

A Study of the Forms; Some of the Pagodas in Bagan Area

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Abstract

The Kingdom of Myanmar was ruled by a succession of 55 kings from 107 A.D. to 1369 A.D. for over 1260 years. Believing particularly in the Buddha *Sāsana*, these kings built and donated multitudes of pagodas and religious buildings in the environs of Bagan. Bagan is an ancient city and a UNESCO World Heritage Site in the Mandalay Region of Myanmar. From the 9th to 13th centuries, the city was the capital of the Bagan Kingdom, the first kingdom that unified the regions that would later constitute Myanmar. An area known as the Bagan Archaeological Zone contains many of the larger pagodas and is arguably the most visited location in all of Myanmar. During the kingdom's height between the 11th and 13th centuries, more than 10,000 Buddhist temples, pagodas and monasteries were constructed in the Bagan plains alone, of which the remains of over 2200 temples and pagodas survive. In building and donation of the pagodas, the early workmanships are simple forms. As the architectural works developed in the later periods, the pagodas were built in various forms so that they are pleasant to the eyes and inspiring devotion to the worshippers. In Myanmar, looking at the forms of the pagodas in Bagan area, there are various architectural works that are different. The most common found forms of the pagodas are cylindrical form containing a big and steep *Dhātugabbha*, the square box-like relic chamber above the *Dhātugabbha*, the form of the pagoda created in Myanmar style and the form of the pagoda based on vaulted square temple. The intention of this paper is to discuss the potential origins of the early Pyu and Mon era religious architecture of Myanmar. The period of architecture that will be in focus is the era preceding the 9th century CE., which marked the development of a new Myanmar Kingdom known as Bagan in central Myanmar. This paper is presented the four forms of pagodas after studying a few of them in Bagan. Moreover, the study of this paper is intended to illustrate the outstanding forms of ancient architecture and to be designed to imitate the contemporaries.

Keywords: Dhātugabbha, Stupas, Cetīs

Introduction

The pagoda (*stupas*) and temples that are worshipped by all the Buddhists began with Dolmen called cemetery cave. In ancient India, corpses of saintly persons, the chiefs of the country, important personages and respectable persons were buried in their tombs together with their utensils. Similarly, the sacred relics of the Buddha and the *Arahats*, etc. were used to be entombed and were paid homage by the people. Later the tombs were built in various forms.

On studying the Buddhist Scriptures, *Cetīs* were in existence during the life-time of the Buddha. The Buddha himself said to Venerable Ānanda that Cāpāla *Cetī*, Udena *Cetī*, Bahuputta *Cetī*, etc. were delightful to worship in Mahā Parinibbāna *Sutta*. By observing the Buddha's saying, it is known that *Cetīs* were built and paid homage during the life-time of the Buddha. After the *Parinibbāna* of the Buddha, the eight portions Buddha's relics were distributed among the eight kings of the countries, namely, (1) Rājagaha, (2) Vesālī, (3) Kappila, (4) Allakappa, (5) Rāmagāma, (6) Vetṭhadīpa, (7) Pāveyyaka and (8) Kusināra by the Doṇa Brahman. The kings of the eight countries conveyed their shares of relics to their respective countries and enshrined them in *Cetīs*. From that time on the *Cetīs* of the Buddhists appeared and increased in number with the passage of time. As the temples and pagodas grow, the artworks are gradually evolving.

The historical development of the building art in Myanmar can be divided into three periods, the first of which may be referred to the "Early Phase", beginning from approximately the 2th century and continuing until the 8th or 9th century. This was followed by a period, when

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the architecture of the country assumed such a character and impressiveness that it earned the title to the designation of the “Classical Phase” and which flourished from the 9th century to 13th century. From the end of this period to the present day the country has reverted to a more intimate form of architectural expression which may be suitably defined as the “Pagoda Period”.

The architecture in Bagan primarily consists of temples and *stupas*. There are also other structures including monasteries, libraries, walls, and water ponds. Temples are buildings that have at least one entrance and exist for the purpose of praying to the Buddha. Bagan temple design evolved from Hindu temples of Northern India. They are built on a square or rectangular base and consist of a main room with 1 to 4 arched entrances and usually face eastwards. On top of the room sits a square tower, topped by a spire that holds an umbrella. Bagan temples are largely made from brick or stone and coated by stuccoes Buddhist artwork. *Stupas* are structures that contain a relic of the Buddha. Large *stupas* are known as pagodas. These are both generally shaped like a cone. Like temples, *stupas* are mostly made from brick, but are instead coated with metal like brass or copper and occasionally gold. The main aim of this paper is to reveal the high architectural of ancient Myanmar pagodas built during the Bagan era. The objectives of the present work are: to study the changes in the architectural design, to study the artistic works on the Pagodas and Temples, to preserve Myanmar cultural heritage, to promote the architectural research and development and to strengthen the standard of building safety and construction technology.

Methodology

The research is based on the pagodas of Bagan, which include: (1) Cylindrical form of pagoda containing a big and steep *Dhātugabbha*, (2) The square box-like Relic Chamber above the *Dhātugabbha*, (3) The form of the pagoda created in Myanmar style, and (4) The form of the pagoda based on vaulted square temple.

Finding and Discussion

The shapes of the religious buildings which are worshiped as *Cetīs* or *Stupas* by monks, novices and people descended from the workmanships of the religious buildings from the successive Pyu, Śrīkṣetra and Bagan Age. Out of these ages, the accounts of forms of some pagodas and temples in the Bagan area will be presented. Bagan is the present-day standard Myanmar pronunciation of the Myanmar word Bagan, derived from Old Myanmar Pukam. Its classical *Pāli* name is Arimaddanapura. Its other names in *Pāli* are in reference to its extreme dry zone climate: Tattadesa, and Tampadīpa¹. The Myanmar chronicles also report other classical names of Thiripyitsaya and Tampawaddy². The old Bagan is situated in the north of Nyaung-U and New Bagan in the south of Nyaung-U Township. Being an area where Buddhism thrived in the ancient time, there are a large number of pagodas. According to the Myanmar saying: “Hle wun yoe than ta nyan nyan Bagan phaya paung”. But according the inventory of the Archaeological Research Department in 1968, there were 2217 pagodas in Bagan area. These pagodas are considered to be the pagodas that escape from the severe attack of the natural Monsoon climate and earthquake damage.

Bagan stands out for not only the sheer number of religious edifices of Myanmar but also the magnificent architecture of the buildings, and their contribution to Myanmar temple design. The artistry of the architecture of pagodas in Bagan proves the achievement of Myanmar

¹ Than Tun , 117-118.

² Maha Yazawin, Vol.1, 141.

craftsmen in handicrafts. The Bagan temple falls into one of two broad categories: the *stupa*-style solid temple and the *gū*-style hollow temple.

A *stupa*, also called a pagoda or *cetī*, is a massive structure, typically with a relic chamber inside. The Bagan *stupas* or pagodas evolved from earlier Pyu designs, which in turn were based on the *stupa* designs of the Andhra religion, particularly Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda in present-day south-eastern India, and to a smaller extent to Ceylon¹. The Bagan-era *stupas* in turn were the prototypes for later Myanmar *stupas* in terms of symbolism, form and design, building techniques and even materials².

Originally, a Ceylonese *stupa* had a hemisphere body, on which a rectangular box surrounded by a stone balustrade was set. Extending up from the top of the *stupa* was a shaft supporting several ceremonial umbrellas. The *stupa* is a representation of the Buddhist cosmos: its shape symbolizes Mount Mehru while the umbrella mounted on the brickwork represents the world's axis³. The brickwork pediment was often covered in stucco and decorated in relief. Pairs or series of ogres as guardian figures were a favorite theme in the Bagan period⁴.

Temple architecture underwent a development during the Pagan period and it is possible to speak of two distinct styles: An Early Style which prevailed until the first decades of the 12th century, and a Late Style which became established in the last quarter of the 12th century. Some scholars term the Early Style the "Mon Style" and the Late Style the "Myanmar Style" on the basis of a parallel development in the language of the inscriptions. From an exclusive use of Mon in the reign of Kyansittha (1084-1113) there developed an exclusive use of Myanmar from the reign of Narapatisithu (1174-1211) onwards.

In Bagan period, Kings built gloriously and proudly pagodas and temples to show their powerful and glory. These building involved various sizes and forms up to the highest and largest building from the smallest buildings.

In this paper the pagodas in Bagan area are divided into four kinds of form. They are as follows:

1. Cylindrical form of pagoda containing a big and steep *Dhātugabbha*,
2. The square box-like Relic Chamber above the *Dhātugabbha*,
3. The form of the pagoda created in Myanmar style, and
4. The form of the pagoda based on vaulted square temple

1. Cylindrical form of Pagoda containing a big and steep *Dhātugabbha*

The model of this kind of pagoda is not free from the architectural workmanships of Śrīkṣetra and Pyu. On studying the model of pagoda, they are found to be built simply without embellishments. If the following pagodas are studied, one will be able to guess the model of the pagodas.

1:1 Bupaya Pagoda

Pagoda No.1657/961

¹ Aung-Thwin, 26-31.

² Aung-Thwin, 233-235.

³ Kollner, Helmut, Brunsm A, 118-120.

⁴ Falconer, J; Moore, E; Tettoni, L.I.

Bupaya Pagoda is situated on the bank of the Ayeyarwady River. The Bupaya takes its name from the bu or gourd, and tradition connects the pagoda to the legend of Pyusawhti. It is known as the work of merit of King Pyusawhti (168-243)¹. It consists of three receding terraces. The three terraces are succeeded by a hexagonal terrace. The cylindrical form of the relic chamber rises above the hexagonal terrace. There is a stairway on the east to ascend to the top terrace. The cylindrical form of relic chamber is surmounted by a bold convex band called Phayondon above which rises a tapering *stupa* finial. In later ages, the pagoda is crowned with an Umbrella. The original pagoda was destroyed in the 1975 earthquake. As result of this earthquake, the bulbous pagoda broke into pieces and fell into the river. It was, however, fully reconstructed using modern materials, with lesser adherence to the original design. Subsequently, it was built as a gilded superstructure². Bupaya resembles Baw Baw Gyi Pagoda in Śrīkṣetra³.



1: 2 Ngakywenadaung Pagoda

Pagoda No.1603/911

Ngakywenadaung Pagoda is situated in the Bagan. It is built on a high terrace. The *Dhātugabbha* does not rise upwards straight. The upper part bulges slightly more than the lower part. The original pagoda is considered to contain ovolo mouldings and a finial above the *Dhatugabbha*⁴. The present height is 43 feet. A greater portion of the pagoda is still covered with green glazed tiles. Though it cannot be precisely dated the *stupa* seems to belong to 12th century AD. Popular tradition, however, attributes it to King Taungthugyi of (931-964).



1: 3 Lawkananda Pagoda

Pagoda No.1023/418 ka

Although Lawkananda Pagoda was built in similar form as that of Ngakywenadaung Pagoda, it is a little more decorated. Lawkananda Pagoda is erected on the bank of the Ayeyarwady near Thiripyitsaya village. It was a work of merit of King Anawrahta (1044-1077). It contains a replica of a Buddha tooth relic. It seems to be built on the early model of Śrīkṣetra Pagoda. It has the shape of a cylindrical column rising up straight. The *Dhātugabbha* was built above the five octagonal receding terraces. There are three stairways in the three cardinal directions to get access to the first and second terraces. The terraces are decorated with square facets and diamond-shaped facets. The *Dhātugabbha* has the shape an elongated bell. Above the bell-shape there are graduated withering lotuses, bosses, blooming lotus and the spire of the pagoda. On 24 May 2003, a bejeweled umbrella was hoisted to the top of the



¹ Deland, A, 34.

² Falconer, J, 27.

³ Khin Maung Gyi, 108-109, PGTP, 29, Seint, 11, Than Swe, 49-50.

⁴ Khin Maung Gyi, 96, PGTP, 29, Seint, 179-180, Than Swe, 35-36.

pagoda. The similar shape of Lawkananda Pagoda can be found in Myingaba Pagoda and Innaya Pagoda¹.

2. The Square Box-like Relic Chamber above the *Dhātugabbha*

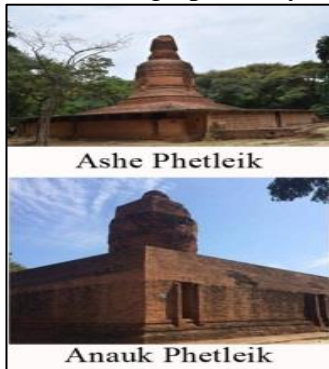
The form of the *stupas* in ancient India was built with big *Dhātugabbha* on the circular terrace in the shape of cut-off circles or something like that. The square box-like relic chamber succeeds *Dhātugabbha*. Then the pagoda is crowned an umbrella with three or five tiers. The pagodas that were built on this model were Ashe Phetleik and Anauk Phetleik Pagodas and Seinnyet Ama and Seinnyet Nyima Pagodas.

2: 1 Ashe Phetleik and Anauk Phetleik Pagodas

Pagoda No.1030/420

Pagoda No.1031/421

The Ashe Phetleik and the Anauk Phetleik are located well to the south of the main monument zone near the west edge of New Bagan, about 150 meters from the present day river bank. Though probably built at the same time, each is slightly off axis, with the main entrances



facing one another. This would have been even more apparent when they were originally built as both featured mandapa-like wooden porches facing the common ground between the two temples. They are considered to be the works of merit of King Anawrahta (1044-1077). These two pagodas are similar in shape. The bell-shaped cylindrical body of the pagoda was erected on the central square brick platform. There are four vaulted roofs surrounded by a vaulted corridor that goes all around the base of the pagoda on the four sides of the central square platform. The interior walls of the corridor are decorated with scenes from the Five Hundred and Fifty *Jātakas* in relief. Above the vaulted roof, the square box-like relic chamber, ovolo mouldings and the finial rise successively².

2:2 Seinnyet Ama and Seinnyet Nyima Pagodas

Pagoda No.1085/457

Seinnyet Ama and Seinnyet Nyima Pagodas are situated on the east side of the road leading to Thiripyitsaya village. These pagodas were built 12th century by Queen Seinnyet and her sister. The Seinnyet Ama which means elder sister is a Gu Phaya and the Sennyet Nyima



which means younger sister is a Pahto. There are three receding terraces at the base. Above the terraces, there is a brick platform with 16 corners. The bell-shaped *Dhātugabbha* rises above the two petals of the lotus. The relic chamber with seven corners surmounts the bell-shape. The top of the Seinnyet Ama pagoda consists of a circular spire ornament. The Seinnyet Nyima pagoda is crowned by a stylized umbrella in the form of 12 concentric rings³. According to Strachan, the Seinnyet Ama and Seinnyet Nyima Pagodas likely date

¹ Khin Maung Gyi, 150, PGTP, 51, Seint, 35, Than Swe, 98-99.

² Khin Maung Gyi, 155, PGTP, 52, Seint, 318-319, Than Swe, 95-97.

³ Khin Maung Gyi, 135-137, PGTP, 52, Seint, 316-317, Than Swe, 90-91.

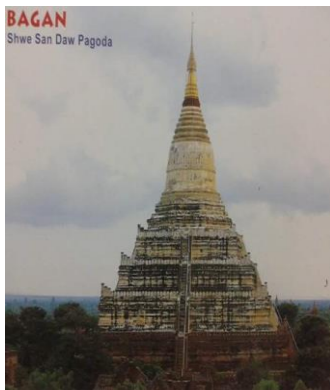
to the reign of Sithu I (Alaungsithu, r.1090-1167) and stylistically belong to the Middle Period (c.1120-1170) of Bagan architecture.

3. The Form of the Pagoda Created in Myanmar Style

The forms of the pagoda and temples that are created in Myanmar style are based on the forms of the pagodas that are mentioned above. The circular terraces were changed from square terraces. The number of terrace increased from one to three or five numbers. Those terraces were bare without any decoration formerly. Later the terraces are decorated with entourage *stupas*, *kalāsa* pots, figures of lion, ogres and *kinnarā*, etc. the stairways are later included to give access to upper terraces from the four cardinal directions. Arched entrances are found to be built over the stairways. The Myanmar style forms can be found in pagodas such as Shwesandaw, Shwezigon, etc.

3: 1 Shwesandaw Pagoda

Pagoda No.1085/457



Shwesandaw Pagoda is a Buddhist pagoda located in Bagan, Myanmar. It was a work merit of King Anawrahta in (1044-1077). Enshrined within the pagoda are sacred hairs of Gotama Buddha, which were obtained from Thaton. Shwesandaw Pagoda was built with five receding square terraces. There are four medial stairways to ascend to the upper terraces. Lion figures can be found at the four corners of the lowest terrace. Above the five terraces, the bell-shaped dome, the relic chamber and ovolo mouldings rise from the octagonal brick base. Above the ovolo mouldings are withering lotus, blooming lotus and pinnacle of the pagoda¹.

3: 2 Shwezigon Pagoda

Pagoda No.1/1 ka



The Shwezigon Pagoda is a Buddhist *stupa* located in Nyaung-U, Myanmar. The construction of Shwezigon Pagoda began in the reign of King Anawrahta (1044-1077). As King Anawrahta died before the completion of Shwezigon Pagoda, the construction of Shwezigon was completed in the reign of King Kyansittha (1084-1113). This pagoda, a sacred Buddhist religious place, is believed to enshrine a bone and tooth of Gotama Buddha. Over the centuries the pagoda had been damaged by many earthquakes and other natural calamities, and has been refurbished several times. In recent renovations it has been covered by more than 30,000 copper plates. Shwezigon Pagoda has three receding terraces. Out of the three terraces, the first terrace is square in shape. Above these terraces there are one octagonal terrace and a circular terrace. The wall of the square terrace is decorated with glazed terracotta plaques which depict the scenes of the Five Hundred and Fifty *Jātakas*. Above the three terraces, there are bell-shaped dome,

¹ Khin Maung Gyi, 87, PGTP, 32, Seint, 201, Than Swe, 53-55.

ovolo mouldings, withering lotus, Blooming lotus and the spire. On one of the outer walls surrounding the Shwezigon Pagoda there is a stone pillar with Mon language inscriptions dedicated by King Kyansittha. Another pagoda that was built with three terraces like Shwezigon is Dhammarājika Pagoda¹.

4. The Form of Pagoda Based on Vaulted Square Temple

Formerly solid *stupas* were built. Now the pagodas are built by combining the forms of solid *stupa* and hollow temple. Now the square terrace is used as a cover over a square brick temple. This square brick temple has only one arched entrance (Gūpaya with one arched entrance). There are also square temples with four arched entrances (Gūpaya with four arched entrances) or square temples with five arched entrances (Gūpaya with five arched entrances).

The Gūpayas with one arched entrance are Nandamaññā Temple, Alodawpyay Temple in Wetkyi-in area and Sinhalese type Pagoda in Minnanthu area. The Gūpayas with four arched entrances Ānanda Temple, Asawkywam Temple, Lemyethnar Temple, Man Aung Temple and Karutcho Temple. Lemyethnar signifies the four Buddhas who had appeared in the present Bhadda Kappa. Ngarmyethnar Temples signify the four previous Buddha and Arimetteyya, the Buddha to appear in the future. The Ngarmyethnar Temples are Einya Kyaung Gū near Upāli Thein (sīmā), Ngarmyethnar Gū, Gūpaya in the south-east of Thatbhyinnyu Temple, Ngarmyethnar Temple on the roadside of Bagan-Nyaung-U road, and Ngarmyethnar Temple near Shwezigon Pagoda. Among these Temples, Nandamaññā temple and Ānanda temple will be presented.

4: 1 Nandamaññā Temple

Pagoda No.577/306 ka

Nandamaññā is a small vaulted temple with only one arched entrance. It was a work of merit of King Kyazwa (1287-1298). Nandamaññā is situated in Minnanthu area. This temple has an arched entrance on the east side. There is a stairway leading to the upper part of the temple. There are lattice windows to admit light on the three remaining sides of the temple. Above the temple, there are three receding terraces. The bell-shaped body of the pagoda and ovolo mouldings successively rise above the three terraces. The size of the cave temple and the size of the *stupa* in the upper part are proportionate, comely and pleasing to the eyes².



¹ Khin Maung Gyi, 45-47, PGTP, 7, Seint, 32-33, Than Swe, 64-65.

² Khin Maung Gyi 171, PGTP 56, Seint 228-229.

4: 2 Ānanda Temple

Pagoda No.2171



The Ānanda Temple, located in Bagan, Myanmar is a Buddhist temple built in 1105 AD during the reign (1084-1113) of King Kyansittha of the Bagan Dynasty. The Ānanda commemorates in its name one of the attributes of the Buddha, his Infinite wisdom-Anantapaññā. The story told in chronicles that once eight saints came to Kyansittha and took him to Nandamūla grotto where they lived. This pagoda is to be built as a model of the Nandamūla cave. Ānanda Temple is by far the most famous temple. The temple is built in a transitional style, featuring architecture associated with the Mon and Myanmar. It is a vaulted temple with four porches and four arched entrances in the four cardinal directions. The bell-shaped body of the temple rises above the three square terraces. Above the bell-shaped body are the ovolo mouldings, withering lotus, blooming lotus, spherical bosses, plantain bud, spire of the *stupa* and umbrella. The lattice windows are installed within the brick-wall of the temple to admit light into the temple. There is a gigantic core pillar at the center of the temple. There are four gigantic standing Buddha Images in front of the four sides of the core pillar. The wall around the base of the temple is decorated with glazed terracotta plaques. The number of glazed terracotta plaques is known to be about a thousand and five hundred. The proportions are majestic. Each side of the central square measures 175 feet, while the overall length of each axis is 290 feet. The main block is 35 feet high, and above it rises two tiers of sloping roofs, followed by four receding terraces which form a base for the curvilinear spire. Finally, a gilded finial and a hit (umbrella) take the temple up to a height of 172 feet. The temple was damaged in the earthquake of 1975. However, it has been fully restored and is well maintained by frequent painting and whitewashing of the walls. On the occasion of 900th anniversary of its construction celebrated in 1990, the temple spires were gilded. As the Bagan Ānanda Temple is very comely among the Bagan temples, it is the most devotional temple¹.

The pagodas based on the square sanctum seem to be constructed with better arrangements. In the construction of *stupas* and vaulted square temples in Bagan, they are mostly found to be constructed based on the four types of form.

Conclusion

On studying the shapes of *stupas* and temples in the Myanmar country, they are found to evolve successively from Pyu, Śrīkṣetra, and Bagan. In the early Bagan, the shapes of the *stupas* are found to be simple, tall and upright cylindrical forms. Then the shape of the *stupas* gradually changed from cylindrical forms to up-ward tapering cone-shaped forms. Then the number of terraces increases from one to five and the shape of the terraces changes from square form to more variegated forms, circular, octagonal, etc. The shape of the body of the *stupa* changes from massive bulbous form to bell-shaped form. The shape of the bell tapers upwards. The upper body of the *stupas* is found to be decorated with ovolo mouldings, withering lotus, blooming lotus etc. Later the corners of the terraces are found to decorate with satellite *stupas*, *kalāsa* pots, figures of lion and ogre, etc. When the age becomes later, the donors and architects embellish their works with pleasing and beautiful decorations. In later ages, the number of arched entrance of the *stupas* and temples increases from one to four or five numbers. Moreover, building pagodas changes from building on bare ground to building square vaulted temples on square platforms.

¹ Aung Kyine, 9-10, Khin Maung Gyi 82-84, PGTP, 13, Seint 73-75, Than Swe 25-28.

In accordance with intellectual development, the Bagan people made use of their intellectual capacity in decorating the pagodas and temples.

The Bagan being the most thrived in Buddha *Sāsana* in Myanmar, it was the age when the pagodas and temples were built to the utmost. The most visible accomplishment of this kingdom was the construction of over 10,000 Buddhist Bagan pagodas, temples and monasteries just along the Bagan plains along. On account of building of multitudes of religious edifices, there will be still able to study the ancient architecture of Bagan, because of the evidences, the pagodas and temples surviving today, remnants of the pagodas in ruins, records of stone inscriptions of religious buildings and works of charity, etc. Perhaps due to the continuing patronage of Buddhist pagoda architecture in Bagan period, a workable classification of the pagoda form has been formulated and would be of benefit to scholars in the field of the art history. There are many Bagan pagodas in the region and if there will be planning on visiting Myanmar, there are want to make this area first visit. The incredible designs and striking architecture make this one of the most remarkable places on Earth. Moreover, it is a document that will not only be related to the subject, but also help in finding practical employment for Oriental Studies students. It is intended that this paper will be a support and contribution to those who make a study of architectural workmanship and the forms of the pagodas and temples of Bagan. This research paper hopes to convey the architectural and technological achievement of Myanmar Religious Architecture that reached its peak during the reign of Bagan Kings.

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