Importance and role of Bagan in the history of painting in Burma:  
15th to early 19th c. Buddhist narrative murals

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To the painters
ABSTRACT

This paper aims to evaluate the role and importance of Pagan in post-Pagan period narrative murals, and more generally in the history of painting in Burma. In the 14th-16th centuries, which is the period of formation of the Nyaungyan pictorial identity, the murals found at Pagan are of a tremendous importance: they illustrate the hybrid and protootypical phases of the future Nyaungyan narrative format, as well as the proto-Nyaungyan style (monument no. 684). However, no significative Nyaungyan murals are found in Pagan, except in the Taungbi monastery: the Nyaungyan arcaic, late classic and final styles are represented by only five monuments that are not playing any key role as 15th and 16th century’s murals. It is in the 1780-1800’s that Pagan became again of a preeminent importance with the Anandian « concerted revolution » embodied by the murals of the Ananda Ok-kyang – thus the term « Anandian style » to call these murals that assimilated a series of innovations inherited from the Siamese pictorial tradition. The Anandian or Konbaung I style then spread in the 1800-1830 outside Pagan to define a Konbaung II style. In conclusion, two of the key murals in the history of Burmese painting are located in Pagan: the monument no. 684 and the Ananda Ok-kyang. The former is the « pierre de Rosette » of the new Nyaungyan tradition. The latter is a siamo-sino-burmese synthesis that will prevail until the second half of the 19th century with the advent of the European influence.

1. Presentation of Bagan in the context of post-Bagan period murals

The early history of painting in Burma is synonymous with the site of Bagan and Bagan period murals from the 11th to the 13th centuries, but did post-Bagan period murals at Bagan contribute significantly to the evolution of painting in Burma?

The fact that there is no hiatus in the history of painting in Burma the tracing of its evolutionary steps from the 11th to the 20th century,1 but all these steps are not represented at the site of Bagan. Regarding the Nyaungyan period for instance, while the Nyaungyan arcaic style of the first half of the 17th century is represented by the murals of monument no. 1267, the Nyaungyan early classic style of the second half of the 17th century is not represented.2 The next stage of the murals’ evolution belongs to the Nyaungyan late classic style of the early 18th century, represented by three monuments: the Taungbi monastery, dated from 1705 by an inscription, the Hman Si Phaya and monument no. 84. Thus, to understand the evolution between

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1 The number of monuments with murals from the 11th to the 19th century in Burma are roughly: 10 for the 11th c., 50 for the 12th c., 255 for the 13th c., 44 for the 14th c., 8 for the 15th c., 6 for the 16th c., 20 for the 17th c., 150 for the 18th c., over 150 for the 19th c. Sources: Pichard 1992-2001, personnal field trips with Alexey Kirichenko and Minbu Aung Kyaiung, communication from Lilian Handlin, Christian Lammerts and U Win Maung Tanpawaddy.

2 See the chronological classification of the Nyaungyan and Konbaung styles in fig. 10.
Nyaungyan archaic style of monument no. 1267 and the Nyaungyan late classic style of these three monuments, the historian of painting needs to rely upon murals from other sites such as Nyaung Hla, Pakhangyi, Yezagyo etc. that belong to the Nyaungyan early classic style of the second half of the 17th century (fig. 1).

**Figure 1.** The hiatus in the production of murals at Bagan in the second half of the 17th century necessitates reliance on murals from other sites to understand the pictorial evolution during this period.

From the point of view of the mural production, the region of Bagan was marginalized during the Nyaungyan period: the main region was located along the Chindwin at the north of its confluence with the Irrawaddy, stretching from Powin Daung to Pakhangyi. The Chindwin region is so rich that it is even possible to speak of a Chindwin school for the years 1700-1780 and, to go further in the regionalization of the Nyaungyan styles, to divide the Chindwin region in two sub-regions: a northern one centered on Aneint, and a southern one centered on Pakhangyi (fig. 2).³

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³ This article is part of a ten-year research made in collaboration with Alexey Kirichenko that came up with a 2017 publication on the life of the Buddha in Nyaungyan narrative murals.
However, Bagan remained a key site in the history of painting in Burma (fig. 3), firstly, in the 15th and 16th centuries, for its major role in the formation of the Nyaunyan narrative format; secondly, in the second half of the 16th century for counting the only known representation of the proto-Nyaunyan style; thirdly, in the first half of the 17th century for its murals of the Nyaunyan archaic style, linking thus the proto-Nyaunyan style to the early Nyaunyan tradition; fourthly, by the end of the 18th century by the assimilation of a series of Siamese innovations, in the Andanda Ok-kyauung and three other contemporary monuments at Bagan, that define the Anandian or Konbaung I style which eventually spread outside Bagan in the early 19th century as post-Anandian or Konbaung II style.

There are thus eight post-Bagan period monuments in Bagan that are crucial for understanding the evolution of the history of painting in Burma (fig. 3). They are chronologically monument no. 225 and the Kyanzittha Umin regarding the formation of the Nyaunyan narrative format; monument no. 684 regarding the proto-Nyaunyan style; monument no. 1267 regarding the Nyaunyan archaic style; and the four
monuments that constitute the Anandian group: the Ananda Ok-kyau, the Upali Thein, the Kamma Kyaung U and the Shwe Kyaung, regarding the Anandian or Konbaung I style. The most important are monument no. 684 because it is the only known illustration of the proto-Nyaungyan style in Burma, and the Ananda Ok-kyau where are found most of the Siamese innovations that were to reshape the Burmese pictorial tradition.

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*Figure 3. Important post-Bagan period murals at Bagan in the history of painting in Burma*

The Nyaungyan murals at Bagan are represented by only four monuments amongst which monument no. 1267 of the Nyaungyan archaic style is the only one to have a strategic role in the history of painting although its murals are less important than the fact that they belong to the Nyaungyan archaic style, and thus allow a study of the relation between the proto-Nyaungyan and Nyaungyan archaic styles. The Taungbi monastery, the Hman Si Phaya and the monument no. 84 belong to a period extremely rich in new monuments, several of which are dated and that belong to the flourishing sites of the Chindwin region (fig. 2). The Taungbi monastery is nonetheless exceptional in its detailed treatment of the final year of the life of the Buddha as well
as in the presence of a singular iconography not found in any other monuments. These elements, however, in the context of the evolution of painting in Burma, do not seem to have played a particular role in its development.

2. Bagan & the origin of the Nyaungyan narrative format (15th and 16th c.)

A major development in the history of painting in Burma is the emergence in the early 17th century of the archaic phase of the Nyaungyan tradition: the first to emerge after the Bagan period. A defining feature of this breakthrough development, that covers the 17th and 18th centuries, is a new model of organisation of the mural space of the monuments: from the porch to the cella, from the bottom of the walls to the ceiling, covering the walls with captioned superimposed narrative registers.

The first known example of this narrative format goes back to the 12th-century murals of the Lokahteikpan in Bagan, but it remains an exception. Thus it is impossible to establish a link between the 12th century murals of the Lokahteikpan and those of the Nyaungyan period. It is in the post-Bagan and pre-Nyaungyan murals of the 14th to 16th centuries that the origin of the Nyaungyan narrative format is likely to be found. This origin can be traced in two phases: a hybrid phase and a prototypical phase.

The hybrid phase

The hybrid phase designates the first step of the transition between the use of the panel as the structural measure of the mural space and its progressive replacement by the register. It is represented at Bagan by the murals of monument no. 225, dated to 1442 by an inscription.

While the corridor is covered with hundreds of panels relating the past lives of the Buddha, the narrative registers are used as the structural measure of the cella (fig. 4) to which the corridor gives access. The four walls of the cella are unified by the presence of the highest register 1 of the series of the previous Buddhas. Below, on registers 2 and 3 – but only on the main wall – is depicted the story of the future Buddha Metteyya. The large cartouches of the captions of these three registers continue on each of the other walls, even when they delimit panels: the cartouches of the captions create thus a visual unity by integrating the panels in the general structuration of the cella. The superimposed registers have become the visual
measure for the organization of the program. However, the narrative format for the whole monument no. 225 remains hybrid: panels in the corridor, registers in the cella.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 4.** Organisation of the four walls of the cella of monument no. 225 at Bagan. The large horizontal red lines represent the cartouches of text; the abbreviation 'sub-R' designates the sub-registers consisting of rows of worshippers

**The prototypical phase**

The prototypical phase designates the second step of the conquest of the mural space by the register: now the register is used at the scale of the whole monument. This prototypical phase is represented at Bagan by the Kyanzittha Umin.

The murals of the Kyanzittha Umin illustrate an important step in the lateral development of the narrative: while in monument no. 225, it was limited to the main wall of the cella (fig. 4), here the narrative (the life of the Buddha) occupies a unique register on the lower part of the various walls of this complex structure. The possibilities offered by this register are exploited both in its height and in its length. The height of the register allows, for instance, to depict in the same spatial framework the different moments of the episode of the Tāvatiṃsa - ascent, preaching, descent and arrival at Saṅkassa (fig. 5). The length of the register enables the integration of lengthy developments such as a procession of musicians and dancers.

But the superimposition of registers is absent in the Kyanzittha-umin, and this is one of the main characteristics of Nyaungyan murals programs. Moreover as this vertical organisation of the registers is symbolic of the path to Buddhahood. Indeed, the lowest register in Nyaungyan murals often depicts the hells while the highest depicts the series of the 28 Buddhas, culminating in the last one, the historical Buddha Gotama. In between, in the intermediary registers, are depicted his past lives, which illustrate the perfection of the virtues of the Bodhisatta that will eventually reach
Enlightenment and become the Buddha. This hierarchization of the program is however found in monument no. 684 at Bagan which represents the proto-Nyaungyan style.

Figure 5. The Buddha’s ascent to the Tāvatiṃsa heaven, at the top of Mount Mēru, in the seventh year following his enlightenment (1); his preaching there (2); then his descent (3) at Sākassa (4). Kyanzittha Umin, Bagan, late 15th-early 16th c.?

3. Bagan & the proto-Nyaungyan style (2nd half of the 16th c.)

Several features of the five Nyaungyan styles that I defined in my new chronological classification (fig. 10) appear in the second half of the 16th century in the murals of monument no. 684 at Bagan. These murals are called proto-Nyaungyan, not Nyaungyan archaic, because some of the basic elements of the Nyaungyan narrative technique are still missing. But despite these differences, the murals of
monument no. 684 belong to the Nyaungyan cultural sphere unlike the murals of the Kyanzittha Umin and of monument no. 225.

The fact that the Nyaungyan features depicted in monument no. 684 are the earliest known does not mean that they were not depicted before, but that earlier examples are not known. This temple being the only representative of this style is thus an extremely valuable monument but this does mean that it was equally important in the 16th century: there may have been other proto-Nyaungyan styles murals that have been destroyed or simply not yet discovered. In this regard, the importance of the site of Bagan must be taken cautiously. However, for the time being, it remains one of the crucial monument for the understanding of the history of painting in Burma.

**Nyaungyan features in monument no. 684 at Bagan**

The main Nyaungyan feature found in monument no. 684 is the polylobed outline that circumscribes the scenes set in the first plan over the entire length of the register (fig. 6). A key element in Nyaungyan and later Konbaung paintings, the polylobed outline is absent from the registers of the Kyanzittha Umin and of monument no. 225. On the other hand, it is widely used in Nyaungyan archaic murals, i.e. in the Tilokaguru cave in Sagaing (fig. 7) or in the Shwe Bontha temple at Maibingun.

![Figure 6. Polylobed outline in monument no. 684. Bagan, 2nd half of the 16th c.](image)

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4 The polyfoilded outline was used in Bagan period murals but not in the narrative registers of the Lokahteikpan.

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The other Nyaungyan features found in monument no. 684 and then in all Nyaungyan styles of the 17th and 18th centuries are royal attire worn by kings, princes, bodhisattas, and deities (fig. 8) and the bulging cheek of men that may suggest that they are chewing betel (fig. 9). If some deities have a bulging cheek, like Sakka, king of the Tāvatiṃsa, it is because this is a male behavior. Monks and Buddhas do not have a bulging cheek, but Bodhisattas in the Tilokaguru are depicted with a bulging cheek in the episode of the Great Departure, while cutting off their hair: this is not a contradiction because these bodhisattas are princes or kings and the betel set is part of the royal regalia.

Figure 7. The polylobed outline in the Tilokaguru cave (c. 1610-20) is used as a ground line as the narrative develops on two planes. To enhance the materiality, the painter has used a black strip in the middle that mimics the rocks around the trees.

Figure 8. Royal attire worn (left) by a deity (monument no. 684), and by a bodhisatta (Tilokaguru cave at Sagaing, and cave no. 478 at Powin Daung: c. 1730-70)
The bulging cheek prompted historians of Burmese painting to identify only one Nyaunyan style, because this feature is found during the entire Nyaunyan period. But this is a mistake: the bulging cheek is not a stylistic element, it is an iconographic motif. It is found in the Nyaunyan archaic murals of the Tilokaguru from the beginning of the 17th century as well as in Nyaunyan final murals of the 1730-1770’s at Powin Daung – more than a century later. There are numerous other pictorial components that distinguish between various segments of “Nyaunyan” artistic styles, indicating that different stages of development determined the content of particular structures in particular locals.

Finally, the iconography of the Great Departure in monument no. 684 introduces a novelty: the door of the bedroom where Yasodharā and Rāhula are sleeping, which is depicted in the murals of the temple near the Kyaiklat Kyaung in Sagaing (15th century?), has been replaced by a curtain that the Bodhisatta cradles in his arm, enabling him to cast a last look at his sleeping wife and child (fig. 6). This motif of the curtain is found in Nyaunyan archaic murals of the early 17th century: i.e. the Tilokagaru at Sagaing and monument no. 44 at Pakhangyi, then throughout the 18th and 19th centuries in the different Nyaunyan and Konbaung styles.

Missing Nyaunyan features in monument no. 684 at Bagan

However, several definitive Nyaunyan features are missing in monument no. 684, such as the architectural syntagm. The architectural syntagm is the association of
three architectural elements: the royal palace, the crenellated wall of the royal city, and one of its gates. These three elements combined together represent the royal city from its center to its periphery. They create a meaningful unit in the development of the pictorial narrative: almost all Nyaunyan and later Konbaung narratives begin or end with this architectural syntagm.

The second Nyaunyan feature that is missing is the presence of a second dynamic plane, in which an action takes place. Indeed, in monument no. 684, all the scenes are located in the foreground, and the background of the register is occupied by decorative scrolls. The only exception is in the scene of the Great Departure, when the Bodhisatta comes to take his son Rāhula with him, before renouncing as it could awake Yasodharā and compromise his departure. Here, the second plane is occupied by a series of deities standing, but there is no action taking place, these deities border the scene, providing assistance (fig. 6). This second passive plane is nevertheless important because it integrates the narrative’s characters even though they are part of the background scene, rather than part of depicted developments like in the Tilokaguru (fig. 7).

4. Bagan & the Nyaunyan styles (17th and 18th c.)

Bagan has only four monuments with Nyaunyan narrative murals, while their number in the Chindwin region reached over 60 (fig. 2). Even the zone south of the Chindwin region, to which Bagan belongs, has only 13 monuments with Nyaungyan narrative murals. The four located at Bagan are monument no. 1267, the Taungbi monastery, monument no. 84 and the Hman Si Hpaya.

The monument no. 1267

As mentioned in the introduction, the importance of the murals in monument no. 1267 lies less in themselves than in the fact that they are evidence of transitional elements as the proto-Nyaungyan style morphed into the Nyungyan archaic styles. Several main features of the Nyaungyan archaic style are found in monument no. 1267: a large outline to define the different groups; compact shapes: very short necks and plump faces; the presence of the architectural syntagm depicted through the gate and its bell; and finally a detail: the garland of big flowers around the standing Buddha echoes

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Nyaungyan archaic murals as in the Shwe Bontha temple in Maibingun, dated to 1638 by an inscription (fig. 1).

The only other Nyaungyan style found at Bagan, the late classic style of the early 18th century is represented by the murals of the Taungbi monastery, of monument no. 84 and of the Hman Si Hpaya that do play not any a particular significative role in the history of painting in Burma.

Keys:
- the red frame corresponds to the Nyaungyan historical period from 1597 to 1752.
- the blue frame corresponds to the Nyaungyan pictorial period from the 2nd half of the 16th c. to the end of the 18th c.

**Figure 10.** Chronological classification of the Nyaungyan and Konbaung styles

5. **Bagan & the Anandian or Konbaung style I (c. 1780-1800)**

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5 This chronological classification of styles has been published in lesser complete versions in Munier-Gaillard 2010 p. 104 and 2013 p. 271. This last updated version has been published in Munier-Gaillard, Kirichenko and Minbu Aung Kyaing 2017, pp. 133-135.
Regarding the history of the painting in Burma, Bagan became again a site of crucial importance at the end of the 18th century when innovations inherited from the Siamese pictorial tradition revolutionized the history of painting in Burma (fig. 11). It is in fact more appropriate to speak of a "concerted revolution" because the Siamese innovations occurred within the traditional organisation of the murals’ spacial placement: the captioned, superimposed registers that characterizes the Nyaungyan tradition, originating back in the 14th century. Their outline remained the structural element of the mural space.

The terms Anandian style or Konbaung I style come from the murals of the Ananda Ok-kyauung where about ten innovative features are identifiable. (fig. 12). The other contemporary monuments where this Siamese influence can be found are the Upali Thein, the Kamma Kyaung U and the Shwe Kyaung U, all located at Bagan (fig. 13).
Figure 11. Mural from Wat Chong Nonsi, Bangkok, Thailand, late 17th-early 18th century. The numbers 1 to 5 refer to the elements found for the first time in Burmese murals in the Ananda Ok-kyauung, explained in fig. 12.⁶

Figure 12. Detail of the 1786-87 murals from the Ananda Ok-kyauung at Bagan, with some of the new elements assimilated from the earlier Siamese pictorial tradition (fig. 11). 1: bird’s-eye view, 2: partial perspective, 3: private life inside a building, 4: use of the terrace or courtyard as a pictorial plan, 5: foreshortening, 6 (not in fig. 11): people depicted from back

⁶ Regarding the bird’s-eye view and partial perspective found in the earlier Maha Thein Daw Gyi at Sagaing see Munier-Gaillard 2013, pp. 296-297. In summary, their use did not spread from Sagaing while it did from the Bagan (Ananda Ok-kyauung).
The Anandian or Konbaung I style from Bagan then spread outside Bagan in the first quarter of the 19th c. to become what can be defined as post-Anandian or Konbaung II style.

Like in the Ananda Ok-kyauk (fig. 12) private scenes are depicted inside buildings through their openings, and the terrace with its balustrade is used as scenic place to circumscribe the space (fig. 14). Chinese style trees and rocks found in the Ananda Ok-kyauk for the first time in Burmese painting are also found in Amyint post-Anandian or Konbaung II style (fig. 15).
Figure 14. Mural from Yot Son Phaya temple, Min Ye Gyi complex, Amyint, c. 1810-30.

Figure 15. Detail of the landscape from the Vessantara jātaka from the Ananda Ok-kyauung, and scene of the encounter between the Buddha Dipaṅkara and Sumedha, the Bodhisatta, from the Yot Son Phaya, Min Ye Gyi complex, Amyint, c. 1810-30.

Conclusion

Several of the key murals to illuminate the history of painting in Burma are located in Bagan. Monument no. 225 (mid 15th c.) and the Kyanzittha Umin (late 15th-early 16th c.? ) illustrate how the main narrative format evolved in time, replacing the
panel with the register. Although these two monuments cannot be linked, they illustrate an evolution that was to lead to the Nyaungyan narrative format of the 17th and 18th centuries: a format that is one of the pillars of the Burmese pictorial identity.

Monument no. 684 from the second half of the 16th century features the earliest known Nyaungyan components. Bagan was however marginalized in the Nyaungyan period in the sense that its influence remained localized.

Finally, at the end of the 18th century, through the Ananda Ok-kyang and its assimilation of the foreign pictorial tradition from Siam, Bagan became again the center from which the Burmese tradition renewed itself until the second half of the 19th century when the advent of European influence introduced new challenges.
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