

Title	Religious Symbols as Decorations on the Sikhara of Ancient Monuments in the Late Bagan Period
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Abstract	In Late Bagan Period, the decorative art works were more complicated as those of symbolic concepts related to both of religious themes and ornamentation. Especially those of feminine deities can be abundantly found in the sikhara of Later Bagan Monuments. Perhaps the female icons were symbolized for the goddess and it might be related to the symbols of wisdom or Dhamma in thought of Northern Mahayana Buddhism. Likewise, the icons of ogre are richly found together with goddess and the head of ogre (kirtimukha) might be related to the concept of eternity in the belief of Tibetan Buddhism. In this study, analogical study will be approached to the religious symbols on the sikhara of Late Bagan Monuments in comparison with the concept of Northern Mahayana Buddhism
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## **Religious Symbols as Decorations on the *Sikhara* of Ancient Monuments in the Late Bagan Period**

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Bagan iconography displayed syncretic traits from the 10th to the 13th centuries. Southeast Asian classic art combined traits from India, China and indigenous sources, disseminated through maritime trade. The Bagan period can be divided into three phases: early (10–11th centuries), middle (12th century) and late (13th century). The late phase of the Bagan period can plausibly be dated from the end of the reign of King Narapatisithu or Cañsū II (1165–1211) to that of King Narasihapate or Tayokpyay Min (1256–87). The successors of King Narapatisithu were patrons of Buddhist cultural heritage, evident in many monuments of various sizes, big, medium and small.

Despite the short span of the late Bagan period, many monuments were constructed during this time. They can be dated by stone inscriptions and ink glosses concerning donations and Buddhist religious matters.

The significant features of the later Bagan monuments include:

1. The construction of pagoda complexes consisting of several structures;
2. The evolution of monastic complexes in the vertical dimension;
3. More complex stucco reliefs on the temple exteriors;
4. An increasing frequency of geometric items in the interior mural decorations;
5. Stone inscriptions providing factual information about donations (mostly written in Myanmar language);
6. Monumental complexes built at greater distances from the banks of the Ayeyarwady River;
7. An increasing tendency to build complexes consisting of a large number of smaller individual monuments rather than single massive structures.

In the late Bagan period, many small monuments were built in the form of complexes of stupas or monasteries. Important groups of small buildings built during this period include complexes at Winīdo, Sambūla, Sin Phyū Shin, Su ton Pyit monastery and Tāmani. Despite the large number of small buildings, some larger buildings, such as temples at Tayokpyay, Pyatthatgyī, Tha Htay Mote Gu and Thitsāwaddy, were also erected. Additionally, there are medium size buildings such as the temples of Thambūla, Phayāthons and Thetkyamuni. The large number of 13th-century buildings in Bagan suggests that the population grew more rapidly in late Bagan than in earlier periods.

The 13th-century buildings are characterized by informative stone inscriptions, ink glosses and rich decoration, but these decorative touches were not intended as static and massive sculptural forms and shapes; rather, they comprise many items or thematic objects related to the use of Buddhist Jataka and canonical motifs to decorate interior walls for didactic functions. Late Bagan monuments have more complicated ornamentation, such as anthropomorphic figures and foliage, than in earlier periods. Iconic symbols include gods and goddess (*deva* and *devi*), Bodhisattva, ogre faces or *kirttimukha*, Brahma, and other mythical creatures. The most beautiful and detailed achievements in the art of floral decoration appeared during the late Bagan period. Thus it can be stated that the 13th-century temples are smaller but decorative items became increasingly numerous. The designers wished to insert many items into restricted spaces in 13th-century architecture.

This study will concentrate on analysis of the upper portions of 13th-century temples called *sikhara*, or square tower, in the context of Mahayana

Buddhism. The three main motifs emphasized in this study are the *sikhara*, goddesses, and ogre heads.

## Origin and Tradition of the *Sikhara*

*Sikhara* means “tower” or “spire” (Brown 1995, p. 62). Etymologically the word *sikhara* originates from the Sanskrit word *śikra*, meaning the “peak of the mountain”. The *sikhara* is the tapering and pyramidal portion of temple-type buildings. *Sikhara* are important architectural features in all types of temple design in India. Several theories have been developed to account for the origin of the *sikhara*; the most acceptable is that the form originated from the Northern Indian or Indo-Aryan style (Brown 1995, p. 63). The Indo-Aryan *sikhara* may have originated from bamboo construction, but not directly from a primitive type: it is a later development, produced by the reduplication of vertically compressed storeys (Coomaraswamy 1927, p. 6).

The *sikhara* evolved from the peaked or domed huts of eastern and central India before the beginning of the Christian era (Brown 1995, p. 63). The *sikhara* is the spire tower of the Northern Indian type of temple that developed from the Buddhist stupa, gradually becoming elongated from the hemispherical mound, through the early centuries of the Christian era. In India, early *sikhara*-type temples appeared circa 500 CE (Brown 1995, plate 87). The first *sikhara* evolved as a feature of Gupta architecture (Coomaraswamy 1927, p. 75). The *sikhara* was combined with the Buddhist symbol of the *chaitya* or *ceti* (*zedi* in Myanmar pronunciation), which eventually merged with the ceremonial umbrella. Additionally, *sikhara* may have been derived from the tall covering of the processional vehicle (*ratha*) containing an image of the deity which was carried about on ceremonial occasions (Coomaraswamy 1927, p. 83). So *sikhara* symbolized both the vehicle and the monument.

Early evidence of *sikhara*-type temples can be found in the Pyu city of Sriksetra, such as Be Be Temple. The spire of Be Be Temple is, however, a circular tower, unlike those of Bagan. The early *sikhara* design can rarely be seen in the Pyu votive tablets. In Bagan votive tablets, *sikhara* were usually depicted with a branch of the Bodhi tree above the Buddha image. The *sikhara* motif in Myanmar developed in the Bagan period. Concerning the *sikhara*, Coomaraswamy said:

the aspiring aspect of the mediaeval towers (*sikhara*) contrasts most markedly with the static character of the early low flat-roofed temples.

Just in the same way in Burma (Myanmar) and Siam (Thailand) stupa, originally a hemispherical dome with one umbrella and clearly differentiated division of parts, develops into soaring types like those of the Shwe Dagon at Rangoon, with the continuous convex curve from base to pinnacle. (Coomaraswamy 1927, p. 63)

In Bagan there were two types of sikhara of roughly equal significance. One is the Mahābodi type with a pyramidal square tower; the other is a curvilinear tower constituting the upper structure of the temple. The Mahābodi-type sikhara is rare in the Bagan area; it is found in the temples of Gūbyaukgyī (Wetkyī-In) (ca. 12th century), Mahābodi (ca. 12th century) and Sīrī or Bochyomi Gūbyauk (ca. 13th century). The 13th-century sikharas were almost identical in form and structure. In the sikhara of Bochyomi Gūbyauk temple, it can be seen that the icons of Brahma in the Anjali Mudra and the flying *vidyadhara* (pronounced *zawgyi* in Myanmar) with festoons were composed in the circular niches on the projections of sikharas. The flying *vidyadhara* had been carved profusely together with *kirttimukha* in India since the 9th century CE. After the downfall of Bagan, the sikhara gradually disappeared from Buddhist monuments in Myanmar, although the sikhara was still used in India until the 19th century CE (Coomaraswamy 1927, p. 63).

### **The Three Jewels of Buddhism and The Holy Triad of Mahayana Buddhism<sup>1</sup>**

In Buddhism there are three jewels: Buddha; dhamma, the teachings of Buddha; and *Samgha*, the sons of Buddha. In Esoteric Buddhism this concept is called the Buddhist Triad and it is represented as three icons. For instance, in Nepal, deification of the three jewels is illustrated as follows (Bhattacharyya 1958, p. 32):

1. Buddha image for Gautama Buddha
2. Goddess image for dhamma<sup>2</sup>
3. God image for *Samgha*

In Mahayanism, Avalokitesvara symbolized great loving kindness, and his Sakti (female aspect/consort) symbolized wisdom. The combination of Avalokitesvara and his Sakti represented nirvana. Thus, the feminine deities of Mahayanism represent wisdom and knowledge (Bhattacharyya

1958, p. 32). The goddesses merged with the icon to symbolize wisdom or dhamma. The Mahayanist school gradually evolved a wide range of deified concepts or beings (Chutiwongs 2002).

Early symbols of Buddhism included the wheel for dhamma and deer for the Deer Park; thus the first sermon, the Bodhi Tree for the Buddha, swastika or throne for the Buddha, et cetera. In the early phase of Buddhism, Theravada Buddhism did not depict the Buddha in human form, perhaps because they accepted that the Buddha is unrivaled. Likewise, the concept of the three jewels of Buddhism is also perceived as depicting the simplicity of Theravada Buddhism; Mahayanists transformed this concept into the holy triad of Buddhism represented by three iconic symbols.

### **Feminine Deities Depicted on the Upper Portions of Monuments**

Feminine deities represent religious themes in Brahmanism. In primitive ritual practice, feminine statuettes fulfilled spiritual purposes. For example, the concept of the mother goddesses and the worship of maternity, for which figures of women with large wombs and robust bodies were



**FIGURE 4.1**

Source: Pyiet Phyo Kyaw.



**FIGURE 4.2**

Source: Pyiet Phyo Kyaw.

created. Feminine deities might have evolved in ancient society as mother goddesses.

Subsequently, this ancient concept was transformed into many icons representing the deification of women or female attributes as goddesses. In one example, the female reproductive organ, the *yoni*, was emphasized by devotees of Siva to symbolize fertility and strength. In Gupta-period temples of India, the pillars of the porch are decorated with figures of river goddesses; this characteristic feature persisted into the medieval period, circa 10th to 12th century CE (Coomaraswamy 1927, p. 79).

In the Esoteric Buddhist pantheon, the name *Tara* is applied to a large number of feminine deities. In Theravada Buddhism there is no pantheon to which worship was offered, but in Esoteric Buddhism a large number of deities are invoked (Bhattacharyya 1958, p. 220).

In Bagan monuments, the Indian influence is visible in the use of feminine deities to adorn the upper portions of religious buildings. The feminine deities can be identified as the goddess who symbolizes wisdom or fertility or auspiciousness. The icons of goddesses were mostly depicted on the upper portions of religious temples, such as the *sikhara*, spire or

square tower, and as friezes, sometime on tympana. The feminine deities can be found together with ogres, *Sīmha* the lion and other ornamental figures. Feminine deities were also placed at both sides of the entrances to buildings. After the decline of Bagan, no trace of feminine deities can be found on Buddhist monuments. No more goddesses or feminine deities can be found on the upper portions of Buddhist monuments in later styles of Buddhist art.

The style of feminine deities found on the *sikhara* of Bagan monuments display an affinity with that of Mahayana goddesses, for example, Tara. Sometimes they are depicted wearing royal clothing and flanked by attendants. Than Tun, however, concluded that the goddesses depicted on the *sikharas* of Bagan temples are directly related to the Hindu Sakti or feminine aspect of Siva and Visnu. The goddess is shown making one of two types of hand gestures, or *mudra*: Padumarhattha *Mudra* and Anjali *Mudra*. The goddess in Padumarhattha *Mudra* holds a lotus with both hands, while the goddess in Anjali *Mudra* is worshipping or paying homage. The goddess with Padumarhattha *Mudra* can be identified with Candi, the Sakti of Siva (Than Tun 2005, pp. 134–37, 140–43, 145–46, 150–52, 154, 156–58). The others ought to be identified as Sri Lakshmi, the Sakti of Visnu (Than Tun 2005, pp. 135, 148–49, 152).

## The Head of the Ogre and Its Tradition

The head of an ogre is one of the most popular motifs in the decorative art of Bagan monuments. In the early Bagan period, most of the ogres consist only of a head, without forepaws or body. In the middle and late periods, the ogres are provided with various designs of forepaws. The ogre icon is known as *kirttimukha* or the Head of Glory; Sun-Face or Grotesque Mask (Brown 1995, p. 139; Panda 2005, p. 97); Grotesque *kirttimukha* (Coomaraswamy 1927, p. 202); or Monster Mask (Rawson 1993, p. 13). Than Tun opined that *kirttimukha* means “the famous mouth” (Than Tun 2005, p. 134, fig. 32).

This ogre motif probably symbolized time and fertility. The demon of time is well known in Indian mythology (Rawson 1993, p. 12): “each person’s ‘present-frame’ is itself a mouth of that monster vomiting out his world of experience and knowledge. We will never be able to find the origin or causes of all things ‘out there’, among older projected things.”

*Kirttimukha*, the Head of Glory, was carved profusely on the walls and upper portions of Indian temples from the 9th century (Panda 2005,



p. 97); however, on the doorjambs of temples from the 7th century, the *kirttimukha* motif was found with festoons of pearls coming out of its mouth. Whilst there are many legends relating to the *kirttimukha* in Indian mythology, the symbolic meaning of *kirttimukha* is immortality and fertility. The *kirttimukha* was associated with other popular motifs such as roaring lions and flying *vidyadhara*s. In Europe (especially England and France), the *kirttimukha* is associated with the Green Man (Basford 1978; Harding, 1972; Lacoste 1998). Green Men are also characterized as having heads of humans, beasts, cats, et cetera, with the mouth made of foliage, the eyes and ears of leaves. The symbolic meaning of Green Men is almost the same as the *kirttimukha* symbol, as guarding, protecting and an emblem of glory.

In Bagan architecture, sikhara are sometimes decorated with *kirttimukha* carrying feminine deities on their shoulders, and sometimes foliage. Although the sikhara originated from the northern Indian or Indo-Aryan tradition, the Bagan sikhara were combined with indigenous motifs, indicating that early Indian influences were not that strong in early Bagan architecture.

## Conclusion

The Sikhara is the holy part of the temple and symbolizes the peak of a mountain. It also symbolized the *ratha* or vehicle. In 13th-century Bagan, sikhara were constructed in large numbers.

The sikhara was related to the Indian architectural form named *Bhumija*, a tower tapering towards the top on all four faces. An example of a sikhara in Bagan is the Bochyomi Gubyauk Temple. The sikhara symbolized great power; strength and stability; the *ratha* or vehicle able to bear a burden forever; the pantheon of gods and goddesses. The sikhara was composed of a vertical dynamic concept and with horizontal rows all the way to the top. Symbolic decoration on the sikhara referred to feminine goddesses, *kirttimukha*, and others.

The temple roof is most important for the temple's dignity because this portion is not accessible to pilgrims, but exists only to represent the grandeur or impressiveness of the temple. Consequently, the arrangement of sikhara with goddesses or *kirttimukha* can symbolize the concept that the Buddhist missionary or Buddha dhamma will prosper for five thousand years from the time that Gautama Buddha passed. The Buddhist missionary

was also popular in the stone inscriptions of Bagan. Sikhara symbolized the vehicle; the goddess symbolized wisdom or dhamma; the *kirttimukha* symbolized time or eternity. Probably these three symbols were intended to represent the concept that the Buddhist religion would prosper until five thousand years had passed.

## Notes

1. The term *Mahayana* (Greater Vehicle) is often used to refer to those versions of Buddhism which incorporate worship of many deities. Skilling (2003) has demonstrated that this term, while very commonly used, is misleading, because it implies a firm distinction between Buddhists, which does not exist in practice. The term “esoteric Buddhism” is one way of referring to the difference in approach without implying a schism.
2. In Theravada Buddhism, the symbol of the dhamma is a wheel with spokes representing the teachings of Dhammacakara in *Migadavon*, the Deer Park at Sarnath.

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