datu on the Telaga Batu Inscription. Historical evidence also strengthens the relationship between the dragon figure and Datu Sriwijaya, namely from the records of Chao Ju Kua which states that the Sriwijaya people called their king as *Long Tsing* or 'dragon descendants' (Gupta, 1939, p. 217).

Regarding the reasons why it is necessary to place the concept symbol *Buddhist* on the Telaga Batu Inscription related to several factors, one of which is the position of the datu himself in the political stage in his country. Kedatuan Sriwijaya is a country that involves small countries as its subordinate territories. This subordinate area is known as the *samāryyada patha*. Each of these areas is controlled by a local ruler known as *hulatuh*. The nature of these areas is the area that serves the Kedatuan Sriwijaya as the center of power (*bhūmi ajñāña kedatuanku*). The binding between the Kedatuan Sriwijaya and its conquered territories are curse inscriptions issued by the datu himself (Kulke 1993, p. 162).

Of course, there are areas that are owned by Datu that are close to and some are far from the center of power, so that more power is needed to oversee areas that are prone to rebellion because they are difficult to reach. For example, in the Kota Kapur Inscription, it is stated that the Javanese Bhumi had acted without filial piety with Sriwijaya, so that it needed to be subdued by the Sriwijaya fleet. Another example can also be found in the Kedukan Bukit Inscription, which mentions the journey of Dapunta Hyang Sri Jayanasa who carried thousands of troops on his journey (Boechari 2012b, pp. 361-384). Based on this example, it can be seen that Sriwijaya took several repressive steps in cracking down on the rebels. The determination of the shape of the snake figure on the Telaga Batu Inscription can thus be interpreted as a preventive step for Datu Sriwijaya in overcoming the threats that confronted his power. Regarding the parties who are very likely to rebel against Datu Sriwijaya, according to Kulke (1993, p. 167) are people with positions like those on the Telaga Batu Inscription.

Another factor that explains the existence of the *mucalinda* symbol on the Telaga Batu Inscription is *mucalinda* as it can also be understood as Datu Sriwijaya's way of conveying the message that he is a devout Buddha. The role of Buddhism as mentioned in many previous studies is very significant for Sriwijaya unity. Evidence of the significance of Buddhism in Sriwijaya is I'Tsing's note. The note stated that I'Tsing's recommendation for Chinese monks who want to study in India is necessary to first learn Sanskrit at the Sriwijaya Buddhist learning center. Archaeological remains in the form of the Muaro Jambi temple complex as well as other Bauddha remains in Sumatra are also evidence of the significance of Buddhism in Sriwijaya (Poesponegoro & Notosusanto, 2010, p. 83). The significance of Buddhism in Sriwijaya even influenced the style of Buddhist culture beyond the reach of Sriwijaya power. HG Quarritch Wales (1978, pp. 5-7) states that the influence of Sriwijaya in the religious aspect can be seen in the art of sculpting and making temple ornaments in Thailand (Siam) and Dwarawati (Champa). This influence became even more interesting because the Buddhist teachings that spread to the area were Hinayana Buddhism, while the

teachings that developed in Sriwijaya were Mahayana Buddhism. The strong influence of Buddha in Sriwijaya, of course, needs to be balanced with the presence of Buddhist elements (in the form of *mucalinda*) in inscriptions containing Sriwijaya law.

Another factor that can be attributed to the symbol *mucalinda* on the Telaga Batu inscription is the economic power of Datu Sriwijaya. Sriwijaya, in this case Datu Sriwijaya, has the authority to fulfill and regulate the food needs of its people, both those from urban areas (Kedatuan) and colonies in remote areas (*bhūmi ajñaña kedatuanku*). Food fulfillment also includes the fulfillment of food for traders from abroad who stop at Datu Sriwijaya's ports, such as Jambi or Palembang. The fulfillment of food for traders also affects the choice of foreign traders to stop at the port of Sriwijaya. If the food needs of foreign traders are not met, the traders will move to ports that are considered more capable, for example ports in northern Java (Charras 2016, pp. 100-101).

The need for food is met through the realization of policies and the strengthening of the Datu's power in order to gain confidence in the power of the Datu. Murriel Charras (2016, pp. 106-109) states that the policy issued by Datu Sriwijaya can be seen from the Talang Tuo Inscription which states that Dapunta Hyang Sri Jayanasa ordered to plant sago (in the inscription it is called *rumwiya*) so that the results can be enjoyed by the people. overall. Sago was used by the datu to meet food needs, both aristocrats, traders and commoners. Evidence of the existence of this sago can also be found in Chao Ju Kua's notes, which states that the "king" of Sriwijaya consumed sago and exported the commodity to various regions. This sago planting tradition has also been continued until the relocation of the capital to Jambi, as evidenced by the discovery of the Lake Sipin meander site which is still in contact with the late Sriwijaya era (10-11 century AD). Datu plays a role in meeting food needs by utilizing areas that are less fertile (for growing rice) into sago planting areas. Indirectly, datu played a role in preventing Sriwijaya from becoming dependent on more fertile neighbors, such as Java. Datu thus shows his divine nature by fulfilling the life of his people, so that the *mucalinda* on the Telaga Batu Inscription is a form of confirmation of this.

## CONCLUSIONS

The existence of a snake figure on the Telaga Batu inscription means a *mucalinda* who protects Datu Sriwijaya and the laws he made. The existence of *mucalinda* on the Telaga Batu Inscription was based on the concept *Buddhist* that developed in Southeast Asia at that time. Based on the comparisons made between *mucalinda* in mainland Southeast Asia and Sriwijaya, both of them use *mucalinda* to protect the king. However, both have different ways of showing the manifestation of the relationship between *mucalinda* and the figure of the king. *Mucalinda* in Khmer was placed as the support for the statue of the king's embodiment, while in Sriwijaya *mucalinda* was placed as the back of the inscription of the king's word. The appointment of a king as the embodiment of *Buddha* or in this case the *Bodhisattva* (*budhharaja*) has been known since the development of Mahayana teachings in India.

*Mucalinda* in Sriwijaya also has a more significant role as it relates to the direct embodiment of the Datu. *Mucalinda* indirectly signifies the authority of the Datu as a living Buddha in the world. *Mucalinda* is a sign that Datu has full power and gives blessings to the lives of the Sriwijaya community. Datu's blessing causes anyone who reads or is mentioned by name in the Telaga Batu Inscription to live up to the inscription from generation to generation. The placement of the snake figure on the Telaga Batu Inscription is thus a reinforcement of the oath delivered by Datu Sriwijaya, so that it is not violated and continues to be obeyed.

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