Bagan, Rakhine and Northeast India: Comparing Crowned Images

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ABSTRACT

There are striking similarities between the crowned images at Bagan, in the Rakhine region, and in Northeast India. This paper focuses on the design of the crown, the *mudra* and the material used for the image to illustrate the close relationship between images of these three areas. Crowns are seen on images of the Buddha, bodhisatta and other venerated figures. While Bagan is mostly commonly compared to Northeast India, this preliminary investigation highlights how the geographical proximity wider stimulated stylistic interchange. It also shows the need for further research to understand how these similarities fit in a wider picture of social, economic and political exchange between the Rakhine region, Bagan and Northeast India both during the Bagan (11-13th) heyday and that of Mrauk U (15th-17th) century CE. This brief study introduces some of these images to illustrate their variety within the Buddhist cultures of these regions.

**Historical background of Crowned Images in Myanmar**

The crowned Buddha – standing and seated - images can be seen in every kingdom of Myanmar history, with different styles including crown, dress, ornaments, using various materials. Some were imitated with their similarities and differences highlighting exchange with each other. Materials included wood, stone, wood, stone, bronze and other metals. This paper compares crowned images at Bagan with those in Rakhine using three main themes:

1. Historical background and characteristics of Bagan crowned images
2. Comparative study of Pala and local crowned images
3. Religious (monastic travellers) and royal (political acts) that encouraged stylistic interchange

*Figure 1a,b - Crowned Standing Wooden Images 12th to 13th century CE at the Bagan Museum*
Bagan Crowned Images: wood and bronze
In Bagan, crowned Buddha images and bodhisatta can be seen in sculptures, votive tablets, and in paintings (Lopetcharat 2007: 70-73). Although many wooden standing crowned Buddha images have been collected, seated and walking ones are rare. The number of sitting crowned Buddha images, is appreciably larger than that of the standing ones. One reason for this may be that most standing crowned Buddha images are made of wood, while seated crowned Buddha images are cast in bronze. Thus, the wooden images may have been abundant but have not survived over time. The wooden image may, however, have been the earliest Bagan style of the crowned Buddha image in Myanmar.

Mudra and crown
The most common right hand gesture of the crowned images is the Varada mudra, with the left hand in three styles. The first hand gesture sees the hand raised with the forefinger up in the “Mahakarunika mudra” in which “the left hand put on the chest at heart level” and “Vitarka mudra” (Figure 2 a,b,c) (Picron 2010: 111, Tun 2001: 22). The raised forefinger of the first style is often assumed to be the Buddha pointing to his disciples Sariputta and Moggallana (Matics 1998:134, 135).

![Figure 2 a, b, c - Wooden Standing Crowned Images at Bagan of the 12-13th century CE (image on left)](https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/38528)

The possibly earliest crown design is a seven or eight leaf-like pointed crown, but the crowns became more and more elaborate over time. Also, the “Usnisa” transformed through centuries, the face became rounder, and the hair on the brow-ridge, the Urna, disappeared in later periods. In terms of facial expression, all are looking down, the space between the eyebrow and the eye is narrower and narrower in later periods, the
nose is more prominent, and the lips became more upturned and the smile more pronounced. In addition to ornamentation of the body, while initially it is adorned with necklaces, and bracelets or armlets, in later images the dresses or royal robes were decorated and broad elaborated girdle were added as well. The sides of the royal garment hanging from the arm to feet formed waves and gilt was often applied (Figure 2 (3)). Virtually all images of Buddha from Bagan stand on the double lotus throne, as seen in of Pala art of Northeast India.

The carving or casting of a crown required detailed workmanship whether the image was made of wood, bronze or carved from dolomite stone as seen with the Andagu. These small donatory objects, rarely more than 22 cm, were intricately carved, with the stone allowing a high degree of detail. In the two examples below, the form of the crown and the decoration are finely depicted.

![Figure 3 Andagu showing different styles of crown for the central image of the Buddha: found in a field west of the Shwezigon in 1922 (left) and Dabayin (right, courtesy U Win Maung (Tampawaddy)) Luce 1969: plates 400, 401](image)

The creativeness of the standing adorned Buddha appears to have begun in Bihar. For example, the crowned Buddha from Bihar, below, dated to the 11th century, depicts an ornamented image surrounded by four smaller images, each an important scene from the Buddha’s life. The inscription on the pedestal may be later than the
At Bagan, the adorned Buddha is seen from the eleventh century on (Picron 2010: 112). While images of the Buddha in Myanmar are more closely related to those of India than to mainland Southeast Asia to the east, it is noteworthy that the Bagan adorned Buddhas are first group in mainland Southeast Asia outside the Khmer empire (Ibid).

Crowned images of the Buddha, bodhisatta and other figures such as Brahma are seen not only in sculptures but also in paintings at Bagan. For example, one is seen at Winido-hpaya, and another is at monument No.645 in Bagan. Numerous painted images on the vaults of the Winido-hpaya depict crowned Bodhisatta with offerings amidst floral foliage. In paintings, the crowned images wore monastic robes, not regalia, and there are no ornaments on body (Picron 2003: 21). Thus, the crown was a significant way of honouring the Buddha, being the only adornment. Other paintings at the Winido-hpaya (IMP649) depict a crowned image of Brahma (Pichard 1994). Both are in same position, Bhumisparsa mudra, but crown designs are different.
Rakhine crowned images

Some of the most elaborated type of crowned Buddha images can be found in the Rakhine area. From its beginnings until 8th century C.E., Rakhine stood independently under its own rulers or kings (Hall 1950:57). Many Buddha images, crowned and uncrowned, have been found in Rakhine area with crowned images mostly in Bhumisparsa and Dharmacakra mudra. The standing crowned Buddha has not been found there to date to the author’s knowledge with further information welcome. The production of crowned images from this region reached its peak in the 15-17th century at the kingdom of Mrauk U.

Most crowned Buddha images were cast in metal. These initial crowned Buddha images were influenced by Pala Sena art of Eastern India which influenced both Bagan and Mon kingdoms (Lopetcharat 2007:270). However, the metallurgy is not similar and they have their own characteristics of different kingdoms. Although there seem to be
some influence of Pala-Sena art, the facial appearance of Rakhine images recall Indo Aryan images more than Bagan images. They may have directly reflected from the patterns of Pala-Sena art particularly for crowned Buddha images (Lopetcharat 2007:271). However, more research is needed on the stylistic comparison and metallurgy.

The crown changed by the beginning of 13th century” (Gutman 1979: 50). The iconography was derived from late Pala art, and also influenced by Northern school of Tibet (Ibid). The crown inside is the Usnisa-like round stupa, and around the base of the crown band is decorated by beads (Thar 1979:56). Gutman (1979) also notes that “the crown is five pointed with short ribbons rising behind, with the fillet at the base beaded and the intact triangular projections decorated with floral motifs”. These varieties can be seen on images of the Buddha from Rakhine and others found at Bagan, highlighting exchange between these two kingdoms in the 15-17th century CE. The crown shows a clear separation between the points of the crown and the tall Usnisa.

![Figure 8- Crowned Rakhine images of the 16th century from Bagan Museum](image)

In Rakhine crowned Buddha images can be divided into two: crowned Buddha images wearing royal attire, and some wearing a monastic robe. In most cases, the chest, arms and legs are shown with jewellery or adorned through the depiction of the folded robe. In some cases, adornment is also seen on the feet (San Tha Aung 1979, plate 39). The crowns had been changed through centuries, and it became localised later as the influence of other art schools reduced and the Bagan and subsequent Bamar art styles became dominant. Initially, Rakhine crowned Buddha images appear to have influenced by the Pala-Sena art forms of eastern India especially Bodhgaya, Nepal, and less by other Southeast Asia countries such as Thailand and Cambodia.
Numerous crown Buddha images in the 11th and 12th century were made of metal. This pattern continued at Mrauk U. Some authors suggest the crown is more elaborated than the body in the period between 11th and 13th centuries (Lopetcharat 2007). However, the Rakhine images depict the Buddha with an elaborate crown and numerous ornaments on the body. Some images have a similar crown style with ribbons emerging from both sides of the crown. Their pendant ears somewhat recall China’s crowned Buddha images (Menzies 2001: 65, ph.47). They were adored with royal garb attaching at the waistband. Somewhat unusually for Myanmar art in general, the back side of the throne was engraved the earth goddess, “Prithivi or Vassumdhari”. It seems that the image represents Sakyamuni Buddha when the earth goddess comes and testifies to his attainment of perfect knowledge, witnessing by touching the earth. The facial expressions, the nose and the lips of these images were not generally copied in later Myanmar art styles.

Other images were cast in bronze and produced with a combination art styles. These include crowned images of the Buddha found at Bagan. The crown and unisa relates to Thailand styles. (Thar 1979: 119). The image has eyebrows, eyes and a full round face that are characteristic of the Myauk U Rakhine ethnic style. Gutman (1979: 51) also assumed that the crown and the ornamentation was directly imitated from “the Ayutthayan style” in the 16th century. Not only the crown style but also the facial features were imitated from Ayutthaya during the 15th to 16th century. However, Thar (1979) states these facial features are the Mrauk U art, and assumed this image was produced during these periods. These unisa designs are similar with Bagan ones although there were different in some other parts. Besides the decoration on the torso is more elaborated. Moreover, the crown is different, and the flanges annexed on both sides of the crown like ribbon, and also the unisa is absent in this image. The facial expression
seems subdued in this example. The neck is short, characteristic of the late Bagan period. This image seated on double lotus throne.

It can be seen that designs of the crown or diadem designs changed from period to period from some different areas in Myanmar. Looking at seated and standing images and styles of crowns spans many centuries with more research in progress to supplement these introductory comments. The earliest crowned Buddha images in Myanmar are approximately late 11th to 13th century with a peak time of producing them in different regions is from the 15-17th century and the 18-19th century. The decoration style, distinctive royal attires, and the several crown designs highlight the evolution of crowned Buddha images, and the differentiation among these images in diverse religious environments.

Mission of Kyanzittha to Bodhgaya
During the reign of King Kyanzittha (1084 – 1113 CE), a mission went to Bodhgaya to restore and endow the Mahabodhi temple. As a result of this, Pala styles from the southern Magadha influenced Buddha images of the 11th to 12th centuries in Bagan (Crocco 1998:134). As seen in the image below taken in the 1880s, the repairs of Kyanzittha were redone many times but the authenticity of the site is not questioned (British Library Online Gallery). In the middle of 12th century, the art style became pure “Burmese” as localised stylistic changes occurred (Crocco 1988: 134). Thus, while it is the case that “Bagan ateliers drew upon a wide range of artistic sources from outside Burma, and Burmese artists rely greatly on the art of the Pala realm in eastern India, between the 11th and 13th centuries”, there is also evidence for the development of localised styles (Stadtner 1989:74).

Figure 10- Photograph taken Joseph David Beglar in the 1880s of repairs at Bodhgaya (http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/apac/photocoll/t/largeimage58196.html)
In addition to connecting India and Myanmar in past, Arakan or Rakhine, a coastal kingdom, had maritime network with the Bay of Bengal (Leider 2015:35). As a result, it can be assumed that the Buddhism and religious art directly spread and influenced from India to Rakhine and Bagan and vice versa. The Pala realm itself stretched from Bihar state through modern Bangladesh bordering coastal Burma, the Arakan or Rakhine region. Arakan was never under Bagan domination, but both may have been active within the many networks of Pala influence.

Some scholars suggest that the crowned Buddha image emigrated to Bagan in the eleventh century, referencing a gilded stone Buddha image in Bhumisparsa mudra wearing ornaments similar to Bihar and Bengal assumed as the first place of the crowned Buddha images in India (Picron 2010:109). The image was put inside the shallow niche of the Shwe –Chan –Thar – hpaya, a wooden shrine erected at the northwest corner of the enclosure in the precinct of Ananda temple finished by King Kyanzittha. Other scholars claim that Rakhine is the original and earliest place producing the crowned Buddha in Myanmar. While not stated as a controversy, according to the date of the crowned Buddha images given, the earliest crowned Buddha image can be found in Rakhine area. (Thaw, T.H. (1963), Aung, S.T. (1979/2016), and Thar, K.Y. (1979). The survival of wooden images in Rakhine has, more than at Bagan, been hampered by climatic conditions, leaving our body of evidence within other materials such as stone and bronze. Until further investigations in Rakhine can be under taken, the earliest surviving documented crowned images are from Bagan. These were closely influenced Pala-Sena art iconography and style, perhaps as well directly introducing the crowed Buddha images. A final answer remains to be determined as the exchange routes of Bagan may logically have crossed the Rakhine area. As this preliminary paper has shown, however, the close geographical proximity of Bagan, Rakhine and Northeast India regions has stimulated a diverse and rich artistic heritage well deserving of further research.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


**Online Resources**


**Myanmar Resources**


