

A Glimpse into the Art of *Nagā:rum Bhurā:* in Myanmar

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Abstract

In Myanmar mythology, *Nāga* is primarily serpent-beings living in the water. Most of the people of Myanmar believe that *Nāga* is often a protector of the Buddha and the *Dhamma*. With this belief, there has a tradition of carving the *Nagā:rum Bhurā:* - Buddha Image with Naga since the eleventh century in Myanmar. This image also represents one of *sattathana* - seven places where the Buddha spent during the rain retreat. When the Buddha spent near Mucalinda Lake, the *Nāga* king protected the Buddha from raining with its body. Myanmar takes this story and carves the *Nagā:rum Bhurā:*. When the people construct the pagoda, they create the lake and place this image. The structure of the lake is varied according to the extent of the pagoda. The architect creates the lake within the pagoda compound but sometime the lake is built on the platform of pagoda. Mostly, the form of the lake is rectangle-shape. The *Nagā:rum Bhurā:* are seen with the *Nāga*'s body coiled up to serve as a seat for the Buddha with pronged head providing a hood over the Buddha's head as a cover. But sometime the sculptors carved the pronged head one or three or five or seven. This paper examines the development of the art of *Nagā:rum Bhurā:* in Myanmar. It also analyzes which belief is associated with the veneration of these images.

Keywords: *Nagā:rum Bhurā:*, the art, *Nāga*, image, the Buddha

Introduction

In Myanmar mythology, *Nāga* is primarily serpent-beings living in the water. The Myanmar *Nāga* is dangerous when angered, and its mere frown

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turns the human being as it is so hot. It can assume human form and, on the whole, it is a benevolent being. The Myanmar believed that *Nāgas* live at the bottom of the deep rivers, seas and oceans and in the bowels of the earth. Myanmar Buddhists believe that *Nāga* is adherents of Buddhism and devout worshippers of the Buddha. The *Nāga* tradition in Buddhism began with an episode of *sattathana* - seven places where the Buddha spent during the rain retreat in His Lifetime. After attaining Buddhahood, the Buddha spent seven weeks in continuous meditation in the vicinity of the Bodi Tree, and the sixth of the seven weeks was spent on the bank of the Mucalinda Lake, a few yards away from the Tree; there blew a great storm, and the *Nāga* King – *Mucalinda* who lived in the lake, sheltered the Buddha by winding his coils seven times round the meditating Buddha's body and holding his hood over the Buddha's head. The depiction of the meditating Buddha protected by the coils of the *Nāga* king later became a popular motif in Buddhist art and sculpture. Myanmar Buddhists also takes this story and carves the Buddha image with *Nāga*. In Myanmar words, the Nagayon Buddha image is called as *Nagā:rum Bhurā*: There has a tradition of carving the Buddha image with *Nāga*¹ since the eleventh century in Myanmar.

¹ It seems that the carving of the Buddha image with Naga is imitated from the Indian art of Hinduism. A Hindu Stone Slab found in Kawgun Cave show a Vishnu recumbent upon the serpent Ananta and the serpent has seven heads.

The *Nagā:rum Bhurā*: from the 10th and 12 century

The image of Buddha sheltered by *Mucalinda* is found in Kyauk-ku-umin¹, Bagan. Holding an alms bowl, the Buddha is seated with the snake hoods spread out overhead. The feature of the snake is very unusual — a bulbouswave-like form engraved with scales rises up from the lotus base and extends underneath the Buddha, giving the impression he is seated on the *nāga*.² This form of snake curls also serves to act as columns that frame the Buddha, the hoods forming the top of the structure.

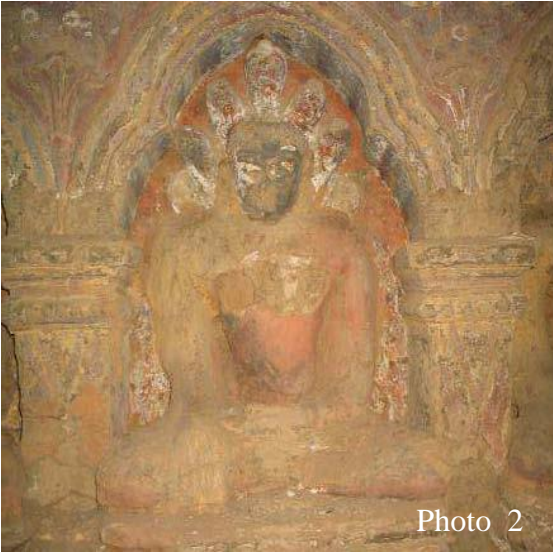


Of the five separate hoods only one is in fair condition, the others having been damaged. The face of the Buddha is damaged though the hair and *usnisha* are intact. This sculpture is earth-touching Buddha and is likely to be the original form.³ According to the building date of monument, the art of the image is late eleventh century AD. (see photo 1)

¹ Erected early Anawrahta Period c. 1065-1070

² Charlotte Kendrick Galloway, *Burmese Buddhist Imagery of the Early Bagan Period (1044 – 1113)*, 2 Volumes, Ph D Thesis, Australian National University, November 2006, p. 156 (Hereafter cited as: Galloway, *Burmese Buddhist Imagery*)

³ Galloway, *Burmese Buddhist Imagery*, p. 157



lower arm has been repaired, the hand has fingers of equal length and the arm is close to the body, crossing the shin in an almost central position. (see Photo 2)

An image is found in *Nāga-yon temple*² at Bagan. King Kyansittha built this temple on the site where he slept protected by the *nāga*.³ In central chamber, the middle image is the tallest, standing 18 feet

Another image is found in Myin-pya-gu, Bagan. While it is badly damaged the overall composition is consistent with a date of around 1075-1084. Seven separate *nāga* heads frame the Buddha's head and shoulders. Rounded hair curls are still visible on this sculpture.¹ The right hand and



¹ Galloway, *Burmese Buddhist Imagery*, 159

² Constructed around 1090

³ According to the Chronicle, when King Kyansittha was hiding from the wrath of King Saw Lu, he was fall a sleep because of tiring by horse herder. At that time, a young *nāga* came to look after him. When he ascended to the throne, he built the temple at this place and named it Naga-yon – covered by *Nāga*.

high and flanked by smaller ones each 12 feet high. It is a standing Buddha image with *Vara Mudrā*. It has *nāga* serpents spreading its hood above the head while the lower parts of the *nāga* is coiled around the pedestal on which the Buddha stood and its tail protruded from the coil.¹ There are altogether 13 *nāgas* with six each on either side of the main image fashioned from wood and painted. Of these 12 *nāgas* flanking the one on the main image, five have been decapitated with the passage of time.² In recent condition, the image is renovated and covers with gold. (see Photo 3)

The *Nagā:rum Bhurā*: from the 14th century to 18th Century



In PakhanGyi, a Bronze Image of *Nagā:rum Bhurā*: is found. This *Nagā:rum Bhurā*: has 9 inches in height. The Buddha seated on four *Nāga* coils and *Nāga* covered the Buddha with its scale. The style and form of the Buddha image is sitting cross-legged position with *Bhūmiphassa mudrā* and *Jhāna āsana*. All the features of the figurine suggest the work as

of Innwa period i.e. 14th Century, except the ears which point to style of Ratanabon period – 19th Century. (see Photo 4)

¹ Former picture of this image shows that the coil is painted on the bottom of the background wall but it is bring out a shape at present.

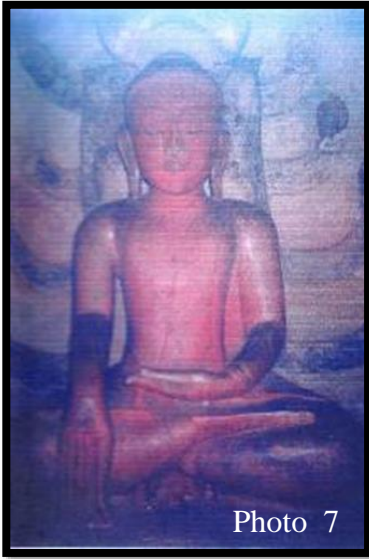
² Aung Kyaing, Plastic Arts Adorning the Nagayon Temple, Yangon, Tun Foundation Bank, 2010, p. 13

A *Nāga* hood is found in Bagan Museum. It is 112 cm in height, 60 cm in width and 46 cm in thickness. It is found from Mahabodhi Temple, Bagan. It has seven heads of *Nāga*, big one at the centre and three heads flanked in left and right sides. Among these heads, two are broken. At the bottom, *Nāga* coiled three times and another *Nāgas*' tails are spread at the back. A Buddha image seemed to be destroyed or stolen. It is a hood of *Nāga* for seated Buddha image belonging to the 15th Century. (see Photo 5)



In Bagan Museum, another *Nāga* hood is displayed. It is 257 cm in height, 66 cm in width and 38 cm in thickness. It is a hood of *Nāga* for a standing Buddha Image belonging 17th Century, collected by U Cinda from Ananda Oak Kyaung. It has seventeen *Nāgas*, one in the center and each of eight *Nāgas* flank on either side and they join and wind each other. (see Photo 6) The art is splendid and wonderful one.

An image is found at PhowinTaung, Monywa in Central Myanmar. The style of Buddha image is seated position with *Bhūmiphassa Mudrā* and *Jhāna Āsana*. In sculpturing robe on the body, there were only lines at the legs or hands, but it was not made distinct with curls. (see Photo 7) The edge of the robe on the left shoulder was shown by dividing into two parts,



and hanging. Four heads of *Nāgas* are flanked by left and right side of image and one big head of *Nāga* covered the image but no coils are found at the bottom of it. This image is carved on the stone wall of cave. The art of the Buddha image shows that it is about 18th century.

The *Nagā:rum Bhurā: in the 20th Century*



This reclining Buddha image is belonging to 20th Century and made of limestone. It is 22 inches long and 11 inches high. The style is that *Nāga* protects the Buddha half asleep with eye closed. (see Photo 8) It is a rare style of image and found

at Religious Affair Department Museum, Yangon.

An image is seen at the Rest House of *Atulamahālokamarajin* Image. It is situated at Tatpyin Quarter, Myeik. Its artistic is peculiar to other and the image is sitting on the throne. At the back of the image flanked by nine *Nāgas*, one covered with his hood and each of four joined and winded each other on either side. The Buddha image is made of marble

and the robe is gilded but nine *Nāgas* are glass mosaic embedded. (see Photo 9)

When the people construct the pagoda, they create the lake and place this image. The structure of the lake is varied according to the extent of the pagoda. The architect creates the lake within the pagoda compound but sometime the lake is built on the platform of pagoda. Mostly, the form of the lake is rectangle-shape. The *Nagā:rum Bhurā:* are seen with the *Nāga*'s body coiled up to serve as



Photo 9



Photo 10

a seat for the Buddha with pronged head providing a hood over the Buddha's head as a cover. In Myeik, southern Myanmar, a *Nagā:rum Bhurā:* is found in Me Kin Buddhist Nun Monastery. A rounded brick tank is created and a *Nagā:rum Bhurā:* is placed. The style is sitting cross-leg Buddha image with *Jhāna Mudrā* but the robe color is painted with dark brown. The *Nāga* figure is painted

with green and it has only four coils and the art of the image is the art of 20th Century. (see Photo 10)

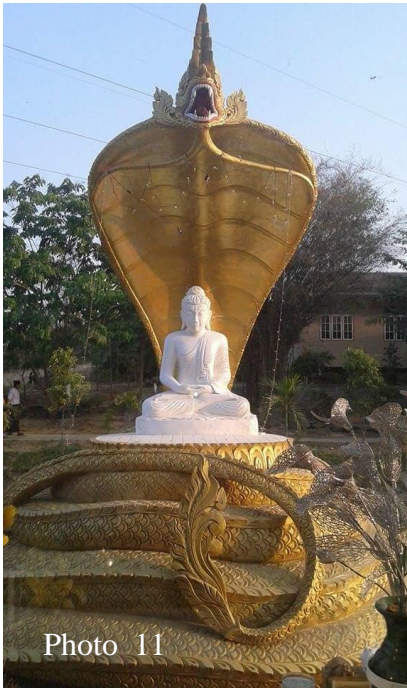


Photo 11

An image which is found in Dhamma Duta Forest Monastery, Bago is unique one. At the center of the monastery, a lake¹ is situated and a The *Nagā:rum Bhurā:* is in it. The Buddha image is sitting cross-legged image with *Jhāna Mudrā* and *Jhāna Āsana* and made of limestone. The art of *Nāga* is magnificent and the whole figure is gold paint. The *Nāga* coiled five times and its tail is curled at the front from the top. On the top of the *Nāga*'s coils, lotus throne is carved and Buddha image is placed on

it. This image is sculptured to donate in 1996. (see photo 11)

Sometimes the reason of the carving the *Nagā:rum Bhurā:* is not associated with the story of *Mucalinda Lake*. Some images are seen at the top of the building or on the hill. In Pha An, Karen State, a *Nagā:rum Bhurā:* can be seen. It is situated at Abayama Ye Kyaung Monastery. This image is placed on the roof of the building. The model and style of the Buddha image is seated with *Bhūmiphassa mudrā* and *Jhāna āsana*. The robe style is covered left shoulder only with wavy style. (see Photo 12) *Nāga* coiled three times and covered the Buddha with its scale. *Nāga* sculpture is made of cement and is embedded tender green glass mosaic. Inside the building, four small The Nagayon Buddha image can be seen.

¹ Men creation



Photo 12

1995. The image is sitting cross-legged Buddha image with *Jhāna Mudrā* and *Jhāna Āsana* that is meditation posture. The robe style is both shoulders covered. The figure of *Nāga* coiled five times at the bottom of image and covered the Buddha with his hood. The whole *Nāga* figurine is glass mosaic embedded in silver. Venerable Monk said that this image is not connected to the story of Muclainda *Nāga* but it is related with the Nat *Nāga* from the heaven. *Nāgas* from the heaven came to the human world, and then worshiped

According to the inscriptions on the stone slab, these images are donated to sculpt in 1968.

An image is found at Padamyā Monastery, 10 Miles Mound in Bago Township. (see Photo 13) Presiding Monk U Sunanda donated this image in



Photo 13

the Buddha.¹ (see Photo 14²) After that they went back to the heaven but one was left to protect the Buddha. He said if one venerates and keeps the Sila- precepts before these images, he or she could reach to the heaven and attain Nirvana.



Photo 14

The Nagayon Buddha images in the 21st Century



Photo 15

Analyzing the art of the Buddha image with *Nāga*, the style is different according to the sculptors and donors' imagination. Thus, the styles and forms of the *Nagā:rum Bhurā:* are varied in many parts of Myanmar. A great colourful Buddha

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- ¹ Sayadaw built a building and an image with Nagas was carved in this building. At the roof of the building another Buddha image with a huge Naga was sculptured to worship in 1995.
 - ² Five nagas came to the human world and worshipped the Buddha.

image is found at southeast of Monywa, central Myanmar. (see Photo 15) The style is protecting by three *Nāgas*. The Buddha image is meditation posture and the robe style is both shoulder covered. An *Nāga* of the centre coiled three times and the rests are twisted beside it. This image is made in 2004.

A wonderful Nagayon Buddha image is found on the hill at Yanlong Quarter, Kyaing Tong, Shan State. (see Photo 16) It is mounted on the seven coils of *Nāga* and the lotus throne. Thai arts influence on this image. Some thorns like those of a jackfruit were placed closely on the head. Lips were thick and the face is long and oval shape. Body structure of this image is thin and long. The robe is shown on left shoulder only and exposing the right breast. It can probably be certain that Thai arts has influenced on its style. We find that besides the indigenous styles sculptors also made use of Thai arts. The



Photo 16

rest one has sitting cross-legged position with *Bhūmiphassa mudrā*. The *Usnisa* is the flame-top signifies – omniscience of the Buddha. Scales of *Nāga* are richly ornamented and gilded. This image is carved in 2006.



In Lashio, southern Shan State, there is a Buddha image with *Nāga*. (see Photo 17) It is carved in 2005. It is more artistic than other statues because the description is that nine *Nāgas* covered the Buddha image. Each of nine *Nāgas* coiled and their hoods covered the Buddha. The Buddha image has

Bhūmiphassa mudrā and *Jhāna āsana*. The robe is one shoulder covered. It is like that the Buddha sitting on the *Nāga* coils and lotus throne. Nine *Nāgas* seemed to be alive and are painted with green and yellow and back of the scales are white. This image is situated on the hill known as Rekan Taung – Mt. Lake. At the foot of the hill a lake is located. Some monk said that the *Nāgas* are lived under the lake and guarded this mountain and this image is dedicated to donate the *Nāga* protectors.

Conclusion

In studying the *Nagā:rum Bhurā:* in Myanmar, it is found that the veneration of this image begun since eleventh century. It seems that the sculpturing of this image is imitated from Hinduism of India. The *Nagā:rum Bhurā:* are seen with the *Nāga's* body coiled up to serve as a seat for the Buddha with pronged head providing a hood over the Buddha's head as a cover. It can be found that there are Nagayon Buddha images in every

part of the country. But these are different styles and postures. According to the donors' intention and sculptors' imagination, the model and style are varied. Sometime the sculptors carved the pronged head one or three or five or seven. The creation of artistic can be seen in some images. When I asked some donors, one said that he is a reincarnation of *Nāga* so he donated this image to dedicate his relatives from previous life. And one said that he dreamed the *Nāga* one night and the *Nāga* asked for him to carve the image in the dream, so he donated this image. But some donated to dedicate *Nāgas* from heaven and they believed that these *Nāgas* can assist to reach the heaven and to attain nirvana. Nevertheless, the veneration of the *Nagā:rum Bhurā:* becomes one of the distinct features of conventional Buddhist with the belief that the devotee can enjoy the blessing of King *Nāga*, can have protection from bad weather and poisonous reptiles and some Buddhists believe that they can have safeguarding and avoiding from misery of life.

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