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The Significance of the Buddha Footprint in the Bagan Metropolis

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ABSTRACT

The origin of Buddha footprint was as an aniconic symbol which represented the presence of the Śākyamuni Buddha in the early narrative stone reliefs. It furthermore bridges the aniconic and iconic period in Buddhist art. The practice of making Buddha footprints spread from India throughout Asia, especially in Southeast Asia: Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. Footprints are also seen in Sri Lanka and China with examples given of contemporary uses. The earliest evidence for honouring the Buddha with the making of footprints is Myanmar since the Bagan period (11th -13th centuries A.D). The Bagan footprint begins to depict the 108 auspicious signs on the soles of the Buddha's feet. The Buddha footprint thus illustrates the theme of this conference in connections to many surrounding countries and its changes over time reflecting fluctuating relations. Most importantly, it highlights the local character of Bagan's religion and art in its wider exchange network.

Keywords: Buddha footprint, Buddhist Art, ceiling footprint, 108 auspicious signs

Introduction

The anthropomorphic form of Buddha was not visualized prior to the iconic period in the early Buddhist art. Many European and Indian scholars had been addressed about the concept of “*Anicomism*” and aniconic representations of the Buddha. Indian artists used the aniconic symbols such as the tree, the wheel, the footprint and the stūpa to represent the “monstrous abstention” of the Buddha because they believed that the Buddha is the Blessed One who would not be exact in visible form.¹ The footprint supported the presence of the Buddha as someone who actually lived or touched the ground rather than the figurative representation. This example can be seen obviously in the narrative art works where the Great Stūpa such as *Bharhut*, *Amaravati* and *Sachi* stūpa.

When the Buddha image appeared, the footprint was transformed to the object of a cult or following. The earliest footprint was plain or sometime contained auspicious symbols such as *Nandiyavatta*, *Svastikas*, *Cakra*. The full list of the 108 auspicious symbols had been described in the Pāli texts from Sri Lanka. Although these texts were Sri Lanka origin, the footprint with 108 auspicious symbols were not seen in the early times even in Sri Lanka. The earliest footprint with 108 auspicious symbols discovered in Bagan metropolis, which dated around mid-11th or 12th century A.D, the *Lokananda* Buddha footprint. During the 12th century in Bagan, the creation of Buddha footprint became a ‘golden age’. Nowadays more than 3000 monuments in different types and sizes remain, many containing unique mural paintings. The most common placement of the footprints are as a pair on the ceiling in the entryway of the temple. The *Winido* temple and *Hlan-Kya* temple footprint paintings are good examples to show the concept of ceiling footprint in Bagan period. Moreover, the latest information

¹ Alfred Foucher, “The Beginning of Buddhist Art “, Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1917, p.6-7

about Buddha feet within *Gu Taung Taw Ya* monastery within Bagan metropolis, may indicate further ways that the Buddha footprint art makes links between Bagan and Southeast Asia.

Beginnings of Buddhism in Myanmar

The Buddhist community in Myanmar link India with their various traditions and Buddhist art, having received from *Maha Thera Sona* and *Maha Thera Uttara* who were monk missionaries in the Buddhist Era 235. They came to *Suvannabhumi* (now *Thaton*) in *Ramannadesa* (Lower Myanmar) to spread the Buddhism out there.² Therefore, Buddhism flourished in lower Myanmar and gradually carried throughout the whole country.

Bagan is the first Myanmar Empire where *Theravada* Buddhism flourished during the 11th to 13th century period. The main reason that King *Anawratha* (1044-1077 AD) conquered *Thaton* (Lower Myanmar) and brought the thirty sets of *Tipitaka* back to Bagan. *Theravada* Buddhism developed more when the written *Tipitaka* arrived in Bagan. Such a text was supported and encouraged works for religious structures such as temples, pagoda, inscriptions, Buddha images and mural paintings. These religious materials exist longer rather than the palm-leaf texts because such materials always maintain the certain stability.

Especially, Bagan artists attempted to illustrate the *Jātaka* stories of the historical Buddha and Buddhist doctrines in their murals of the temples for interior decoration. Besides, the artists want to give the message about the Buddha and Buddhism for the visitors who visited the temples. Therefore, the pilgrims could learn the Buddhist teachings and doctrines from the mural paintings. The murals were skillfully reinterpreted by the Pāli texts however they are easier to understand than the literary form. Buddha footprints were an important part, to set the mind of the pilgrim at ease.

The creation of Buddha footprints has been developed in conformity with the other Buddhist arts. The majority of footprints made are based on the textual influence from Sri Lanka and then the artists created the own style and decoration. Combining the source of Pāli texts and architectural creations teach the Bagan society about Buddhist teachings and doctrines. Bagan Metropolis mainly connected with India for the Buddhist art, then, their Buddhist network was spread out to Thailand and Cambodia for the mutual influences of Buddhist art.

The tradition of the footprint veneration

The veneration of the footprint is a common devotional practice in many religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and other beliefs. The footprint could be regarded as the

² Khin Maung Nyunt, Dr. "Bagan and its Global Connections: Pre and Post Buddhist Periods", Early Myanmar and its Global Connections An International Conference, 13-15 February 2012, Bagan Archaeological Museum, Myanmar, P. 4

physical evidence of the Vishnu, the Buddha, and the God. Thus, the devotees have been worshipping the footprint as the divine object, for examples, in Buddhism the footprint was described the iconic cult object by the term “*Pādacetīya*”. Similarly, the Hindu pilgrims have been regarded the footprint as the corporeal extension of the Vishnu, so-called “*Viṣṇupada*”. Islamic culture also pay homage the place where imprinted the footprint by the Prophet, namely as the “*Qadamgāh*”. Likewise, the “holy footprint” of Jesus Christ could be found in many churches, they represent the special events of Jesus Christ.³ The most importantly, the footprint is the genuine traces of the venerated one, the Buddha, due to the reasons that they are a kind of the Buddha’s relic of use and commemoration, his physical significant factors so called “*Uttama Purisa lakṣaṇa*” (Thirty-Two Characteristics of a heroic man), his walking path, his royal renunciations, and so on.

The veneration of footprint may have started from touching the feet of a person who is respected one with the head, the ritual practices of the Indian tradition. According to the Strong expresses the impure part of a person (probably the feet) is placed upper the purest part of other’s (probably the head), described the absolute superiority and complete purity of the venerated one.⁴ Therefore, this custom shows their great respects to the gods and deities and humbles themselves in front of them. Moreover, Hindus believe that Vishnu is the highest gods, thus, they place his foot above the head of the demon.⁵ They used to paint the footprints of the Vishnu and Hindu gods in front of the main door, to protect the bad luck and bring the good fortune to their household. The Buddhists had been inherited this concept and practice of the worship of the Buddha footprint, probably the example of Buddha footprint murals on the ceiling remain in Bagan today.

Depiction of 108 symbols at the Bagan footprint

The earliest list of 108 auspicious symbols (also known as *Buddhapādamaṅgala* in Pāli) is described by two mentioned early texts from Sri Lanka: “the *Samantabhaddika*” written by the Venerable *Upatissa* during the 5th century A.D, and “the *Jinalankarātika*” 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 the *Metteya* (future Buddha) and the *Jinalankarātika* mentions about the *Gotama* Buddha (*Śākyamunī*) differently (Dr Sailer (n.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

³ Cicuzza, Claudio, “A mirror reflecting the entire world”: the Pali *Buddhapādamaṅgala* or ‘Auspicious signs on the Buddha’s feet’, Bangkok, Lumbini: Fragile Palm Leaves Foundation, 2011, p. xvii, xviii

⁴ Strong, John S., “Relics of the Buddha”, the United Kingdom, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004, p. 85

⁵ Debjani Paul, “Antiquity of the *Viṣṇupada* at Gaya Tradition and Archaeology”, East and West, Vol. 35, No. 1/3 (September 1985), pp. 2,4

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

The 108 auspicious symbols are mainly placed within a grid system, and they are ringed to the core. The marks are usually going through clockwise on the right foot and anticlockwise on the left. The Cakra is located in the center, the upper part of the Cakra has 9 cells horizontally and 5 cells vertically, therefore there are totally 45 cells above the Cakra. The lower part of the Cakra also has 9 cells horizontally and 2 cells vertically, thus totally 18 cells under the Cakra. Left and right of the Cakra have 9 cells each and the heel has 27 cells. Therefore on the sole of the Buddha consists of the 108 auspicious symbols serially. By the later Bagan period, all of the 108 auspicious symbols are depicted on the huge Cakra which is located in the centre of the footprint, so called centre composition.

The Significance of the Buddha Footprint in the Bagan Metropolis

In Bagan period, the Buddhist art and architecture have been extremely developed moreover the creation of Buddha footprint also became the major activity for religious artworks. Although the veneration of Buddha footprint started before Bagan, it made simple and primitive form which was just craved on the natural rock. *Yah Han Na* Buddha footprint from *Thaton*, for example, it was probably made *Suvannabhumi* period before Bagan.⁶ It is the right footprint of Buddha, which made concaved sandstone block and without any symbols on it. *Suvannabhumi* metropolis probably has more document of Buddha footprints, however, most are unexplored in this area. Bagan metropolis, the following period after *Suvannabhumi*, has been created the excellent example of Buddha footprints because they received the sacred Buddhist texts from *Thaton*, moreover, the mission group⁷ of King *Kyanzitha* brought the tradition of veneration Buddha footprint from Bodh Gaya back to Bagan. Account for these reasons, numerous footprints can be seen different forms and significant concept within the religious compound.

The earliest so far discovered and finest Buddha footprint in Bagan, *Lokananda* Buddha footprint, scholarly dated about mid-11th or 12th century A.D. This is the left footprint of the Buddha which made by the brown-sandstone slab and the set of auspicious illustrations were based on the *Jinalankara* Pāli text (Fig- 1). The compositions of 108 auspicious symbols have been illustrated as the anticlockwise direction i.e. the mark number one starts from the space right under the first toe (big toe) and the marks are arranged in a centripetal ring going anticlockwise on this left footprint. Typical of this, 108 auspicious symbols are placed on the sole of this footprint as follow; the small *Cakra* located at the center and the size of the toes is nearly same

⁶ Jacques de Guerny, "Buddhapada: Following the Buddha's Footprints", Thailand, Orchid press, 2014, pp. 6-7

⁷ In the late 11th century, King Kyanzitha sent the missions to Bodh Gaya for preparing the Mahabodhi temple (cited by Jacques de Guerny)

which have natural lines like a conch shape⁸. The upper part of *Cakra* has vertically 5 symbols and horizontally 9 symbols, and the lower part has vertically 2 symbols and horizontally 9 symbols. There are 18 symbols at the left and right of the *Cakra*; besides, the 27 symbols are located at the heel etc. The footprints are almost without frame in Bagan period, the two dragons used to flank the footprint after Bagan period.⁹

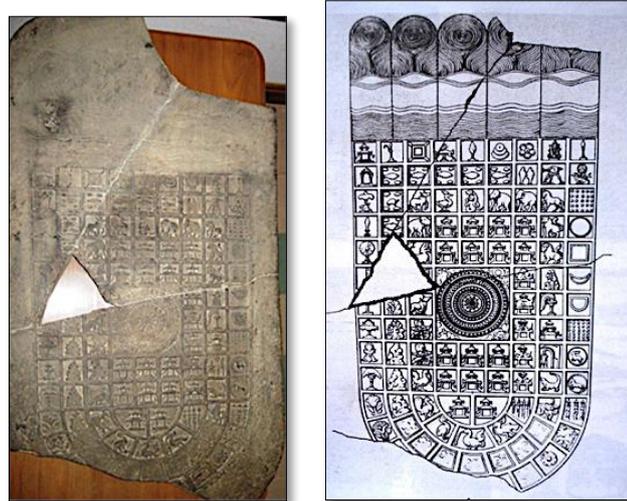


Figure (1) The Buddha Footprint at *Lokananda* pagoda

The next type is a pair of footprint, the example of this type can be seen at *Shwe-zi-gon* pagoda and Ananda temple (Fig-2). 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 footprints in Bagan, normally this type used to depict at the ceiling of the temples. After the Bagan period, a single footprint is more popular than the pair.

⁸ This conch shape totally transmitted as “a conch” after Bagan period

⁹ This tradition comes from the Dragon King who requested the Buddha to leave his footprint on the bank of the *Nammada* River.



Figure (2) The Buddha Footprints at *Shwe-zi-gon* pagoda and *Ananda* temple

In Bagan area where is often found a pair of Buddha footprints in mural form on the ceiling at entrances to religious temples. This tradition has been originally started in Bagna period and the most significant type of Buddha footprint in Bagan metropolis. Although the tradition of painted footprint on the ceiling became extremely popular in Bagan, this evidence is almost totally absent in Southeast Asian art. The painted footprint did not stand for decoration only, it used for the amulet object to protect evils for the person who passed under it. This assertion is echoed by U Aung Kyaing (Kyine; Min Bu), who refers to the ceiling footprint as a “symbol for prevent and protect to danger or harm”.¹⁰ By placing the footprint on the ceiling, the lay devotee was already humble by themselves under the Buddha’s feet. Jacques de Guerny also agreed this amulet concept, he described that “*Buddhapāda* paintings were located to protect visitors and discourage demons”.¹¹ However, Dr Sailer has clarified that the ceiling footprints probably used as meditation devices.¹² He explained, “The footprints were one part and the second part was the Buddha image. The Buddhist devotees, as they entered the sacred area, looked up at the pair of soles of the Buddha to concentrate themselves as meditation devices before entering the Buddha image”.¹³

The painted footprint can be seen as 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 in the center of the arch with surrounded by the Brahma and Andra, a series of circular pattern, and floral design etc. This type is generally without auspicious symbols on the soles because it 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. 3). According to some scholars, these footprints were probably used as amulet symbols to protect the devotees, because all footprints are not prominent among the others decorations. Among the four, t two pairs contained tiny symbols and the another two only have

¹⁰ Aung Kyaing (Kyine, Min Bu), “The history of Lokananda pagoda”, Yangon, Pyi-Thu-Arnar Sarpay, August 1992, p- 6

¹¹ Jacques de Guerny, “Buddhapada: Following the Buddha’s Footprints”, p- 11

¹² Dr Sailer (n.d), “The World of the Buddha Footprint: Introduction”, p-2

¹³ Dr Sailer, interview, 07 Dec 2017

empty grids. Therefore, these are probably used for discouraging demons for the devotees who visited to the temple.





Figure (3) Buddha footprints mural painting on the ceiling of each vestibule at temple no.475

According to the system of drawing, for example in the *Hlan-Kya* temple (Fig-4), the artist used as meditation devices because only a pair of footprint located at the central hall of the temple. The overall drawing seems to demonstrate the veneration ceremony of the Buddha footprint, including devotional activities of the devotees. Therefore, the visitors who visited the temple, could receive the veneration practice of the Buddha footprint from the painted figure on the ceiling of the temple. Moreover, they may have prepared themselves to enter the shrine when they focus on the footprint. The size of the footprint is enough to see clearly from the ground and the framework also prominently decorated in it. 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. They used only two to three colors however we can see obviously all of

the symbolic illustration 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 divine 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 put banner 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.



Figure (4) Buddha footprints mural painting on the ceiling of *Hlan-Kya* temple

The footprint, moreover, tells the story of the Buddha's exceptional character such as *Buddhapādamaṅgala*, which represented the cosmologic themes. The entire world system contains in the 108 auspicious symbols of the Buddha footprint such as the Mount *Meru*, the four oceans, the sun and moon, the *Himālaya*, and the universe itself.¹⁴ According to the Claudio Cicuzza the cosmologic symbols and some physical features of Buddha are related to each other. Cicuzza's analysis notes that Thai texts and some tantric texts described that

"the Mount *Meru* shows the quality of his body (...), the *Himālaya* represents the physical body of him (...), the sun (*suriya*) is a name of the Blessed One (...).¹⁵

Although Myanmar texts on the Footprints did not directly deal with this side of the symbols' meanings, the auspicious marks are revealed the Buddhist cosmology. Examples include the celestial divine hierarchy and the mundane symbols that are among the 108 auspicious signs. The group of the celestial divine hierarchy symbols contains the six abodes of the Deva, the sixteen Brahma realms, and the Brahma with

¹⁴ Strong (2004), "Relics of the Buddha", Pp. 94-97

¹⁵ Claudio, "A mirror reflecting the entire world", Pp. xxxv, xxxvi

four faces. In the same way, the mundane symbols contain *Manussa Loka* (human world), and *Thata Loka* (animal world) such as human, animal and plants etc. Therefore, these *Buddhapādamāṅgala* 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. This two tell the history of the cosmography, because both contain the upper levels of the cosmos such as a mount *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.¹⁶



Figure (5) Buddha footprints mural painting on the ceiling of *Winido* temple

The 12th century stone inscription, again, recorded about the painted footprint on the ceiling. In this inscription mentions 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”¹⁷

Account for this record, the artists used to draw the painted footprints with beautiful design pattern, color arrangement, and detail decoration. Moreover, it gives much knowledge about the tradition of Buddha footprint in early period.

Finally, this essay is going to introduce the most significance example of Buddha footprint in Bagan metropolis. Recently, a pair of significance Buddha’s feet

¹⁶ Gordon H. Luce, “Old Burma Early Pagan”, New York, 1969-70, vol. 3, pl. 353a

¹⁷ Than Tun, Dr, “The Buddha’s Footprints in Burma”, *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, No.28, 1984, Tokyo, Tokyo Gaikokugo Daigaku

discovered by the U Win Maung (*Tampawaddy*). It is placed inside the cave of mountain base where is located at *Gu Taung Taw Ya* monastery, the west of *Myit Chae* Township, one mile away from *Tant Kyi* Mountain (Fig-6). The big stone feet are placed in front of the Buddha image as the *Uddissaka-cetiya*. According to U Win Maung, it dated 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 a complete set of 108 auspicious symbols on the sole when uncover the feet from the throne (Fig-7). Moreover, extra 14 cells of monks and elephants figure also add among the auspicious symbols.

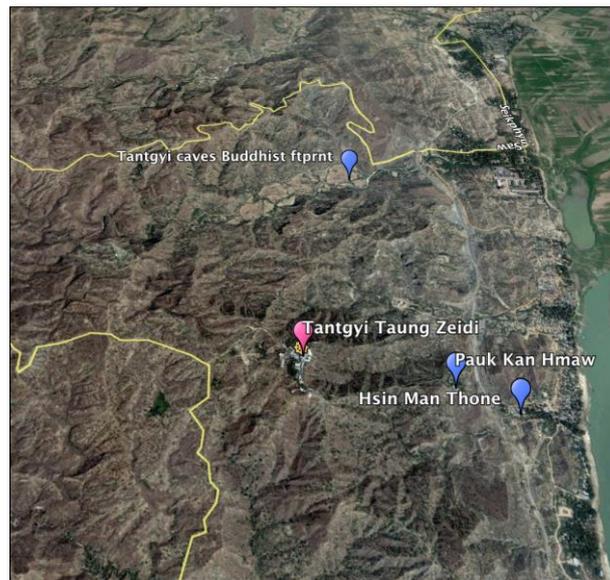


Figure (6) The location of *Tant Kyi* cave Buddha footprint north of Tant Kyi Taung Zeidi (Courtesy Ko Phyo Phae, 12.2017)



Figure (7) Feet of the Buddha with 108 auspicious symbols at the Tant Kyi Taung caves

However, this footprint is similar to the Khmer art rather than the Bagan style, for example, the footprint from Angkor Wat because it is a convex carved stone footprint. The Angkor War footprint also describes the auspicious marks in the grid type, the *Cakka* is in the middle, and the symbols arrangement at the heel is the same as the Buddha feet from Bagan. The artistic representation of footprint in Bagan is normally create concave form because the Buddha printed his footprints on the ground or rock i.e. a mark made by pressure. The worship of the Buddha feet is probably only one not only in Bagan but also in Myanmar because it has never seen before in anywhere. Therefore, these feet could not be 11th century and Bagan style, it probably made when the Buddhist connections between Bagan and Angkor in the 12th and 13th centuries.

To summarize, this paper attempt to demonstrate the significance of the Buddha footprint in Bagan metropolis with unique examples of Bagan Buddhist artwork. According to the political and religious history of Bagan, the veneration of Buddha footprint could link with *Suvannabhumi* metropolis and Sri Lanka. Although in the Mon State areas known as *Suvannabhumi*, it is very rare to see the cult of the footprint. Numerous footprints can be seen in the Bagan metropolis, and from then onwards, it continues to be developed in the following periods. In my view, the common use of the footprint on the ceiling in Bagan reflects the innovative nature of religion during that period of time. Thus, the use of the footprint on the ceiling may have a Bagan origin. We found that there existed many visual records, which are very interesting arrangement at the ceiling of the temples. The footprint on the ceiling of the entrance are mostly used to discourage demons. However, the central shrine ceiling footprint seems to be bearing the symbolic message as a meditation device before the Buddha image. Thus we may have some idea from it how the spaces of the temple were used. As I mentioned above, the devotee received the Buddha as he or she knelt down to pray in the open space directly below the footprint.

As discussed in the previous section of this paper, the conception of ceiling footprint being played as significant role in Bagan's *Theravadha* Buddhist society. It contains a variety of meanings: it could be interpreted to have been effective, somewhat like an 'amulet object' for the lay devotees who visited to the temples. The footprint in this way was the primary meditation devices for the devotee's preparation process to enter the shrine. Applying these concepts for the ceiling footprints, the religious interpretation is my view more meaningful than the interior decoration. The ceiling footprint is the most significant creation in the Bagan metropolis because it can be seen only in Myanmar among the Southeast Asia countries. Likewise, the evolution of 108 auspicious symbols started in Bagan period, and over time spread of Southeast Asia countries. There was footprint connection between Bagan and Khmer art visible in Buddha feet at *Gu Taung Taw Ya* monastery. At Bagan, however, with the creation of the Buddha footprint, it became a major tradition.

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