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## Nativity Scene(A.D. 6 – 13 Century)

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### Abstract

From the time when the Nativity Scene started in India and onwards, the style of carving the Nativity Scene changed and developed step by step. When Indian Civilization spreads in Myanmar, the Nativity Scenes are found in Terracotta Votive tablets at S'riksetra (2<sup>nd</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> Centuries A.D.), Pyu city. In Bagan period (11<sup>th</sup> -13<sup>th</sup> Centuries A.D.), many kinds of raw materials were used to make the Nativity Scenes and different styles were produced. The Nativity Scenes of Pyu and Bagan period are here described in compares with the Nativity Scenes of India and the countries where Buddhism flourished.

Keywords: Nativity, S'riksetra, Pyu, Bagan, Buddhism

### Introduction

After Buddhism developed the depictions of the life of Gotama Buddha in India was not executed in human forms. The art of sculpture in stone emerged during the Kushan period (A.D.100 – 300) in Mathura and Gandhara areas. In one way sculptures appeared with the emergence of Mahayana sects where Gotama Buddha was transformed and worshipped from a teacher to an everlasting god complete with supernatural powers (Zaw Tun, 1975, 83). Before sculptures of the Buddha appeared in form bas-relief of four principle scenes were implemented as symbols of the Buddha. The birth of the Buddha was depicted as Maya standing and holding the branch of the sal tree (Foucher 1934, Plate II, III and IV). The Bodhisatta was not depicted in the scene. Instead, four Catumaharajas are seen holding up the footprints of the Bodhisatta on the panther skin.<sup>2</sup> In some depictions, a lotus flower is found on the ground.<sup>3</sup> Instead of the figure of the Buddha for the enlightenment scene, a Bodhi tree is depicted on the throne. The sermon delivered to the *pancavaggiya* has been depicted with a *dharmacakka* symbol<sup>4</sup> and two deer<sup>5</sup> underneath it. Entering *nibbanna* scene has been depicted with a *cedi*.<sup>6</sup> Figures or symbols used instead of the Buddha are elephant,<sup>7</sup> bull,<sup>8</sup> horse,<sup>9</sup> lion,<sup>10</sup> etc. These figures which symbolized the Buddha were created during the time of King Asoka (273 – 232 B.C.) and the kings of Sunga Dynasty (185 – 73 B.C.) (Zaw Tun, 1975, 85-6) (Than Tun 2002, 8-11). After those periods, the depiction of the birth of Buddha was not represented as a bull, lotus flower or footprints but the Indians acquired the art of portraying in human form from the Persians and Greeks. This fact was affirmed because the Persians and the Greeks influenced the northern part of India<sup>11</sup> where the life of the Buddha

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<sup>2</sup> The seven steps that were taken after the birth of Buddha were symbolized by footprints.

<sup>3</sup> This is to symbolize the seven lotus flowers that emerged for the seven steps the Bodhisatta took after his birth.

The lotus symbol can be taken as growing out from noble pureness, glory, auspiciousness.

<sup>4</sup> The first sermon delivered by the Buddha is symbolized by the *Dharmacakka* symbol.

<sup>5</sup> As the first sermon was delivered at the deer park, the figures of deer denote the delivering of *Dharmacakka* sermon.

<sup>6</sup> *Cedi* symbol is used to symbolize the death of Buddha.

<sup>7</sup> In the dream the Buddha's mother Maha Maya felt that an elephant entered her womb. In another way this was how she conceived. Thus an elephant figure symbolizes the embryo of the Buddha in [the mother's] womb.

<sup>8</sup> The Buddha was born on the full moon of Kason. In both Sanskrit and Pali the period falls under Taurus and the bull is its zodiac sign. Thus a bull figure represents the birth. The day he entered *nibbanna* was also on the full moon day of Kason. Thus the bull figure also denotes the demise of the Buddha.

<sup>9</sup> As Prince Siddhattha renounced the world on a horse it symbolizes the renunciation.

<sup>10</sup> The lion figure symbolizes the enlightenment of Buddha.

<sup>11</sup> Rajagaha, Sarnath, Gandhara, Mathura, and Patna.

started to be portrayed in human form (Than Tun 2000, 3-4) (Tin Maung Yin, 1970. 33-36)<sup>1</sup>. Especially when the Greeks in India took up Buddhism, they introduced, they assimilated their native philosophy with Buddhist philosophy and started to make Buddha images. For the birth scene of the Buddha their ideal image was influenced by the Yakshi figures at the entrance of the stupa in Bharut built in 200 B.C. because, the stone relief of Yakshi figures and the birth scene of Queen Maha Maya look the same. There is no difference in Maha Maya's posture with the Yakshi standing and holding the branch of a tree in *tribhanga* form (Galloway 2004, 2). In Gandhara where a lot of Greeks lived in the northern part of India Greco-Roman art is found evidently. The kings of Kushan period (A.D. 100-300) and Gupta period (A.D. 400-600) were known for the transformation of Greco-Indian art to pure Indian art form. The spread of Buddhism and Indian Buddhist art were not only brought about by these kings but Indian merchants and those who were searching for new territory brought to Myanmar and other Southeast Asia countries.

### Early Buddhist Literature

There is division regarding Buddhism that had entered into Myanmar (Bishoff 1995, 4-11) (Than Tun 2002, 3-7).<sup>2</sup> According to archaeological excavations regarding Buddhism, the earliest supporting evidence had been found in Pyu city of S'riksetra (A.D. 200 – 900). Writings associated with Buddha *sasana* in Pyu mixed with Pali and Sanskrit were found inscribed on stone images, large stone slabs silver *bodhi* tree throne, votive tablets and gold plates. Pali and Pyu inscriptions were inscribed all around the four sides of the throne of a broken stone image without head found at Kan-wetgaung-kon (Duroiselle 1930, 128, PL. LIV h). Holy discourses such as *Maura sutta*, *Mangala sutta*, and *Ratana sutta* from the *parita*<sup>3</sup> were inscribed on stone and placed at the entrance of the city. The inscriptions at Shwe Gate<sup>3</sup> were of South Indian script, thought to be the style from A.D. 600 (Sein Maung Oo 1968, 167). The names of the four Buddhas and the four savakas around the circumference of the silver *bodhi* tree repousse were inscribed (Duroiselle 1930, 176. PL. XXXVIII c). The earliest excerpts from the *Pitaka* inscribed on twenty sheets of gold were excavated from Khin Ba mound. Excerpts such as *Siddham Avijja paccayasankhara* from the *Abhidhamma* and *Vinyapitakat* were inscribed (Duroiselle 1930, 179-80). There are also gold plates inscribed with the attributes of the Buddha such as *Itipisōbagava arahan sanma sambhudō* (Duroiselle 1930, 109, Pl. LI, ii). The two Maung Kan gold plates are also notable. Excerpts from the Buddhist *pitaka* are inscribed in Pali (Lu Pe Win, 1953, 10). Regarding the handwritings on the plates, they can be asserted as Kadamba script from south India of A. D. 600 (May 1956, 46). Thus, it can be asserted that Buddhism had arrived in Myanmar since A. D. 600 via S'riksetra. Not only texts associated with Buddhism but also *cedis*, temples, Buddha images and several votive tablets were found. Hindu images and Brahma images were also excavated. As Sanskrit literature, Hindu and Brahma images were found Buddhism in S'riksetra could be said as influenced Mahayana Buddhism.

<sup>1</sup> a) The 519 B.C. stone inscription of Emperor Darius and another after this period mentioned that Gandhara and other areas of India were included in the Persian Empire.

b) In 322 B.C., the king of Macedonia, Alexander the Great conquered the northern part of India which the Persians had taken and left a governor to rule instead.

<sup>2</sup> Some scholars stated that Tapussa and Bhalika had brought the hairs of Buddha while he was living and brought back to be enshrined in the Shwedagon pagoda. Some asserted that it had already arrived in Suvannabhumi assumed to be situated in lower Myanmar through missionaries sent to nine quarters and places during the reign of King Asoka.

<sup>3</sup> Shwedaga gate

## Buddhism in Bagan

Buddhism must have arrived firstly in Bagan via S'riksetra. The early Buddhism that arrived was associated with Mahayana sect because the Buddha sculptures and paintings have Bodhisattas flanking the Buddha. During the reign of Anawrahta (1044 – 1077) when Shin Arahan, monks and the *pitikas* got to Bagan from Thaton, Theravada Buddhism gradually won over. However, regarding the arrival of Buddhism to Bagan from Thaton, as there is no contemporary stone evidence of that period the assertion of scholars varies (Than Tun 2002, 6). The Buddhism that arrived in Bagan from Thaton and S'rikeshtra was Mahanayana Buddhism which flourished in Kalinga district in east India, Talingana district, Amaravati in Andhra district. Later Buddhism disappeared in eastern part of India and southern Buddhism, Theravada Buddhism gradually became influenced during the reign of Htihaingmin (1086-1113) it came from Concipura in the south and Sri Lanka. Therefore, the first part of *sasana* of Pyu, Mon and Myanmar cannot be denied that it was influenced by Mahayana Buddhism (Po Latt 1962, 19-20).

### Nativity Scene

According to the excavations at S'riksetra, the ancient Pyu is the earliest evidence of the founding of Buddhism the birth scene of the Buddha was also found there. The birth scenes were done in stone carvings and in clay votive tablets. In terracotta votive tablets the eight principle scenes were done in relief. Some differences are found there. Maha Maya and MahaPajapati were in the same size and stood together on a square platform. The Bodhisatta stands a little lower on a platform at his mother's right side, hands together on the chest as if paying respect to his mother. The left hand of Maha Maya is on the shoulder of Pajapati and her right hand hold the bending branch of the sal tree in tribhanga position. Maya's left foot bends a little to the back as safety in holding up the weight of the body. In one way, Maha Maya stance does not look as if she is giving birth but dancing. All the figures face front. The above-mentioned style can be seen in the stone bas-reliefs of the eight principle scenes of Varanasi, Shibbati and Bihar. The stone reliefs from India were executed earlier than the ones of S'riksetra and of a better quality. The birth scene in bronze of Bagan period resembles the one of S'riksetra. All the clothes of S'riksetra seem to be of thin material worn tightly to the skin so it can be said that the style was influenced by later Gupta period. Another birth scene: Maha Maya and the Bodhisatta can be seen standing together on a square platform but the figure of Pajapati was not included. The left hand of Maha Maya is on the hip, the right hand holds the sal branch as if to holding onto it for gathering strength the body in three-fold position. The Bodhisatta can be seen standing at the right knee of his mother with hands together at chest in paying respect position. A flying *deva* can be seen above the Bodhisatta. The figures in the bas-relief wore thin clinging clothes. Similar style of this birth scene can be seen in Bagan votive tablets. Moreover, it also resembles the figure of Maha Maya in the stone birth scene from Andhra area. This piece from Andhra is the most symmetrical of all.

A sandstone carving of Bodhisatta's birth was found at Shwenyaungbin ridge. Both Maha Maya and Pajapati can be seen standing together on a platform in abanga form. The Bodhisatta stands on a lotus platform a little higher than the former two. Maha Maya and Pajapati are almost in the same height with Maya having her left hand on Pajapati's shoulder and holding the branch of the sal tree with her right. Pajapati holds the waist of Maha Maya supporting her. Their features are round and smiling. The Bodhisatta stands at the right of Maha Maya wearing a headdress fully clothed. Both his hands are placed at the chest in *anjali mudra*. The eyes of the Bodhisatta are cast downwards and his face looks tranquil. The figures do not have plasticity and the clothes cling tightly as if they are wet. The style is similar to the figures in Ananda and Myinkaba Gubyaukng temples of Bagan period.

















