Burmese Buddhist Imagery of the Early Bagan Period (1044 – 1113)

2 Volumes

By

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Declaration

I declare that to the best of my knowledge, unless where cited, this thesis is my own original work.

Signed:      Date:

Charlotte Kendrick Galloway
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Abstract

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Buddhism is an integral part of Burmese culture. While Buddhism has been practiced in Burma for around 1500 years and evidence of the religion is found throughout the country, nothing surpasses the concentration of Buddhist monuments found at Bagan. Bagan represents not only the beginnings of a unified Burmese country, but also symbolises Burmese 'ownership' of Theravada Buddhism.

While there is an abundance of artistic material throughout Burma, the study of Burmese Buddhist art by western scholars remains in its infancy due to historical events. In recent years, opportunities for further research have increased, and Bagan, as the region of Buddhism's principal flowering in Burma, is the starting point for the study of Burmese Buddhist art. To date, there has been no systematic review of the stylistic or iconographic characteristics of the Buddhist images of this period. This thesis proposes, for the first time, a chronological framework for sculptural depictions of the Buddha, and identifies the characteristics of Buddha images for each identified phase. The framework and features identified should provide a valuable resource for the dating of future discoveries of Buddhist sculpture at Bagan.

As epigraphic material from this period is very scant, the reconstruction of Bagan's history has relied heavily to this point in time on non-contemporaneous accounts from Burma, and foreign chronicles. The usefulness of Bagan's visual material in broadening our understanding of the early Bagan period has been largely overlooked. This is addressed by relating the identified stylistic trends with purported historical events and it is demonstrated that, in the absence of other contemporaneous material, visual imagery is a valid and valuable resource for both supporting and refuting historical events.

Buddhist imagery of Bagan widely regarded to represent the beginnings of 'pure' Theravada practice that King Anawrahta, the first Burman ruler, actively encouraged. This simplistic view has limited the potential of the imagery to provide a greater understanding of Buddhist practice at Bagan, and subsequently, the cross-cultural interactions that may have been occurring. In
in this light the narrative sculptural imagery of the period is interrogated against the principal Mahayana and Theravada texts relating to the life of Gotama Buddha. This review, along with the discussion regarding potential agencies for stylistic change, reveals that during the early Bagan period, Buddhism was an eclectic mix of both Theravada and Mahayana, which integrated with pre-existing spiritual traditions. Towards the end of the early Bagan period, trends were emerging which would lead to a distinctly Burmese form of Buddhist practice and visual expression.
# Table of Contents

## Volume 1

### Introduction

- Early Art Historical Studies and Burma – A Particular Time and Place ................................................... 1
- Gordon Luce – The ‘Founding’ Historian of Bagan and his Lasting Influence ................................................ 5
- History, Art History and Southeast Asia ........................................................................................................ 13
- Inauspicious Beginnings for Art History and Burma ...................................................................................... 15
- The Burden of “Indianisation” ........................................................................................................................ 17
- Historiography and Burma – New Approaches .............................................................................................. 23
- A Note on Taxonomy and Burmese Buddhist Art ......................................................................................... 26
- Summary ......................................................................................................................................................... 29

### Chapter 1 Histories and Narratives – the Origins of Bagan and its Art

- The Glass Palace Chronicle – a Key Factor .................................................................................................... 31
- Histories of Bagan ........................................................................................................................................... 32
- .... The Founding of Bagan ........................................................................................................................ 35
- .... The Nanchao Invasions and the Pyu ...................................................................................................... 40
- .... Early Bagan and Inscriptions ................................................................................................................... 42
- Two Paradigms – Theravada Buddhism and the Mon Conquest ................................................................ 43
- .... The Theravada Paradigm ......................................................................................................................... 44
- .... The Mon Paradigm ................................................................................................................................ 46
- A Chronology of Bagan’s Temples ................................................................................................................ 49
- Remarks on Theravada and Mahayana “Art” .................................................................................................. 52
- Narrative and Buddhism ............................................................................................................................... 53
- .... Narratives of the Buddha’s Last Earthly Existence ............................................................................. 56
- .... Summary .................................................................................................................................................. 66
- Conclusion ..................................................................................................................................................... 67

### Chapter 2 The Pyu and the Arrival of the Burmans – A Critical Association For Burma’s Art History

- The Pyu ......................................................................................................................................................... 69
- .... A Wide Sphere of Influence ................................................................................................................ 70
- Spiritual Beliefs and the Pyu – a Multifacted Buddhism .............................................................................. 72
- Pyu Artistic Styles ......................................................................................................................................... 74
- The Fall of the Pyu and Rise of the Burmans ............................................................................................... 84
- .... Remnants of Pyu Culture at Bagan ..................................................................................................... 87
- .... Pyu Votive Tablets ................................................................................................................................ 88
- Religion at Bagan Prior to Anawrahta ........................................................................................................... 96
- .... Brahmansim – Another Link to the Pyu? ............................................................................................. 104
- The Pyu – Burman Link: New Findings ....................................................................................................... 104
- .... Paw-daw-mu (no.996) ................................................................................................................................ 104
- Conclusions .................................................................................................................................................. 105

### Chapter 3 Anawrahta, King of the Burmans

- Anawrahta’s Votive Tablets .......................................................................................................................... 108
### Chapter 4 Kyanzittha, Unifier of Burma

**Kyanzittha’s Temples**

- Shwe-zigon (no.1) .......................................................... 167
- Naga-yon-hpaya (no.1192) .................................................. 171
- Abe-ya-dana-hpaya (no.1202) ............................................. 178
- Ananda-gu-hpaya-gyi (no.2171) ......................................... 184
- Kubyauk-ngwe Wetkyi-in (no.285) ...................................... 192
- Kubyauk-gyi Myinkaba (no.1323) ....................................... 194

**Summary** .................................................................. 196

### Chapter 5 Chronology and Change – Internal Integration of External Ideas

**Tracing Iconographic Changes** ............................................... 198

- Anawrahta Period (1044–1084) ........................................... 199
  - Early Anawrahta Phase (1044 –c.1065) .......................... 199
  - Late Anawrahta–Sawlu Phase (c.1065 –1084) .................. 200
- Kyanzittha Period (1084–1113) .......................................... 201
  - Early Kyanzittha Phase (1084 –c.1095) ....................... 202
  - Late Kyanzittha Phase (c.1095 –1113) ....................... 203

**Agencies for Change** ......................................................... 204

- Shin Arahan and a Theravada Shift – Principal Agents for Iconographic Change .................................................. 204
- Sri Lanka and Bagan – Art Historical Links .......................... 215
- Media as an Indicator of External Influence .......................... 217
- Shin Arahan and Kyanzittha ........................................... 219
- Queen Abe-ya-dana – Another Agency for Change? ............ 223
- An Emerging Burmese Visual Canon .................................. 225
- A Further Note on Indian Influence ..................................... 227
- A Comment on China ...................................................... 227
- A Summary of Stylistic Change ........................................ 229

**Application of the Proposed Classifications** ..................... 229

- Paw-daw-mu (no.996) ......................................................... 230
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Temple 820</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyauk-sa-ga-gyi (no. 1029) – Another Sawlu Temple?</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sculptures Attributed to the Kyanzittha Period</td>
<td>234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6 Text and Image</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Lalitavistara</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Lalitavistara and Buddhist Imagery</td>
<td>243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Nidanakatha</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual Narrative of the Last Earthly Life of Gotama Buddha</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review of Selected Imagery and Narrative Scenes of the Early Bagan Period</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anawrahta’s Votive Tablets</td>
<td>281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shwe-hsan-daw</td>
<td>282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyauk-ku-umin and the Naga-yon</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>294</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glossary</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix – The Marks of a Superman</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>