

## The Social Life of Bagan Period

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### Abstract

The City Arimaddanapura, 'the City of the Enemy Crusher', or Tampadipa 'the Land of Copper', some of the original names of the old Bagan used in the lithic inscriptions. In command of the Ayeyarwady River, sited just a few miles downstream from the great tributary the Chindwin, that flows down from India and Assam. Bagan stood midway between the delta trading ports of the Mons and the China road, between the river land overland routes to India, and the scattered trails that still weave through the hills to the east, to the remainder of South East Asia. Bagan was the crossroads for traders as well as armies. Bagan received not only a direct input of Indian artistic forms, from the mid-11<sup>th</sup> century onwards, but also an adapted version from the hands of pre-Bagan, Mon and Pyu kingdoms, whose cultural life had been incorporated into that of Bagan, before the rise of city to statehood. Influenced by Indian conception of statecraft and government brought to the emergent city power by Brahmans from India, no doubt attracted by the riches service to so great a state would bring, Bagan was to develop into an Empire under king Anawrahta (1044-1077 A.D.) and king Kyansitha (1084-1113 A.D.) and their successors. The social life of Bagan people can be seen in the fresco paintings, sculptures, stone reliefs, stucco, terracotta plaques and stone inscriptions at Bagan period temples, stupas, caves, ordination halls and monasteries.

### Introduction

The Arimaddanapura means the City which Crushes its Enemies. The Myanmar Chronicles say that the Lord Buddha Gotama prophesied: king *Pyusawhti* pierced his enemies, the great bird, the great boar, the great tiger, and the flying squirrel. The chronicle contradicts itself when it says that even in the reign of king *Thamondarits* (107 A.D.). The kingdom was founded under the name of *Arimaddana* and again that in the reign of king *Pyusawhti* (167-242 A.D.), it received the name *Arimaddana*. In the reign of king *Aniruddha* (1044-1077 A.D.), the kingdom was known as *Pugarama*.<sup>1</sup>

The original site of the city was on the bend in the Ayeyawady's course. The city walls meet the river on the up and downstream side of the bend, thus the broad river formed two sides of the capital's defenses and water from the river filled the moat. In command of the Ayeyawady river, sited just a few miles downstream from its great tributary the Chindwin, that flows down from India and Assam, Bagan stood midway between the delta trading ports of the Mons and the China road, between the river and overland routes to India, and the scattered trails that still weave through the hills to the east, to the remainder of southeast Asia.<sup>2</sup> Bagan was the crossroads for traders as well as armies.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the Bagan dynasty's art and architecture reflected the multitude of cultural cross currents that met with indigenous elements. Bagan received not only a direct input of Indian artistic forms, from the mid-11<sup>th</sup> century onwards, but also an adapted version from the hands of the pre-Bagan Mon and Pyu kingdoms, whose cultural life had been incorporated into that of Bagan, before the rise of the city to statehood.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Glass Palace Chronicle of the kings of Burma', translated by Pe Maung Tin and G.H. Luce. Yangon. Myanmar Historical Commission, 1962, pp. 29-40

<sup>2</sup> Aung Thwin, Michael. 'Pagan the origins of Modern Burma', Honolulu, University Press, 1985, p. 101

<sup>3</sup> Than Tun 'Social Life in Burma, A.D. 1044-1287', pp. 37-47

The Bagan's origins are in the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century. Influenced by Indian conceptions of statecraft and government brought to the emergent city-power by Brahmans from India, attracted by the riches service to so great a state would bring, Bagan was to develop into an Empire under the military prowess of king Anawratha (1044-1077 A.D.).

In Bagan period, Myanmar way of communal life can be seen in the fresco paintings, sculptures, stone carvings, stuccos, terracotta plaques, bronze reliefs, wooden and stone inscriptions at Bagan period stupas, temple, caves, ordinations and monasteries. Bagan period fresco paintings and stone inscriptions illustrate panoramic and scenic views of town and villages, ceremonial occasions held in Bagan Royal Court, modes of wearing apparels and dress used by Bagan people of difference levels, traditional Justice, customs and social tradition. The fresco paintings of Bagan period portrayed the 550 *Jatakas*, the previous lives of twenty eight Buddhas and the life of Buddha Gotama. One can notice a variety of illustrations such as religion, economy, irrigation, agriculture, fishery, domestic, etc. They depict social life representing different social classes engaged in activities, transportation by boats, sailing vessels, cats, sports such as boxing and wrestling, armed forces, infantry, elephantry and cavalry, armed with weapons, swords, lances, bows and arrow and shields.<sup>4</sup>

A stable, well run empire encourages trade, and that brings about prosperity. Immigrant Indians came to serve the court as ritual major-domos, astrologers, artists and artisan and like, and Theravada Buddhism, being an essentially tolerant creed, naturally let them practice their respective religions without hindrance. Outside the Court orbit were other Indians merchants and peddlers, scions of distant trading houses, plying the web of routes that converged on Bagan.

King Anawratha moved by religious zeal and under the influence of one Mon monk, Shin Arahan requested set the *Tipitaka*, the Theravada Buddhist scriptures from the Mon king Manuha of Thaton. By the time of the great reign after king Anawratha, that of king Kyansitha (1084-1113 A.D.), not only was the Bagan artist in possession of more detailed texts on the life of the Buddha, and past Buddhas, namely the *Nidanakatha* and *Buddhavamsa*, which seemed to be the most popular narratives for pictorial exposition at Bagan, but also his competence as painter, or sculptor, had improved.<sup>5</sup>

Dr. G.H. Luce remarked that the main themes of the early Bagan sculpture painter may suffice to shrew his main affiliations as an artist: with North India, from *Gandhara* to Bengal. He owed little to *Andhra*, *Pallava* or Singhalese art. His limitations are clear. He was a true artist, primarily in wood suddenly called upon by a strong minded king to carve in sandstone an enormous number of new subjects. He had no books or art galleries to refer to. He knew the old Buddhist symbols, the *mudra*, the *asanas*, the Eight Scenes. What he could fit into that scheme, and his technique was mainly confined to the two dimensional.<sup>6</sup>

Bagan temples were built in months, not in centuries. The surprising thing is the artist's measure of success, not his failures. In Bagan period paintings, Dr. G.H. Luce and members have not had time to do much more than read the thousand of glosses below the panels— so important in themselves, so useful in identifying the scenes. A vast amount of work remains to be done: – cementing the paintings to the walls they now barely adhere to, before they can be carefully cleaned, protected Bengal tradition fell on fruitful ground. The Abeyadana temple proves that, the painter, given a freehand, he could do masterly work, both in general design

<sup>4</sup> Sandar Khin, 'Bagan Images of Mural Paintings', Ministry of Culture, 2007, pp.19

<sup>5</sup> Stranchan, Paul, 'Pagan Art and Architecture of Old Burma', p.10

<sup>6</sup> Luce. G. H. 'Old Burma Early Pagan', p.182

and in calligraphic detail. But he was generally limited to two dimensions. There has not been space to consider the iconography of the *Jatakas*, as seen both in paint and terracotta.<sup>7</sup>

In the earlier pagodas, before *Tipitaka* texts arrived from Ceylon and were translated, there was little but *Jatakas* for the Bagan artists to illustrate and these remain a constant source throughout the Bagan period. And Bagan artist, if he had little dramatic scene, was a good storyteller. His first medium was the terracotta plaque. This taught him to reduce his theme to minimal proportions. When the vast wealth of *Tipitaka*, and the acres of wall-space in the large temple, were at his disposal he must have been embarrassed by his riches. Both Mon or Myanmar artists chose stories from the *Vimana Vattuttu*, 'the Mansions of the Blast'.

But apart from the ink glosses below their panels, there is rarely anything to distinguish one theme from another. However their pleasant colouring filled space, especially in the high vaults or the awkward pockets between the carved niches and the windows. And so, it seems, a division of labour was arranged between the journeymen painters, who, with extraordinary speed could cover a wall with conventional sutta-paintings, and the few master-artist who designed the large main panels at eye-level.<sup>8</sup>

There was obviously close cooperation between painter, sculptor and architect. At first the sculpture was dominant, pocketing the walls with niches for images. The painter was called in to frame and crown these with patterns of receding roofs and stupa finials, and to fill the spandrels.<sup>9</sup>

The picture depicted the introduction of his son *Siddhatta* by King *Suddhodana* on the wall at Pathothamyia temple. One can study the Bagan period palace and pillars, spires with tiers, banners at corners and court dresses of king and queen. In Kyansitha Umin, one painting depicts the procession of Bagan folk carrying on shoulders *Padetha* trees. The procession shows two men hold banner and umbrella in front of the *Padethapin* tree carried on shoulders, and went to worship to the monuments, temples and pagodas and monasteries. This picture reflects the religious mood of Bagan where Buddhism had flourished and reached the height of its glory.

In Prince Razakumar's Myinkaba Gubyaukgyi temple, one picture depicts the merry procession of skillful artistes in front holding banners to worship the Buddha. It is a scene of people's life in Bagan period. Four drummers playing the same drum are found in the picture. Flutes musical instrument is used in early Bagan period. This painting is located on the window wall of the north-eastern corner of this temple.<sup>10</sup>

In Thakymuni temple, one picture shows the carrying of tooth relic of Lord Buddha to Ceylon by Princes *Sanghamitta*, daughter of the greater King *Asoka*. The painting depicts the boat sailing across the fish-full waters and carrying the tooth relic of Buddha, framed by the floral decorations, in which appeared figures of deities, king, nobles and the chieftains worshipping the sacred relic.<sup>11</sup>

In Nadaminnyar temple, the picture depicts the scene in which Buddha in deep meditation was disturbed by the daughters of Mara the Evil. In this scene, the dresses of twelve different ages women in Bagan period were seen.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.184

<sup>8</sup> Luce, G.H. 'Old Burma Early Pagan', New York, J.J. Augustin, 1969, pp. 245-6

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p 247

<sup>10</sup> Sandar Khin. 'Bagan Images of Mural Paintings', Ministry of Culture, 2007, p. 145

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.105

In Lokahteikpan temple, one picture depicts with the ink glosses, the king Sulhani Bramadat led and besieged Meikhtila kingdom in India. Thus one can see Bagan army reflects the strength and ability of elephant corps and cavalries employed in the battles proving military strategy and power of Bagan.

### Findings

The new findings paintings are the panel pictures in the temples at Bagan period in Daw Sandar Khin's best book "Bagan Images of Mural Paintings" in 2007. They are the pottery painting on the wall at king Kyansitha's Nagayon temple, the sailing vessel, the dancers and the musicians on the wall at Prince Razakumars' Myinkaba Gubyaukgyi temple, the fisher men on the boat on the walls at temple No. 1026, the use of harrow by the farmers on the wall at the middle temple of Penantha temple group, the painting depict the procession of Bagan folk carrying on shoulders Padethapin Trees, on the wall at Kyansitha Umin, the drummer, horn and flute players, conch shell blower, harpist and cymbal players in painting on the wall at Kyansitha Umin.

### Conclusion

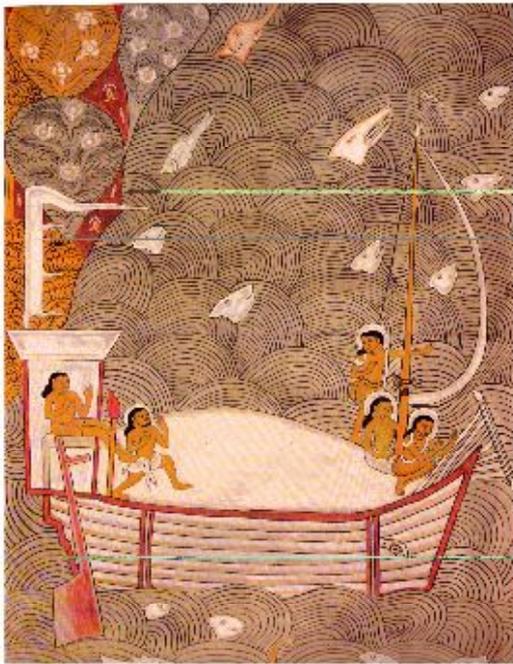
The Bagan society was rigidly organized around temple building occupations and the maintenance of the various dedications. The great dedications were usually by a senior member of the court or the royal family. Often dedications were made by women, widowed and anxious to earn merit for their loved ones. The social life of Bagan people can see in the fresco paintings in Bagan temples.

### Acknowledgements

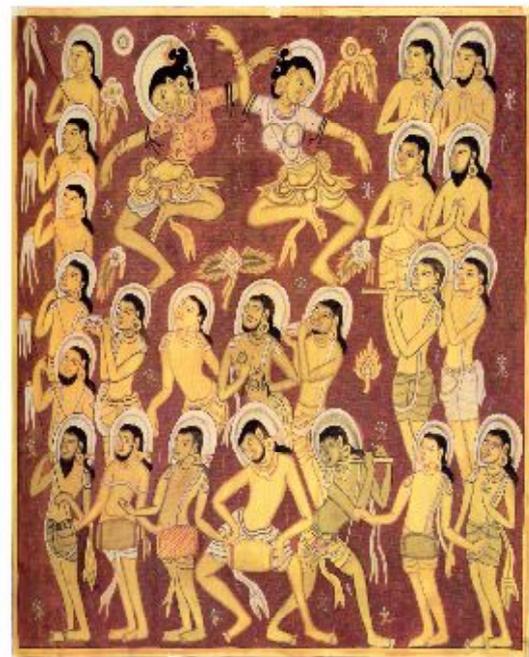
My special thanks go to the unknown painters and well known the great painter *Saittarapitci* of Bagan period for their brilliant carriers, Professor Dr. G.H. Luce, Professor Dr. Than Tun, Professor U Tun Aung Chain, Professor Dr. Kyaw Win, Rector U San and Pro-Rector Dr. Hla Htay, Dagon University and Pro-Rector Daw Sandar Khin for her best book 'Bagan Images of Mural Paintings'.

### Bibliography

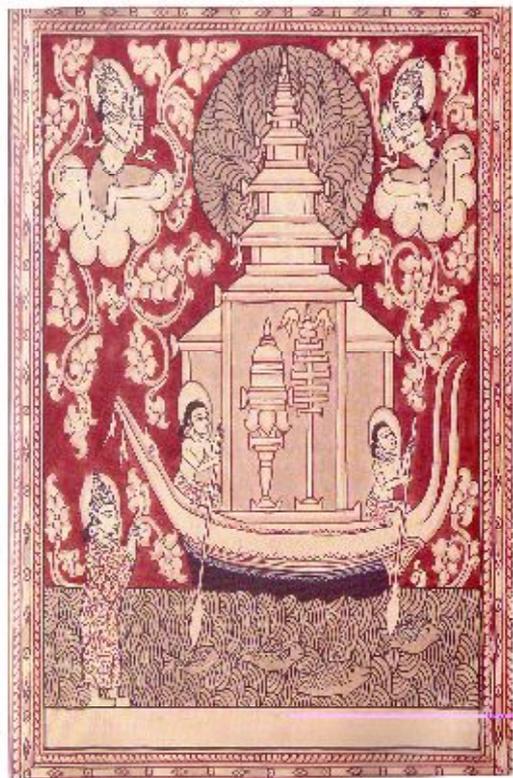
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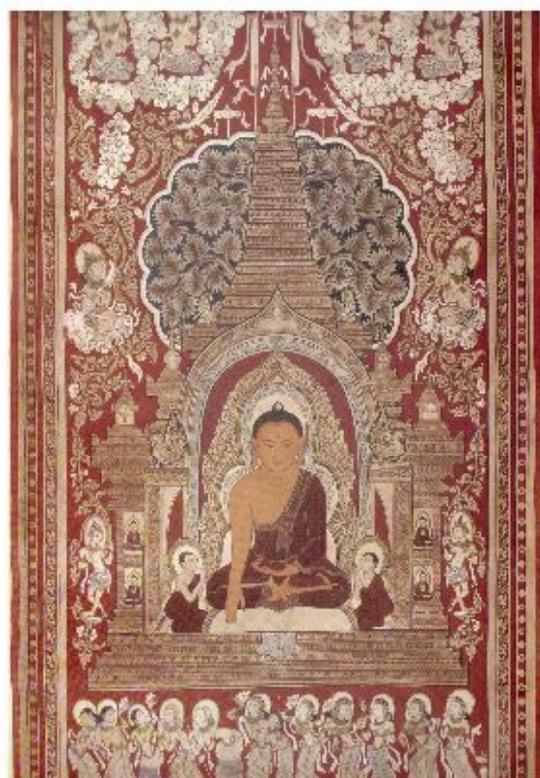
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Myinkaba Kubyauk-gyi Temple, 12th Century A.D



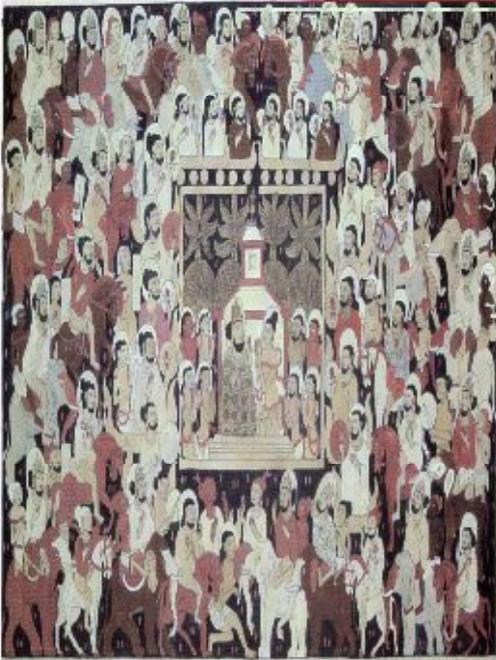
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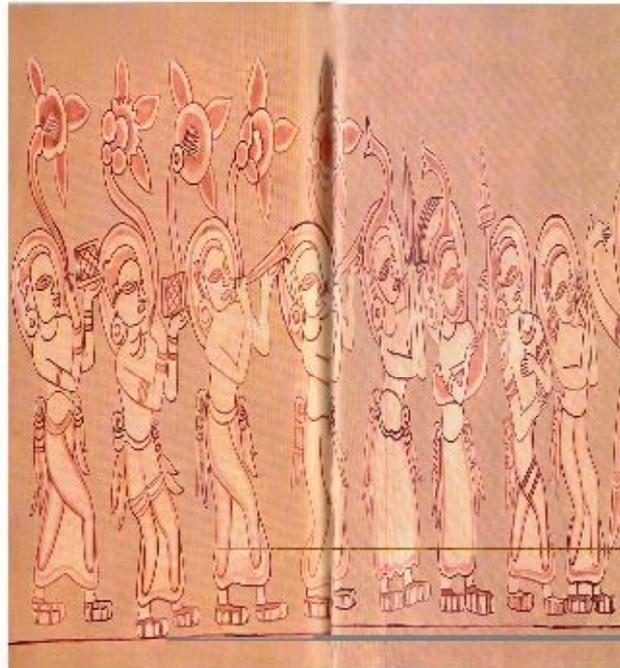
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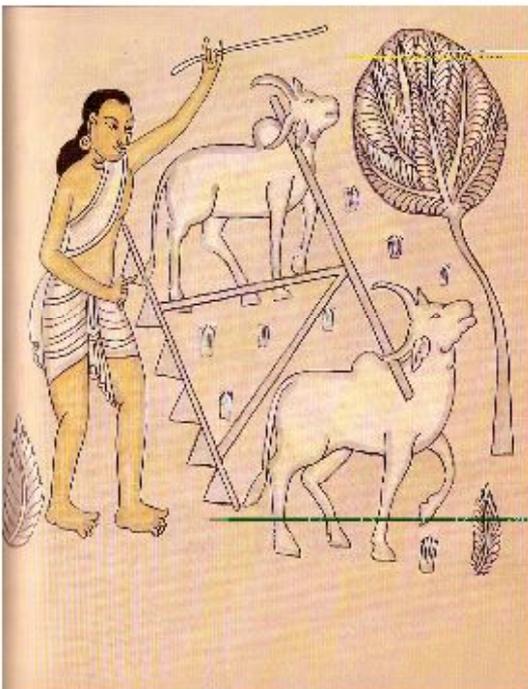
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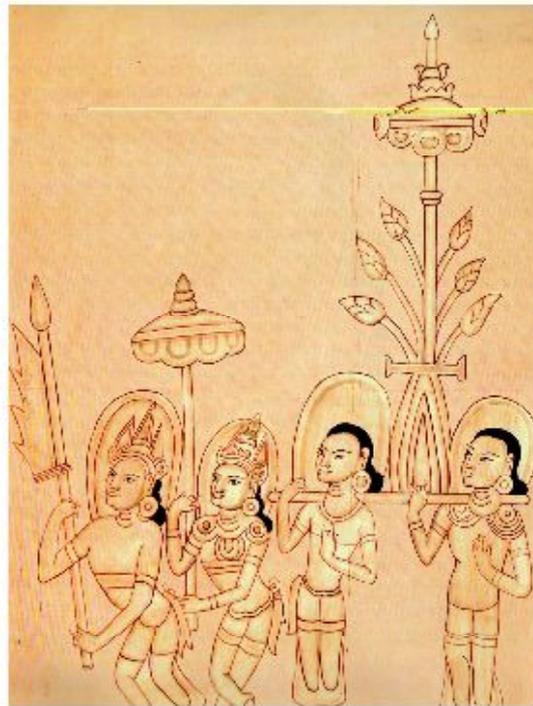
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Loka-lhtek-pan Temple, 12th Century A.D.



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Kyanzitha Umin, 13th Century A.D.



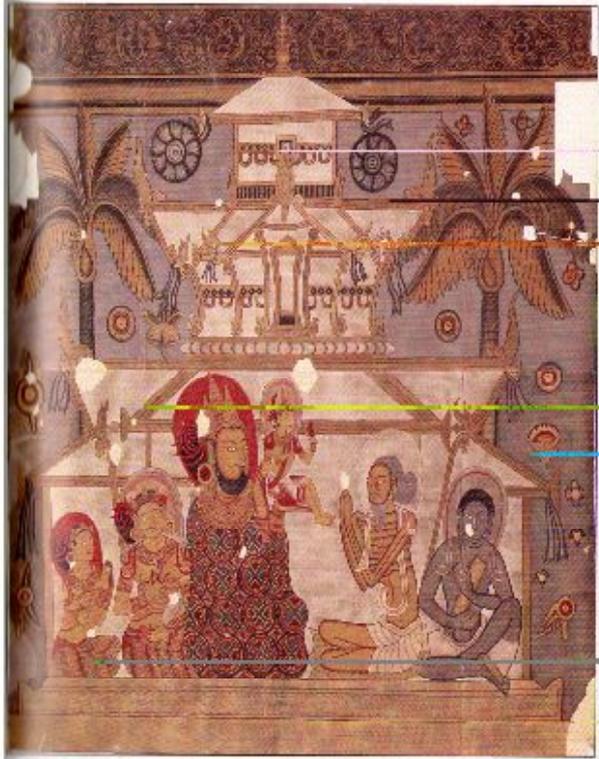
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Out of the three Pe-nan-tha Temples, the middle one, 13 th Century A.D



ကျွန်းဘုရင်၏ အေမီ - ၁၃ ရာစု  
Kyanzitha Umin, 13th Century A.D.



သထုံမြို့ရှိ သာဓကိယဘုရား၊ ဒေသီ - ၁၂ရာစု  
Thakya Muni Temple, 12th Century A.D.



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Pahoethamya Temple, 11th Century A.D.