Images of Brahma in the Buddhist Art of Bagan (circa 11-13th century)

Dr. Thein Lwin, Deputy Director General, Department of Archaeology, National Museum and Library: Ministry of Culture and Religious Affairs

U Min Han, M.A (AIHC&A, India), Independent Scholar
Introduction

This paper analyzes the role Brahma images in the Buddhist art of Myanmar with special references to Bagan Period (ca.11-13 century). It is focused on the manner in which Southeast Asian artists adapted styles from Hindu- Brahmanic arts.

Southeast Asia came under the influence of Indian civilization towards the end of the first millennium B.C. This as the starts of trading missions from India coming to the east and some of them come to Myanmar coastal regions and brought their religious images and icons for worship. By the beginning of the first millennium A.D, Buddhism has been firmly established in the Southeast Asian region mainly Thailand, Myanmar, Java and Cambodia. South-east Asia is a vast region of Asia situated east of India Subcontinent and south of China. Buddhism had created a great current of art in the region and Buddhist stylistic arts had great impacts on the religious and secular life of the people in those related areas for more than two millennia. Although the Southeast Asia Buddhist art as visual aids for propagation of the religious ideas reflects Hindu art influences, it was changed in the Southeast Asian context. The iconography of Southeast Asian Art strongly reflects Indian influences but Buddhist artists tried to change the idea with the identifying attributes and gestures of some Hindu deities as Buddhist icons. The ideals of physical representation present quite distinct local characteristics. The artists tried to visualize the spiritual perfection of the gods in different ways in Southeast Asia art. They tried to express the power and complexity of the gods on a superman scale, while lesser beings were expressed smaller. Regional styles emerged and developed. Whatever Buddhism has spread in Southeast Asian, they have given rise to a remarkable flowering of material culture.1 The iconographic features varied from country to country. Images are also important features of religious buildings. Design and decoration in Buddhist art historically has stimulated creativity in other artistic areas.

The figures of Hindu and Buddhist Brahmās early in Myanmar

The Hindu Triad comprises Brahma, Vishnu and Siva-Creator, Protector, Destroyer, representing the creative, preservative and destructive energies of God. Brahma embodies ‘Rajoguna’, the quality of passion or desire, the cause of creation. "In the late Vedic period of India, as a major god of Hinduism, with the rise of sectarian worship, Brahmā was gradually eclipsed by Vishnu and Shiva". 2 In classical times, it is evident in the doctrine of Trimurti which considers Brahmā, Vishnu and Shiva as three form of supreme and later sectarian myths describe Brahmā as having come forth from a lotus issued from Vishnu’s navel. 3 According to the Vedas, Brahma originated directly from the Supreme Being and is therefore one of the foremost gods, father of all men, and guardian of the world. In the Puranic literature, however, he is stated to have hatched out of the Golden Egg that lay floating upon

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1 Rawson (1978)
2 Bhattasali (1929)
3 Ethel Beswick (1960)
the primeval waters. A little later, he was portrayed as originating from a lotus flower the stem of which had arisen from Vishnu's navel."\(^4\)

![Figure 1 Hindu Triad of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva in India](image1)

**Figure 1** Hindu Triad of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva in India

Originally, Brahmā is depicted in art having four faces and with four arms, holding sacrificial instruments, lotus flower, scepter, a string of beads and the Vedas and on his mount, Hamsa (swan).\(^5\) In painting, he is depicted with a yellow complexion, wearing white garments and garlands.\(^6\) His attributes are slightly varied from region to region. In Buddhism, the part of many layered universe is the realm of pious celestial spirits. Especially in Theravada Buddhism, the Brahmāloka is said to consist of twenty separate heavens, **the lower sixteen (Rupa - Brahmā – Loka)** and **the higher four realms (Arupa - Brahma - Loka)**. Theravada Buddhists

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\(^4\) Thapar (1961,p-50)
\(^5\) Britannica Vol.II
\(^6\) Ethel beswick(1960)
believes that the rebirth in Brahma - Loka is the reward enjoyed by an individual who has accompanied great virtue with meditation. They are no creators. 

Figure 3  The 20 Realms of Buddhist Brahmas

Early in Myanmar, the figures of Brahmā were directly associated with Hindu Brahmā sculpted or depicted in three-headed form. The distinctive feature of the Brahmās in Myanmar Buddhist art have the Brahmās with only two hands but four headed and they are mostly portrayed or depicted Anjali or Namaskara mudra; holding an umbrella to shade the Buddha as an attendant with Indra; many Brahmās in role worshipping to the Buddha; realms of Brahmās with their prasada buildings; donating figures, etc. In Sriksetra, the finding of the figures of Vishnu standing on Garuda, the reclining Vishnu images and two stone yoni (no Linga), indicates that Buddhism and Hinduism coexisted peacefully in there. The three headed Brahmā seated on the double lotus plinth emerging from a single stem from reclining Vishnu can be seen clearly in Sriksetra. His four hands are visible, the two upper hands are raised up to the shoulders but the attributes in the hands are not clear. The two lower hands are Anjali mudra that became the typical character of Bagan stone Brahmās. Another Brahmā figure in Sriksetra was the relief with central seated Buddha, hands in Dhammacakra mudra is flanked by two disciples. In pedestal below, Brahmā with three-head, kneeling, eye closed, hands in Namaskara and hair in topknot, with Indra (on right). It is an almost identical stone relief image of Brahmā in Buddhist art in Myanmar.

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7 Buddhist Terms(2003)
8 Dr. Than Tun
9 Charlotte Gallowway (2016)
The two figures of reclining Vishnu were also found at Thaton. The Brahmā figures have slight differences in wearing crown, hands and legs postures, plinth and dressing on each. The three heads are visible on upper right but only two hands. Dr. Ray remarked that they seem belong to about the 9th-10th centuries AD. These sculptures were blown up by the Japanese, into many fragments, in Rangoon University Library.

The next interesting figure was found at Kawgon Cave in Karen State clearly visible three heads and sitting pose of Brahmā is exactly similar to Thaton. In comparing the Brahmā figures before Bagan period, there can be seen slightly different styles in some postures of arms but in the same manner.

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10 Taw Sein Ko (1892), F.O Ortel (1892)
11 Dr. Ray (p.47) 12 ASB (1958 Pl.14)
12 ASB (1958 Pl.14)
The Sandstone Brahma Figures in Bagan

Although Bagan inherited Hindu art and architecture, Bagan artists greatly changed to create a Myanmar Buddhist art form of their own. However, the Brahmanical images of Bagan were found right from the earliest period down to the decline and fall of Bagan in the late 13 century. According to the inventory of Bagan Pagodas, the total number of ancient monuments are 3122. But the only example of Hindu temple was “Nat HlaungKyaung.” There can be seen the reclining Vishnu figure with three Hindu gods while Brahmā seated on double plinth, Padamasana pose (leg), Namaskara mudra (arms), three headed and headress is closely similar to Sriksetra Brahmā figure. N.R.Ray said that "Brahma, the first god of the Brahmanical Trinity, has been able to command very little influence in Burma. He seems to have had no temple and, as an independent deity, very few adherents too. He has been represented as we have seen, with Visnu and Siva on the Anantasayya relief form Thatoñ, Hmawza;” Kawgun, “Nat HlaungKyaung” and Bagan Archaeological Museum.

Figure 6  Sandstone Buddhist Brahmas (ca. 11-13 century), Bagan Archaeological Museum

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13 Dr Than Tun  
14 Hla Gyi Maung Maung  
15 Dr.Ray (p-64)
Ananda, the most famous temple in Bagan, is decorated with nearly 1500 relief plaques, carved out of single blocks of stone or made of green-glazed terracotta. Among them, eighty stone carvings show the scenes from the life of the Gautama Buddha. In these so sculptured accounts, the three headed Brahma figure can be seen in original plaque No. 13/16/17/18/49/50/72. In these figures, the skill of Bagan artists in creating perfectly proportionate Brahma figures in Theravada Buddhism can be seen as follows -

- The scene showing the Bodhisattva seated on gold net supported by the four Brahmās.
- The scene showing the Bodhisattva stepping to the ground and a Brahmā holding an umbrella over him on right.
- The scene showing Brahmā named Gadikara, offering the folded monastic robe on a club to Bodhsattva.
- The scene showing the Brahmā after offering to the Buddha.
- The scene showing the Bodhisattva seated under the tree with Brahmā (on left) and Indra (on right).

The original plaque No (17) and (18) have a similar theme with plaque No (16) (see fig - 12/13). All these Brahmā with three heads are similar to the Hindu god Brahmā but the ideal of physical expression in art form is quite different from the Hindu art.
The other three-headed Brahmās, fifty-one in number, are located in Mye-Bon-Tha-Phayahla pagoda in Bagan. In the chamber of Pagoda, along with the bases of the throne of Buddha statues, there are recesses with single sand stone, three fully visible heads, three broad Jātamakuta merging into one, seated in Padamasana, and doubtless Namaskara mudra. Most of them are superficially damaged, and exactly similar to Brahmā figures now at Bagan Museum.
The Brahmā figures in Nan-Phaya temple are famous for its unique feature of decorative artworks which adorn the four pillars of the interior chamber. Each pillar has two reliefs of Brahmā skillfully executed with floral designs. The posture of Brahmā is *Rajalilasana* or Majestic Royal Pose *ardhaparyankasana* within a lovely forest of lotus. The faces of these Brahmās are more mobile than those of other Brahmā in Bagan. Carved from the stone blocks; they are reminiscent of the stone carving techniques of Java and Cambodia.

Especially, Buddhism was flourished in Bagan period during the 11th century to 13th century A.D. The numerous stupas, temples and monasteries were witnessing the people of Bagan. Originally most of the walls and vault ceilings of monuments in Bagan were adorned with mural paintings. "The earliest murals at Bagan, which are dated to the 11th century, have strong stylistic similarities with the pictorial art of northeast India, the Bihar-Bengal region, notably Nalanda-Bodhgaya. There were

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16 G.H. Luce (1969, p-212)
17 Strachan (1989)
18 Pichard (2002, Vol II)
both push and pull factors involved in the arrival of Indian art styles in Bagan at this time. The growth of a Buddhist regime would have naturally attracted artists and architects experienced in creating Buddhist works. After the decline of Buddhist sites in India, or at the very least in the creation of an environment in which Buddhists generally, including artisans, would have been motivated to find a more accepting the culture. At Bagan, the imported Indian models were assimilated and transformed into genuinely local formations.

The paintings of Brahmā images are found at a lot of temples such as Ananda temple, Abeyadana, Lokahteik-Pan temple, Gubyaukgyi, GubyaukNgae, Wini-Dhor temples, Phaya-thon-Su and temple No. 480. In Abeyadana temple, there are seven Tondoes each on the west and east walls: their 14 deities all moving north, as if to pay their respects to the main Buddha in his Shrine. The Brahmā image has three heads, but two hands in Namaskara mudra and riding on his vehicle Hamsa on the west wall, near Northwest corner associated with other 6 Hindu deities along the fringe of central pillar is definitely said Brahmā in Hinduism.

![Figure 11 Hindu Brahma riding on his vehicle, Hamsa in mural painting at Abeyadana Temple in Bagan](image_url)

However, on North and South exterior wall of sanctum, the images of Brahmās related to Theravada Buddhism have very distinctive features. Scenes depicting the Buddha in descent from Tavatimsa, the Brahmā (on left) images can be also seen at Gubyaukgyi, and Loka Hteik-Pan temple.

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In the paintings of Vini-Dhor temples have Brahmās associated with Theravada Buddhism. Inside the inner shine of temple No-653, the vault ceiling is fully painted with Brahmā - Loka; the Brahmās seated inside Prasada buildings with glosses stating their names and life-span of each one and painted in black ink, showing notable creativity of artistic work in Buddhist art. The images of Brahmā in phaya-Thon-Suu and temple No-480 are also remarkable in Bagan. The most distinctive feature of Brahmās related to Theravāda Buddhism also can be seen at Lokahteik-Pan Temple. The three-headed Brahmās are worshipping to Dusa-Ceti located in their heaven. In the temple, the Brahmā holding an umbrella (on Left) and the three-headed Brahmās worshipping to the Buddha (on Left-below) are also interesting as the Buddhist Brahmās.

Figure 12 Buddhist Brahmās worshipping Dusa Ceti located at Brahma loka (left) - (Loka Hteik Pan Phaya) and the rows of Buddhist Brahmās

The most distinctive and the biggest paintings of Brahmā can be seen at the vault ceiling of the four Entrance gates of Ananda temple. Comparing the four with other
Brahmā images found in Bagan, these can be said to be exactly associated with Buddhism, which means not Hindu Brahmas in the features.\textsuperscript{21}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure13.jpg}
\caption{Figures of Buddhist Brahmas at Ananda Temple in Bagan}
\end{figure}

\textbf{Conclusion}

In conclusion, originally the figures of three headed Brahmā have been found at Sriksetra and other places in lower Myanmar. In Bagan Period (ca.11-13century), the Bagan artists created the idea and stylistic form of Brahmā which were expressed in the Theravada Buddhist texts. Although they changed the attributes and gestures of Brahmā image, they left the three heads basically unchanged but their remarkable art has historically stimulated creativity of the Brahmās in Buddhist art as an attendant of the Buddha and pure-human being form in features of Brahmā after Bagan Period.

\textsuperscript{21} U Min Han (field records,2017)
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