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Bodies in Stone: Yoga, Vyayama and Krida in Temple Sculpture across the World

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Abstract

Background: Temple sculpture depicts religious figures and stories, but also shows the body in different postures and actions. Yoga (posture and the control of the body), vyayama (exercise, strength and physical training) and krida (play, recreation) are three related activities that also provide three distinct ways of thinking about these depictions. For the purposes of this discussion, they will be taken together through examples from different places.

Objective: To explore selected images of temples and other representations through these three lenses and to consider what they reveal about bodily practices and social life.

Methods: Images for each theme were purposefully chosen from a pre-existing archive of images that responded visually to the theme, for their suitability for viewing and the content that they offered for analysis. Each image was analyzed in relation to the visible posture or activity depicted in the image, the setting and the sourced information provided.

Findings: The Yoga section considers the seated, squatting and backbending postures in images from Indonesia, Cambodia, Thailand, Egypt and Guatemala, with the Egyptian and Maya samples used for comparison. The Vyayama section reviews the pair figures, gripping, balancing and combat in the Cambodian, Egyptian and Greek examples. The Krida section addresses the table games, cock fighting, acrobatic display, fishing and the Maya ball game. Some images could pertain to more than one aspect of physical or social activity.

Conclusion: The sculptures at the temple and other sites serve as visual data for analyzing representations of the human body and body-related practices and leisure activities. Combining the reading of Yoga, Vyayama and Krida enables us to have a wide range of perspectives in analyzing the images without conflating their visual description with their historical imagination.

Keywords: temple sculpture; Yoga; Vyayama; Krida; folk art

1. Introduction

Temples in many cultures were the focus of not only worship but also festivals, community events and gatherings. Few temples are decorated solely with images of divine beings and monarchs. There are human figures, working, playing and performing other physical activities, along with divine and royal figures, that can be used to study the forms of the human body in these settings.

In this paper, the discussion of such images is handled through three Indian words. Here, Yoga is used to denote stillness and balance achieved through the control of the body. Vyayama is used in a comprehensive way for exercise, strengthening, bodybuilding, wrestling and martial arts training. Krida is used to mean games, playing and recreational sports. These words are only categorised and given their interpretive value in relation to images from other places; they do not carry an assumption that the activities depicted had the same meanings in all places.

The paper poses two questions: in what ways are yoga, vyayama, and krida represented in temple and related sculptural settings in different cultures? And what conclusions may be drawn from these representations about the role of the body in religion and social life?

2. Material and Method

All images are from a reference collection of monuments and visual material from various regions. Examples chosen for presentation on Yoga, Vyayama and Krida were based on: degree of visibility of the human body, relevance of the image to the theme, level of detail available for description, and published or museum information. The collection covers temple reliefs as well as comparative examples from tombs, museum collections and elsewhere.

All images are captioned with a figure number, caption, the source of the image and the source description. The descriptions first describe the visible features of each image and then provide contextual information from the sources. When an image is from a non-temple setting, this is mentioned and the image is used as an example for comparison. Image credits and contextual statements are taken from the published sources listed in the final column of Table 1 and in the References. Table 1. Images cited in this paper.

Table 1. Selected images (Figures 1 to 15)

Fig.	Theme	Subject	Setting	Source
1	Yoga	Seated figure, hands in lap	Central Java, Indonesia, architrave relief	Not identified
2	Yoga	Seated yogi in a niche	Lolei Temple, Cambodia, relief	Wells (2024)
3	Yoga	Squatting yogis in mirror pose	Phanom Rung, Thailand, doorway	Wells (2024)
4	Yoga	Backward-bending acrobats	Karnak, Egypt, temple relief	Darnell (2010)
5	Yoga	Ruler seated with crossed legs	Cancuen, Guatemala, Maya panel	Vanderbilt Univ. (2004)
6	Vyayama	Ta Prohm martial-arts relief sequence	Ta Prohm Temple, Cambodia	Cambodianess (2023)
7	Vyayama	Figure with raised leg and arms	Cambodia, Angkor-style relief	Not identified

Fig.	Theme	Subject	Setting	Source
8	Vyayama	Combat or stick-fencing scene	Egypt, temple-wall relief	Not identified (cf. El Awady, 2009)
9	Vyayama	Rows of paired wrestlers	Egypt, painted tomb wall	Newberry (1893)
10	Vyayama	Two wrestlers in a grip	Greece, marble relief	Tactual Museum (n.d.)
11	Krida	Board game (chess-like)	Bayon, Cambodia	Smarthistory (n.d.)
12	Krida	Cockfight with onlookers	Bayon, Cambodia	Smarthistory (n.d.)
13	Krida	Acrobatic balance	Bayon, Cambodia	Smarthistory (n.d.)
14	Krida	Fishing and water life	Bayon, Cambodia	Smarthistory (n.d.)
15	Krida	Maya ball game	Chichen Itza, Mexico	World Hist. Encycl. (n.d.)

3. Yoga in Temple Sculpture

Sculpture depicts the human figure seated, standing, balanced and leaning. These gestures may be connected to physical regulation, religious rituals, entertainment, or other forms, depending on the depiction and context.

The images below are all taken from sites in Indonesia, Cambodia, Thailand, Egypt and Guatemala. The first three examples are Southeast Asian temple reliefs of seated and squatters. The Egyptian and Maya representations show you different ways of handling bending, balancing and cross-legged sitters.



Figure 1. Indonesia: Seated figure in a steady posture, architrave relief. Central Java, 9th century CE. The identity of the figure has been discussed differently in the source material.

Description. The bearded figure is seated cross-legged on the panel with his back straight. His shoulders are broad; his hands rest together on his knees; he wears a tall headdress, a necklace and thick armbands. The whole figure is worked in high relief, with its crossed legs and erect posture immediately apparent. On the left, the edge of further standing figures can be seen and part of an even larger figure on the extreme right-hand edge. In the source file, the site is given as Prambanan, Central Java and the photographer's name is not given. The figure is illustrated here mainly for its seated position.



Figure 2. Cambodia: Seated figure in a niche, Lolei Temple relief. About 893 CE. Posture: sopāśrayāsana (Wells, 2024). Photograph: David R. Wells.

Description. In a recess carved in the face of a pillar, a figure is seated with knees splayed, crossed, or bent before his body. His arms are held close to his knees and chest, and Wells (2024) identifies the posture as sopāśrayāsana, a squatting position in which the back and legs are bound with a cloth strap. He is topped with a tall, pointed crown. An inscription line sits above a scroll-work border of the arch over the niche. The image has been magnified to make the stone and the position of the legs visible.



Figure 3. Thailand: Squatting figures in a mirrored posture, doorway colonette, Prasat Phanom Rung. About 1100 CE. Posture: utkutikasana, "the tight squatting pose" (Srisuchat, 2004, p. 154, as cited in Wells, 2024). Photograph: David R. Wells.

Description. Facing figures, one on either side of a central stem, with the figures facing each other; both are sitting with squatted knees and knees raised and one hand held up to his head, whilst the other hand is by the knee. Plant scrolls are over their heads, and a beaded border encircles the panel. Lichen on the stone. Their posture is low and held and can be considered in relation to balance and control of movement.



Figure 4. Egypt: Figures in backward-bending postures, Karnak relief (comparative example). Reign of Hatshepsut, 18th Dynasty, about the 15th century BCE (New Kingdom). Shallow carved relief from the Opet Festival scenes of the Red Chapel (Darnell, 2010).

Description. Four figures carved in two registers of two, all bent back strongly with a convex spine, reaching to the ground with the head hanging between the outstretched arms. The lines are cut in shallow relief. A narrow central line separates the upper register from the lower. The Opet Festival reliefs of Hatshepsut's Red Chapel at Karnak show acrobats among the singers and musicians who accompanied the procession of the god's bark (Darnell, 2010). The postures seem to be associated with a dance, circus act, or gymnastic performance. This example is included for comparison purposes only, not as a yoga pose.



Figure 5. Guatemala: Ruler seated with crossed legs, Maya relief panel, Cancuen (comparative example). Late Classic Maya period, late 8th century CE. The panel comes from the ballcourt of the royal palace at Cancuen and is presented in a royal setting rather than a temple context (Vanderbilt University, 2004).

Description. A large figure squats on a throne seat, knees crossed. He wears a feathered headdress, a broad bead collar and wristbands, and raises one hand in a gesture toward a kneeling attendant at the bottom left. A second figure stands at the bottom right with arms folded across the chest. Areas of glyph text occupy the upper right and left edges, and the panel is narrowly framed by a rounded border. This seated stance occurs in a context of royal and ceremonial activity; a comparison with seated figures from other regions is appropriate. The composition corresponds to the Cancuen ballcourt panel that shows King Taj Chan Ahk on a throne installing subordinate officials, with an inscription dated to the end of the eighth century CE (Vanderbilt University, 2004); the museum accession is not recorded in the source file. Taken together, these five images demonstrate that the various representations linked to discipline of the body were not confined to seated postures. The seated figures of Java and Cambodia show stillness and grace; the three figures on the seat of the Phanom Rung sculpture and the Egyptian back-benders give a variety of body positions and movements. The Maya panel introduces a more direct comparison between seated postures with the placement of the cross-legged seat in a court context. Posture labels from the sources have been used; the focus of the discussion is on what can be seen.

4. Vyayama in Temple Sculpture

Here are some representations of physical activity, body movement and struggle. They represent examples from Cambodia, Egypt and Greece. Two of the examples are Cambodian, two from Egypt and one from Greece. Only the Cambodian examples have a direct relationship with the theme of this paper; the other three were added for comparison, with their original context noted on the images and in the text.



Figure 6. Cambodia: Ta Prohm martial-arts relief sequence, stone bas-relief, late 12th–early 13th century. Ta Prohm Temple, Angkor, Cambodia (Cambodianess, 2023).

Description. This relief is one of a set of eight small panels along the lower border of the temple. The panels depict pairs of figures in various postures and performing various actions with their body, including movements of knees, arms and chest. Phoeung Dara, an archaeologist with the APSARA National Authority, identifies the sequence as martial arts, possibly kun Khmer, and the report adds that it more likely shows training, since nearby figures sit and point out techniques to the fighters (Cambodianess, 2023). The pairs are repeated with different postures and the relevance of the relief to a discussion of Vyayama, with respect to movements of the human body, control, and balance, is given here, although the name of the exercise (s) portrayed in the relief is not given in the report.



Figure 7. Cambodia: Figure with raised arms and lifted leg, Angkor-style stone relief. The exact site and activity are not specified in the available source file.

Description. Large figure in the centre, extending his arms and placing one foot forward in a wide stance. He is wearing a large circular headdress and a heavy, large beaded necklace. On the left is a seated figure who turns to the central figure, and on the right is a small, bald kneeling figure with palms joined. In the lower part of the panel, there are long poles. This scene in the source file is called wrestling, Angkor Wat, but the style of carving has been associated with work dating to the Bayon period. The stance and raised limbs are described here without giving an action a specific name.



Figure 8. Egypt: Figures with raised arms and sticks, carved relief with hieroglyphic columns (comparative example).

Description. Several male characters with wide steps and fists raised above their heads. Between them run rows of hieroglyphs with overlaps between the figures in tight steps. The poses may indicate a contest or a stick game. The source file links the image to sports and military-training scenes from the mortuary complex of Sahure at Abusir (Fifth Dynasty), whose causeway reliefs include military exercises and training (El Awady, 2009), but it carries no site label, so the attribution of this particular block is provisional.



Figure 9. Egypt: Pairs of wrestlers, painted tomb wall. Colour wall painting arranged in rows. This is a tomb setting and is included for comparison.

Description. Groups of tiny dark figures occupy the wall in horizontal registers. In each register pair, the wrestlers brace their legs, lock arms, clutch figures' legs, and turn bodies. Some figures appear to be wrestling on the ground, while others seem to heave opponents into the air. The repeated human figures depict many different wrestling holds and motions. A decorated border completes the register. Comparable registers of paired wrestlers occur in the Middle Kingdom tombs at Beni Hasan, notably those of Baqet III (Tomb 15) and Khety (Tomb 17), where rows of wrestlers appear beside siege scenes and are usually read as physical training for soldiers (Newberry, 1893; Egyptian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, n.d.); the tomb shown here is not identified in the source file.



Figure 10. Greece: Two wrestlers in a grip, marble relief (comparative example). Pentelic marble relief from the base of a funerary kouros found in the Kerameikos, Athens, about 510 BCE (National Archaeological Museum, Athens, inv. NAM Γ 3476; Tactual Museum, n.d.; Cartwright, 2014); not a temple sculpture.

Description. Two male figures are nude, placed in front of and back against one another with their brows touching. Their hands are clasped in the middle; their knees are bent and splayed apart, making a broad stance. The work emphasises the musculature of the back, arms and thighs; the scene is an intimate struggle, which includes both grip and balance.

5. Krida in Temple Sculpture

The examples are: Four examples from the Bayon temple, Cambodia; one from Chichen Itza, Mexico. All relate to the visual material for questions on play and recreation and concern: the relationship between recreation and work; the relationship between recreation and public life or ritual. The Bayon reliefs date to the reign of Jayavarman VII (late 12th–early 13th century); its outer gallery combines historical episodes with scenes of everyday life such as markets, fishing, festivals with cockfights, and jugglers (Phnom Penh Post, n.d.; Smarthistory, n.d.).



Figure 11.Cambodia: Board game (Krida), Bayon relief. Two players seated at a small board.

Description. Two figures kneel on either side of a low table with a small board. Small round pieces sit on the board, and one player points toward it. Other figures sit behind them and watch. A curved line of stone above them suggests a canopy or roof. The source file describes this as a chess-like board game. The scene provides an example of a recreational activity represented in temple sculpture and draws attention to forms of play beyond physical contests.



Figure 12. Cambodia: Cockfight with onlookers (Krida), Bayon relief. Crowd scene with birds.

Description. In the centre of the panel, a crowd of kneeling and bending figures looks inwards. Towards the bottom, a tall, long-tailed bird can be seen, with others watching around them. On the left can be seen a seated group with hands joined, gathered near a small house. A band above depicts a large fish and a scaled animal. The circular dispersal of figures around the birds creates an impression of group surveillance and social interaction. The source states that this is a scene of a cockfight at the Bayon.



Figure 13. Cambodia: Acrobatic balance and play (Krida), Bayon relief. Figures balancing and dancing near a wheel.

Description. A tall figure is performing a dance form on the head of a kneeling figure below. To his left, a figure is bending and twisting in a lively action, and a large spoked wheel is carved at the extreme left, as the scene continues. On the right, more figures are making active postures of a dance gesture. The scene seems to synthesize in it a sense of balance, muscular control and a performing element, and may be thought of in relation to either Krida or Vyayama, while the actual purpose of the work-theatrical, festival, ritual- continues to be indeterminate.



Figure 14. Cambodia: Fishing and water life (Krida), Bayon relief. Large fish above seated figures.

Description. Three big fish are carved along the top of the panel, with a fourth bending at the upper right. In the lower register, a smiling man is holding a long pole in the centre-right, and an older man on the left is raising one hand. At the far right, a third head is almost visible. The panel is full of water activity and figures with fish, tying the hunting and fishing to both work and play and to the larger discussion of daily life.



Figure 15. Mexico: Maya ball game (Krida), Chichen Itza stone relief. Carved stone frieze in a temple complex.

Description. A framed stone panel relief depicts a figure in profile on the left facing to the right. He wears a high-banded headdress. Scroll-like carved figures and several other characters fill the panel. The source file identifies this as a ball-game scene at Chichen Itza. The Great Ballcourt there, built between about 1050 and 1200 CE, carries relief panels along its benches that tie the game to ritual, including sacrifice (World History Encyclopedia, n.d.); the specific building and panel shown here are not identified in the source file.

6. Discussion

The shots depict the human body in various postures and motions. All three categories of Yoga, Vyayama and Krida contain examples of sitting, bending, balancing, wrestling and playing in the illustrations selected by the artists. Acrobatic activity, for instance, is both physical skill and play, and fishing can be both work and recreation. There can be considerable overlap between these three areas.

Moments of social life and commonplace activities depicted in the sculpture, including these images of board games, cockfighting, wrestling, fishing and acrobatic show-battles, all look beyond the realm of the divine figures and mythological subjects. Instead, they serve as an opening to think about the 'other' people and cultures depicted in the sculptures. The exact function of each scene can be determined from the context of its original location.

You could compare such evidence from Cambodia, Egypt, Greece, Indonesia, Thailand and Mexico by looking at posture, motion and balance. But these fell into very diverse cultures and periods. A similarity in their appearance didn't imply that the composition symbolized the same thing.

7. Limitations

This paper considers individual images from various regions and time periods. There are some examples from tombs and museum collections, whereas others are from temples. These are presented for interest and comparison. The study is based on visual analysis and what has been published. For several images (Figures 1, 7, 8 and 11–15) the available source files do not record the exact monument, panel or photographer, so those attributions are provisional until they are confirmed from the original image sources. Future work might investigate the representations in other sources and contexts (archival material, site studies, cultures).

8. Conclusion

Temple and related sculpture evoke the body in action – the body in different forms of meditation, of exercise, of wrestling, of entertainment. The approach to these images, through the themes of Yoga, Vyayama and Krida, gives a larger template for thinking about the depiction of bodily practices and social acts in visual imagery. The examples also highlight the relation between physical movement, cultural practice, and the visual image across diverse regions. Though the examples draw on different contexts of time and culture, they can be useful for looking at the different ways in which human activity may be pictorialized. Both themes allow us to think of temple sculpture in relation to the display of both religious figures and physical activity.

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