The Significance of the Buddha Footprint in the Bagan Metropolis

Su Latt Winn
Asst. Curator, Zaykabar Museum
ABSTRACT

Buddha footprints can be found at the pagodas and the temples of Myanmar since the Bagan period (11th -13th centuries A.D). It is thus the earliest evidence honoring the Buddha footprints in Southeast Asia.

In Bagan, the Buddha footprint can be divided into free standing so called “isolated footprint” and mural painting types. Both forms continue after Bagan, but at Bagan, the mural painting type is more frequent due to the custom of placing Buddha footprints on the ceiling of temple entryways. This use is unique in Southeast Asia. It is also at Bagan that the footprint begins to depict the 108 auspicious sings on the soles of the Buddha’s feet.

The Buddha footprint thus illustrates the theme of this conference in how it connects to many surrounding countries and changes over time reflecting fluctuating relations. However, it also highlights the local character of Bagan’s religion and art in its wider exchange network in comparing Bagan footprints of the Buddha with those in Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka and China.

Introduction

Buddha footprints depicted the existence of the Buddha in multivalent ways to show footprints that support the presence of the Buddha who actually lived or touched the ground rather than the figurative representation. When the Buddha image appeared, the footprint was transformed to become an isolated cult object. The tradition of venerating the Buddha footprint spread from India throughout Asia. The earliest Buddha footprints probably started in Bagan, Myanmar at 11th century, then the practice spread to Sukothai, Thailand. Sukothai period could be regarded as “the golden ages of Buddha footprint in Siam”. In Cambodia, the veneration of the Buddha footprints came from Thailand.

Buddhism in the Bagan Metropolis

Bagan is the first Myanmar Empire where Theravadha Buddhism flourished during the 11th century to 13th century period. King Anawratha (1044-1077 AD) conquered Thaton (Lower Myanmar) and brought the thirty sets of Tipitaka back to Bagan. Theravadha Buddhism began to develop more elaborately when the written Tipitaka arrived in Bagan. The texts supported the meaning of religious structures such as temples, pagoda, inscriptions, Buddha images and mural paintings etc. These religious materials still exist while we no longer have the texts. It is also the case that such materials always maintain a certain stability. Especially, Bagan artists attempted to illustrate the Jātaka stories of the historical Buddha and Buddhist doctrines in their


06/12/2017
murals of the temples for interior decoration. Besides, the artists wanted to transmit messages about the Buddha and Buddhism for the visitors who visited the temples. Therefore, the pilgrims could learn the Buddhist teachings and doctrines form the mural paintings. The murals were skillfully reinterpreted by the Pāli texts and for people who could not read, the depictions were easier to understand than the literary form.

The creation of Buddha footprints have been developed in conformity with the other Buddhist arts. The majority of footprints reflect textual influence from Sri Lanka and then the artists created their own style and decoration. Combining the source of Pāli texts and architectural creations taught Bagan society about Buddhist teachings and doctrines.

**Iconography of the Buddha Footprint**

The many Buddha footprints from Bagan can be classified into at least three different forms which are an image of the soles of the Buddha’s feet, an isolated object for worship, and as painted on the ceiling of the religious temples. These three depicted forms are unique examples of Buddhist art. The first form shows the significant physical features of the Buddha. Account for the *Abhisamayalamkara* Pāli text, the Buddha belong to 32 significant physical features and 80 attributes, which are major and minor characteristic of Śākyamuni Buddha. But all of these signs are not easy to create in the sculpted image; therefore, the artists selected about 20 signs as the ideal form of the Buddha image when they carved. The footprint is also a significance *laksana* that identifies the Buddha as an incomparable person who carries these 108 auspicious signs with the thousand-spoke wheel “Cakka” on the soles.

The earliest list of 108 auspicious symbols (also known as *Buddhapādamaṅgala* in Pāli) described by the two mentioned early texts from Sri Lanka; “the *Samantabhaddika*” written by the Venerable Upatissa during the 5th century A.D, and “the *Jinalankara-tika*” written by the Venerable *Buddharakkhita* in 11th century A.D. Each text provides the lists of the 108 auspicious symbols on the sole of Buddha; however, the *Samantabhaddika* refers to Metteya (future Buddha) and the *Jinalankara-tika* mentions about the Gotama Buddha (Śākyamuni) differently. According to Dr Sailer, the earliest illustration of 108 auspicious signs on the Buddha footprint started during the King *Dhatusena* period (455-473 A.D). However, the early tradition of Buddha footprints in Sri Lanka used to describe up to eight auspicious illustrations. Although the *Buddhapādamaṅgala* has been recorded in Sri Lanka texts, the visual record of complete set has not yet been found in Sir Lanka. The

---

2 Min Thu Won, “Culture Magazine”, Vol.1, April, 1997, Ministry of Culture, Yangon, pp. 51-53
4 eight auspicious illustrations:

06/12/2017
earliest example of 108 auspicious marks in artistic representation has been found in Bagan period, which are mainly based on the *Jinalankara* Pāli text.

Although the 108 auspicious symbols are impossible to depict in the Buddha image, some of the early Buddha images used to describe the *Cakka* on the the palms and sole of the image since Puy period. It seems that the earliest complete signs on the sole of the reclining Buddha image have appeared first in the Bagan period. There are many reclining Buddha images in Bagan area, however the only reclining Buddha image from Kok-thi-naryon consists the painted of 108 symbols on the soles. Note on this image that the image is reclining on couch by placing his left foot on the right foot equally. Unfortunately, only a few symbols have remained on two-third of the left sole because the cement detached from the sole. By observing the remaining symbols, this pattern probably was an early type because it is similar in layout to the earliest sculpted footprint from Lokananda pagoda.¹ The *Cakka* is located on the middle of the sole and sixteen Brahma higher celestial being worlds have been place on the heel (Figs. 1, 2).

![Figure (1), Buddha footprints contain on the soles of reclining Buddha image at Kok-Thi-Nar-Yon temple](image)

According to the Quagliotti, the prints are depicted on the bottoms of the feet of the large Buddha image which is usually reclining in *Mahāparinibbāna* posture.² However, the reclining Buddha images are mostly demonstrated by the two postures such as resting posture and *Mahāparinibbāna* posture.³ Both postures often depicted the 108 auspicious marks on the soles of the great reclining Buddha images in later periods.

The second form is an isolated object for worship which is probably the common practice for the lay devotees. The footprint is the most venerated sacred object because several Buddha footprints had been imprinted as seals by the Buddha in

---

¹ Now in the Bagan Archaeological Museum in Bagan
² Quagliotti, “Buddhapada”, p. 87
³ The resting posture is normally created as the Buddha is lying down by supporting his right hand and the *Mahāparinibbāna* posture is generally demonstrated as the Buddha is reclining on the pillow by keeping his head to the north.
person during his life time.\textsuperscript{1} The real Buddha footprints are limited in quantity; therefore, the isolated Buddha footprints have been recreated by devoted artists. The cult Buddha footprints can be divided into two forms, which are \textit{pāribhogika-cetiya} and \textit{uddissaka-cetiya}. The first form is directly connected with the \textit{Tathāgata} himself and the second one is created by image maker for commemoration.\textsuperscript{2} There is no trace of \textit{pāribhogika-cetiya} in Bagan, however the \textit{uddissaka-cetiya} of the Bagan stone artwork is the best example for the later period. The sculpted sandstone slabs can be found inside the pagoda yard or near the entrance of the temple. The source of the material for the sculpted footprint was easily obtained from the neighbor areas. The brown-sandstone has been used for the footprint in early Bagan period while the red-sandstone widely used in the late Bagan period.\textsuperscript{3}

**Bagan Buddha Footprints**

The earliest so far discovered and finest isolated Buddha footprint in Bagan, Lokananda Buddha footprint, scholarly dated about mid-11\textsuperscript{th} or 12\textsuperscript{th} century A.D. This is the left footprint of the Buddha which was made from a brown-sandstone slab and the set of auspicious illustrations was based on the \textit{Jinalankara} Pāli text (Fig-2). The depiction of the 108 auspicious marks is as follows; the small Cakra located at the center and the size of the toes is nearly same which have natural lines like a conch shape.\textsuperscript{4} The upper part of Cakra has vertically 5 facts and horizontally 9 facts, and the lower part has vertically 2 facts and horizontally 9 facts. There are 18 facts at the left and right of the Cakra; besides, the 27 facts are located at the heel etc.

\textsuperscript{1} According to the Buddhist traditions, the three original footprints are located in different places where one is from Sri Lanka (Adam’s Peak) and other two are from Myanmar (Shwezettaw, Minbu district).

\textsuperscript{2} Claudio, “A mirror reflecting the entire world”, p. xxi

\textsuperscript{3} Win Maung (Tampawady), Research of tradition and maters associated with Myanmar culture), Yangon, Pan-myoo-tayar Sarpay, June 2006, p. 306

\textsuperscript{4} This conch shape totally transmitted as “a conch” after Bagan period
The next isolated form is a pair of cult footprint, the example of this type can be seen at Shwe-zigong pagoda and Ananda temple (fig-3). Both contain 108 auspicious symbols which come from the Jinalankara Pāli text like Lokananda Buddha footprint. The composition of Buddhapādamaṅgala illustrated as the clockwise direction i.e. the mark number one starts from the space left under the fifth toe (little toe) and the marks are arranged in a centripetal ring going clockwise on the left sole, the right sole is opposite layout. These two are the earliest pair of cult footprint in Bagan, normally this type used to depict at the ceiling of the temples.

In Bagan area a pair of Buddha footprints in mural form is found on the ceiling of the temples. According to Strong this shows the impure part of a person (probably the feet) placed above the purest part of other’s (probably the head), describing the
absolute superiority and complete purity of the venerated one.\textsuperscript{1} According to this logic, the footprint of the Buddha has to be placed on the ceiling at entrances to religious temples. This tradition has been originally started in the Bagan period and it became the most significant type of Buddha footprint in Bagan metropolis. Although the tradition of painted footprint on the ceiling became extremely popular in Bagan, it does not exist elsewhere in Southeast Asian art.

The painted footprint stands for not only interior decoration but also for the amulet object to protect evils for the person who passed under it. An assertion echoed by U Aung Kyine (Min Bu), who refers to the ceiling footprint as a “symbol for prevent and protect to danger or harm”.\textsuperscript{2} By placing the footprint on the ceiling, the lay devotee was already humble by themselves under the Buddha’s feet. Pichard also states that “the footprints decorating side by side the center of the ceiling within a quadrangular or circular motif that may appear in the form of petals”.\textsuperscript{3} Therefore, the painted footprint can be seen at least a pair on the main hall’s ceiling or four pairs on the ceiling of each vestibule to the main hall. The artist used to draw the footprint, amulet symbol, in the center of the arch with the twenty eight forms of Buddha, a series of circular pattern, and floral design etc. This type is generally without auspicious symbols on the soles because it was probably used as protective emblem rather than veneration object. The toes are turned to the main Buddha image in the central shrine, which means the footprint is symbolic bearing on the main image (Fig. 4).

\textsuperscript{2} Aung Kyine (Min Bu), “The history of Lokananda pagoda”, Yangon, Pyi-Thu-Amar Sarpay, August 1992, p. 6
\textsuperscript{3} Quagliotti (1998), “Buddhapadas”, p. 196
Cosmological symbolism of the Footprint

The footprint, moreover, tells the story of the Buddha’s exceptional character such as \textit{Buddhapādamaṅgala}, which represented the cosmologic themes. The entire world system is contained in the 108 auspicious symbols of the Buddha footprint such as the Mount \textit{Meru}, the four oceans, the sun and moon, the Himālaya, and the universe itself.\(^1\) According to the Claudio Cicuzza’s analysis of the relationship between the cosmological patterns and the Buddha features,

“the Mount \textit{Meru} shows the quality of his body (…), the Himālaya represents the physical body of him (…), the sun (\textit{suriya}) is a name of the Blessed One (…).\(^2\)

Moreover, the celestial divine hierarchy and the mundane symbols also include among the 108 auspicious signs. In the group of the celestial divine hierarchy symbols are also included the six abodes of the Deva, the sixteen Brahma realms, and the Brahma with four faces. In the same way, the mundane symbols contain \textit{Manussa Loka} (human world), and \textit{Thata Loka} (animals world) such as human, animal and plants etc. Therefore, these \textit{Buddhapādamaṅgala} seem to illustrate the map of the whole universe.

The visual evidence (fig.5) clearly shows this relationship illustrated on the ceiling of the Winido temple (Temple no. 659/340). The two big circles are parallel one the ceiling of vestibule, one is cosmological illustration and another one is footprint demonstration. These two tell the history of the cosmography, because both contain the upper levels of the cosmos such as a mount \textit{Meru}, a mountain range going around the universe, four islands, and the great ocean etc. The cosmography has often seen in Bagan because it could explain that the Buddha occupies the ruler position at the center of the cosmos.\(^3\)

\(^2\) Claudio Cicuzza, “A mirror reflecting the entire world”, p. xxxv
Ceiling Footprints

The 12th century stone inscription, recorded painting the footprint on the ceiling. In this inscription it says that

“The Buddha’s footprint of various strange marks is painted with gold and (many) colors so that it would be a marvel to look at”¹

According to this record, the artists used to draw the painted footprints with beautiful design pattern, color arrangement, and detailed decoration. Moreover, it gives much knowledge about the tradition of cult Buddha footprint in early period. According to the system of drawing, for example Hlan-Kya temple (Fig- 6), the framework is more prominently decorated rather than the footprint. The pair of plain footprint is circled by the square shape frames which are not only very beautiful detail design but also attractive color arrangement. This is not colorful one however We can see clearly all of the symbolic illustrations because of the skillful color arrangement of the artist. The inner frame is a lotus floral design which is surrounded by water pots. The pots were laid down in front of the monks who are holding the robe; it means the monks offer these pots to the Buddha footprints. Each corner of the inner frame has a stupa which probably refers to the Buddha’s tooth relic stupa. The outer frame is of a diamond shape design of lattice fences and banners fly on the top of the fences. This enclosure represents as “here is the sacred place”, which is normally used for the religious ceremony until the present day. The overall drawing seems to demonstrate the veneration ceremony of the isolated Buddha footprint, including devotional activities of the devotees. Therefore, the visitors who visited the temple, could share in the veneration practice of the Buddha footprints, just like the painted figure on the ceiling of the temple.

¹ Than Tun, Dr, “The Buddha’s Footprints in Burma”, Journal of Asian and African Studies, No.28, 1984, Tokyo, Tokyo Gaikokugo Daigaku
Finally, this essay is going to introduce the most significant example of Buddha footprint in Bagan metropolis. Recently, a pair of significant Buddha’s feet was discovered by the U Win Maung (Tampawaddy). It is placed inside the cave of mountain base where is located the west of Myit Chae Township, one mile away from Tant Kyi Mountain. The big stone feet are placed in front of the Buddha image as the uddissaka-cetiya. According to U Win Maung, it is dated to about 11th century A.D. Among the pair of the Buddha’s feet, one is replica because it was lost long time ago. The upper parts (the feet) have a small stupa and *kalasa* pot, and the feet put on the lotus throne. It can be seen that they have a complete set of 108 auspicious symbols on the sole when the feet are uncovered from the throne (Fig-7). Moreover extra 14 facts of monks and elephant figures are also added among the auspicious symbols. The list of the symbols is similar to the Lokananda Buddha footprint except the extra 14 facts. The worship of the Buddha’s feet is probably the only one, not only in Bagan but also in Myanmar because similar objects have not been found anywhere else. According to this example, the veneration of the feet also flourished beside the cult Buddha footprint.

**Stone Feet of the Buddha**

Figure (6) Buddha footprints mural painting on the ceiling of Hlan-Kya temple
Summary

To summarize, I have attempted to demonstrate the significance of the Buddha footprint in Bagan metropolis with unique examples of Bagan Buddhist artworks. Bagan period became the center of Theravada Buddhism on behalf of the King Anawratha. In Bagan period, Buddhist art and architecture were highly developed and the cult of the footprint also became the major tradition. Excellent examples of Buddha footprint can be seen in different forms and significant concepts. Among them, is the rare example, even in Bagan area -- the Kok-Thi-Nar-Yon footprint and the feet of Buddha are almost unique in the Bagan metropolis. Kok-Thi-Nar-Yon example could be the earliest one for the reclining Buddha image and the Buddha feet are also extraordinary form of cult object. Moreover, the painted footprint on the ceiling is a unique tradition of Myanmar, which has been created in Bagan period. The painted footprint gives an account of interesting concepts that have been interpreted differently by various scholars. Therefore, this is the early source of the cult footprint that has continued to flourish in Myanmar ever since.
References


Than Tun, Dr, “The Buddha’s Footprints in Burma”, Journal of Asian and African Studies, No.28, 1984, Tokyo, Tokyo Gaikokugo Daigaku


Win Maung (Tampawaddya), Research of tradition and maters associated with Myanmar culture), Yangon, Pan-myo-tayar Sarpay, June 2006