The significance of North East India in the development of the sculpture of 12th -13th century Bagan

• The claim of early scholarship that Burma found all its inspiration from North East India (the area now seen as the modern states of Bihar, West Bengal and the area now known as Bangladesh) has now been refuted. However today I aim to show that parallels do exist in architecture, sculpture and iconography. Fresh examination shows a much more fluid and complex context. I want to show that Bagan belonged to a much wider Buddhist world. Fleeing Muslim persecution Indian Monks travelled to Burma by the silk route to Northern China, others by sea through the straits of Malacca to the coast of present day Vietnam. Indian traders also came to south Burma

• The interaction went both ways. The Mahabodhi temple was reproduced at Bagan during reign of king Natonmaya 1210-34

• Burmese missions sent to repair Bodhgaya; Religious missions travelled from Myanmar to Bodh Gaya –

• Abeyadana, King Kyanzittha’s first wife - thought to have come from East Bengal. King built the Abeyadana Temple for her at the start of the 12th century. This is decorated with a mixture of Mahayana, Theravada and Hindu themes

Bagan 11th -13th century Found at the Myinpyagu temple another 4 exist
Outline of Lecture

1. Introduction - I will today look at material from the Bagan Empire (1044–1287). By the early 12th century, Bagan had emerged as a major power alongside the Khmer Empire in Southeast Asia, recognised by Song China and the Chola dynasty of India.

   Under the rule of King Anawrahta (1044-77); King Kyanzittha (1084-1112/13)

2. Brief introduction to the style and patronage of sculpture in North East India.

3. Parallels in iconography and style in the votive pilgrim tablets

4. Similarities and differences between Pala and Bagan stone and bronze sculpture

The lecture acknowledges the debate as to what extent pre Buddhist practices in Burma and the Mahayana Buddhist traditions took part in the ritual purpose of the Buddhist imagery of 12th – 13th century Bagan but will not go into this discussion. However I will briefly refer to a couple of examples of Bagan frescoes, which confirms evidence of Mahayana elements in Bagan.

c. first half of the 13th century Burma
Wood with lacquer

Metropolitan Museum of art New York
The importance of pilgrimage in Buddhism. This is stressed in Brahmanical literature.

"The highlight of a pilgrimage was to stand beneath the Bodhi tree at Bodhgaya where Buddha attained enlightenment. Pilgrimage of the Buddhist community provided cultural unity within the subcontinent. The purpose of pilgrimage - allowed devotee to imbibe the sacred presence at a holy site and be cleansed and to perform a religious observance or meritorious act in the hope of spiritual deliverance."
Gupta period
late 6th–early 7th century
India (probably Bihar)
Bronze

British Museum
Northeast Gupta/Licchavi period 7th-8th century AD

Narrow waist. Slim waists and thighs; The bottom of the robe fanning outwards with a double band of folds that hang above the ankles.

10th century Nepal Copper alloy
Walters art gallery, Baltimore

Nepal 10-11th century
Characteristic Pala style

Stiff, stylised figures. Broad chest with the more columnar and slimmer torso and elongated limbs.

Faces become more stylised and slimmer more heart shaped. The faces have a pinched quality with pursed lips and pronounced noses.

The eyes begin to turn up at the edges. Dip in the centre of the eyelids. Pointy nose like a parrot’s beak.

The ushnisha of bronze images are often surmounted by a conical flame.

Stone images – figures appear on a double lotus throne

Base with several recesses

11th Century Pala Musee Guimet
Flame halo distinctive feature of Pala sculpture
Seated Buddha Reaching Enlightenment, Flanked by Avalokiteshvara and Maitreya; Pala period 
late 10th–11th century; India, Bihar, Nalanda monastery
Black schist – British Museum, London
Votive memorial tablets

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L. Pala period
10th century
Bihar, possibly from Nalanda
Black schist with traces of gilding
British Museum

R. Pala Buddha – Found at Nalanda
National museum New Delhi

Discovered in Nalanda – illustrates
The biography of Buddha
Pala period ca. 9th–10th century; India, Bihar, possibly Bodhgaya or Nalanda; Terracotta. Dimensions: H. 6 1/2 in. (16.5 cm); W. 4 1/2 in. (11.4 cm); D. 2 in. (5.1 cm)

Votive tablet
Bagan late 11th -12th century
Terracotta
Museum of Fine arts, Boston

The carved dark stone and the pyrophyllite votive momentoes have been attributed both to NE India and Burma. Deposits of this stone found in Purulia district of West Bengal. Discovered in Bagan – two ; Arakan. Some found in Sri Lanka, Thailand some at Nalanda. Some imported from Bihar.

The pyrophyllite is also called ‘andagu’ in Burma, carved in high relief. Also known as ‘dolomite’ or ‘steatite’. Pyrophyllite is a type of metamorphic rock, similar to schist or slate, which has a very fine texture that allows precise and etailed carving.

An inscription in Myanmar on the tiles’s reverse states that the image was made by the son-in-law of King Kyanzittha (1084-1112) in order to gain deliverance.

The inscription along the bottom edge contains the so-called “Buddhist Creed” in Pali, in Mon-Myanmar script and is followed by a repetition of the donor’s name and his wish for deliverance.
L. Buddha Private collection. Elongated features suggest Bodhgaya

Represents the 8 great events of the life of the Buddha

Style involves an elongation of the body. Some figures show shorter body and fatter arms.

Neck short on both, but Bagan face is squarer with less pointed nose?

Buddha 12th – 13th century - Bagan museum found in Bagan

The face with a broad forehead bows down which results in a short neck a feature suggesting Burmese origin on the work
Stone Sculpture of Pala and Bagan 12-13th century
L. The Buddha triumphing over Mara
India, probably Kurkihar, Bihar state
900-1000 Basalt Stone British Museum

R. Buddha seated in dharmacakra mudra.
Bagan period, 11th century. Sandstone.
Bagan Archaeological Museum

It may be from the Kubyauknge temple
near the Village of Wetkyi-in Bagan.
Buddha Severing His Hair. Bagan period, ca. 11th-12th century.
Sandstone with traces of pigment.
Bagan Archaeological Museum.

Monkey Making Offering of Honey to the Buddha. Kubyaukng Temple, Myinkaba village.
Bagan period, 1198.
Sandstone with polychrome. Bagan Archaeological Museum

Until recently this was its original niche in the Inner corridor of the Kubyaukng Temple at Bagan.

The monkey offering very popular in Pala NE India. It was included in the 8 Great events. The pairing of the monkey with the elephant appears in Myanmar but not in India.
Overall Bagan tempered the Indian aesthetic ideals.

It carved major images in the round and depicted the human form with greater naturalism.

Buddha's hair depicted in small cone-shaped curls and the face oval to triangular with a slightly pointed chin.

The eyes were wide and turned upwards like those of the Chinese phoenix, the bridge of the nose high and slightly aquiline and lips pursed, the lower lip being slightly thicker than the upper.

The upper earlobe curved like the human ear but with small lines carved in the middle, the lower earlobe elongated over the shoulders.
Bronze Sculpture
Pala Bronze
Nalanda 8th-12th Century AD - Indian Museum – Kolkata

Most Pala metal objects are in bronze. The specific alloy varies from workshop to workshop but in general it has a characteristic high copper content.

According to ancient texts the alloy was to consist of 8 metals (astadhatu). This was for ritual correctness. Some made in gold and Silver some with gilded surfaces. In general they are hollow cast except for the smaller sold ones.

There are abundant remains of metal images dating from the Pala and Sena periods. The Bihar and Bengal regions must have been important centres of metal image production. Partially due to the rich ore deposits throughout Magadha.

Metal images easily transportable and therefore may have played a major role in the dissemination of Indian styles to Southeast Asia.
Seated Buddha displaying the earth-touching gesture *bhūmisparśamudrā*, the gesture immediately preceding enlightenment.

Broad forehead, tapering face and uṣṇīṣa (cranial bump) with gem setting.

One of the finest known Burmese bronzes of the Bagan period, this piece reflects the powerful influence of eastern India and particularly the adaptation of a stylistic current in the Bodh Gayā region.

One characteristic mark of Bagan bronzes is a high nickel content producing a silver like finish. Certain bronzes from Yunnan, China share this but not found in eastern India. No traces of workshops known at Bagan but the fact that majority of bronzes found there suggests a casting centre.
9th century Licchavi Nepal

Burma - Bagan
Buddha seated in bhumisparsa mudra.
Bronze with copper alloy,
12th-13th century
British Museum
Bagan period
late 11th century

Burma

Bronze inlaid with silver and copper
In 1937 This image was found in the chamber of a shrine after a brick wall collapsed.

The practice of interring bronzes within the brick fabric was probably intended to enhance the efficacy of the donation, like terracotta votive tablets placed within stupas and under the floors of temples.

Stone inscriptions at Bagan also record that metal objects were interred within stupas and even encased within large buddhas made of brick inside temples.

Even today people commission metal figures that are worshiped in shrines at home or donated to monasteries.

The double wavy bottom of the robe is distinctive of the Bagan Buddhas, including the large original ones extant in the Ananda temple.
One of the many seated Buddhas from Nāgapaṭṭinam

The treatment of the face is linear and symmetrical, the flame ‘uṣṇīṣa’ is characteristic, if summary, and the ‘ūrṇā’, nipple and robe edges at wrist and ankle are simply incised.

British museum
Classic Buddha features, Bagan

- Heart-shaped hairline
- Urna
- Fleshy nose
- Tight, full-lipped mouth
- Eyebrows: swallow in flight
- Eyes like bird drinking
- Ears touch shoulder
Comparison of Pala – Bagan

Differences in body of Bagan image:
1. Simpler body hugging robe
2. Plain back slab
3. Rounder body
4. Similarities – double lotus throne
Fresco painting

• In the Pala-Sena period of NE India aside from some recently discovered and badly damaged murals found at Nalanda all that remains of the Pala-Sena painting tradition are a number of fragments of palm leaf manuscripts. Palm leaf manuscripts of which most popular manuscript for illustration is the Astasahasrika Prajnaparamita.

• Burmese murals adorned temples primarily constructed for the purpose of enshrining an image and individual worship. Burmese narratives created an environment that focuses on the religious needs of individuals
India - Ajanta 5th century **Bodhisattva Padmapani**

Bodhisattva, Myinkaba Kubyaukgyi. 1113
Wall paintings

Dry frescos: paint applied to dried layer of mud & lime or stucco.

Figure outlined in black or red

Early temples: Theravada and Mahayana themes

Buddha surrounded by scenes from the life Jataka stories

28 Buddhas Mahayana themes mainly bodhisattva figures like this one. None of inscriptions mention Mahayana themes – just incorporated into vocabulary.

Roundels, scrolls, vegetal and animal shapes merging all appear in Pagan paintings.

Pala 11th century illustration - Seated on lion suggests Manjusri?

dvarapala / bodhisattva
Myinkaba Kubyaukgyi, 1113
Conclusion

• The parallels seen in the sculpture, votive stelae, bronze sculpture and particularly fresco paintings provides evidence of the integration of craftsmanship, iconography and meaning in the wider community of Buddhist practice across the region of North East India to Burma. The presence of imagery from both streams of Mahayana and Theravada provides insight into a syncretic mix of traditions superimposed on a pre-existing culture of nat worship and Brahmanism. The principle image of the Enlightenment provides the pivotal focus.

• The belief in the power of the story is demonstrated by the exclusively popular persistence of the replication of the moment of Buddha’s enlightenment. Burma’s cultural environment created a system that favoured the continued replication of some Buddhist imagery. This may be meaningfully and powerfully produced hundred years apart. Reverberations of replication continue to the present day.

• The nature of popular religious belief encouraged the image to be imbued with a remarkable power. This resulted in images being interred offered for the accruing of merit but also reinforced the efficacy of the monument. The sculpture functioned more for what was invisible than what was visible.

• Ideas of chronology and stylistic development are less important than an effort to understand the place and power of these images.