

Burmese Buddhist Imagery of the Early Bagan Period (1044-1113)

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Buddhism is an integral part of Burmese culture. While Buddhism has been practiced in Burma for around 1500 years and evidence of the religion is found throughout the country, nothing surpasses the concentration of Buddhist monuments found at Bagan. Bagan represents not only the beginnings of a unified Burmese country, but also symbolises Burmese 'ownership' of Theravada Buddhism. While there is an abundance of artistic material throughout Burma, the study of Burmese Buddhist art by western scholars remains in its infancy due to historical events. In recent years, opportunities for further research have increased, and Bagan, as the region of Buddhism's principal flowering in Burma, is the starting point for the study of Burmese Buddhist art. To date, there has been no systematic review of the stylistic or iconographic characteristics of the Buddhist images of this period. This thesis proposes, for the first time, a chronological framework for sculptural depictions of the Buddha, and identifies the characteristics of Buddha images for each identified phase. The framework and features identified should provide a valuable resource for the dating of future discoveries of Buddhist sculpture at Bagan. As epigraphic material from this period is very scant, the reconstruction of Bagan's history has relied heavily to this point in time on non-contemporaneous accounts from Burma, and foreign chronicles. The usefulness of Bagan's visual material in broadening our understanding of the early Bagan period has been largely overlooked. This is addressed by relating the identified stylistic trends with purported historical events and it is demonstrated that, in the absence of other contemporaneous material, visual imagery is a valid and valuable resource for both supporting and refuting historical events. ¶ Buddhist imagery of Bagan widely regarded to represent the beginnings of 'pure' Theravada practice that King Anawrahta, the first Burman ruler, actively encouraged. This simplistic view has limited the potential of the imagery to provide a greater understanding of Buddhist practice at

Bagan, and subsequently, the cross-cultural interactions that may have been occurring. In this light the narrative sculptural imagery of the period is interrogated against the principal Mahayana and Theravada texts relating to the life of Gotama Buddha. This review, along with the discussion regarding potential agencies for stylistic change, reveals that during the early Bagan period, Buddhism was an eclectic mix of both Theravada and Mahayana, which integrated with pre-existing spiritual traditions. Towards the end of the early Bagan period, trends were emerging which would lead to a distinctly Burmese form of Buddhist practice and visual expression.

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