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Buddha's life in Konbaung period bronzes from Yazagyo

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This is a study of a collection of narrative bronzes retrieved from a cluster of ruins (see figure 1) at Yazagyo, in the Kabaw Valley, in a remote area of Northwestern Myanmar/Burma. The valley lies between the Upper Chindwin River and the hills which separate Burma from Manipur. Yazagyo is on a side road from the Myanmar-India Friendship Highway, 35 kilometres north of Kalaymyo. It was formerly protected by several kilometres of earth banks and moats, surmounted by a stockade. The bronzes come from a total of six ruined buildings, five of which have since been demolished.

The Yazagyo collection (see figure 2) is kept at the Minkyaung (royal monastery). Figures in this distinctive style, generally posed on rectangular open-frame bases and representing events in Buddha's life, are a near-ubiquitous feature of reliquary deposits of the 1752–1885 Konbaung Period.¹ The ruins also yielded oval silver boxes filled with small fragments of an uncertain substance which are now preserved in

1 We take the periodisation published in Chew 2005 pp. 256–257 as the standard for art periods in Post-Bagan Upper Burma. These are First Ava Period (including the latter half of the 16th century when Ava was subsidiary to Toungoo), 1364–1597; Second Ava Period (also called the Nyaung Yan period after the first king of that dynasty), 1597–1752; Early Konbaung Period (in which the capital moved from Shwebo to Sagaing, Ava and Amarapura), 1752–1819; Late Konbaung Period (in which the capital moved back to Ava, again to Amarapura and finally to Mandalay, where the last king, Thibaw, was deposed and exiled by the British), 1819–1853.

Figure 1. One of the ruined pagodas near the Min-kyaung monastery.

fragrant oil. They are believed to be significant religious relics. Two silver scrolls inscribed with the opening paragraphs of the *Vinaya* were found. One of these was dated 1883 (see figure 3).

The enshrinement of relics

A relic chamber² is a cavity in a pagoda, sometimes topped with a stone lid. Pagodas may have several such chambers. The earliest relic chamber in Burma to survive relatively intact into modern times was underneath the Khin Ba mound, a 7th–8th century CE ruin excavated in the 1920s just inside the southeast wall of the Pyu city of Sri Ksetra. Two stone covers were found in the mound, indicating that the structure may at some time have held two relic chambers, or that a single chamber may have been re-used. Contents of the brick chamber included a silver reliquary with Buddha images in high relief

2 We use the term “relic” to describe any item placed in a relic chamber. This can include pieces of organic or inorganic material believed to be physical remains of Buddha Gautama, of past Buddhas, or of other holy people, sculptural representations of Buddha, votive deposits such as scriptural extracts, and personal objects such as gemstones or pieces of jewellery.

Figure 2. The contents of the relic chambers.

inscribed with the names of the four Buddhas of the present world cycle,³ silver stupas and models of trees, several dozen Buddha images mostly in *dhyana-mudra*, embossed *dvarapalas*, gold leaves bearing scriptural extracts in Pali, coins, beads and gemstones (ASI 1927: 171–181; Stargardt 2001).

At Bagan, Buddha images and votaries have been recovered from ruined buildings, but there is no record of a relic chamber surviving with its contents intact. This may be due either to pillaging through the centuries (Than Tun 1996) or to the recycling of enshrined materials. Buddhists across Southeast Asia, praying that their donations would last for thousands of years, have at times enshrined remarkably large quantities of religious materials. In CE 1480, more than 16,000 images of Buddha were enshrined in a single building at Phichit, in Thailand (Woodward 1997:21). Unlike wall paintings in temples or Jataka

3 The reliquary is on display with other finds from the excavation at the National Museum, Yangon.

Figure 3. Reading the 1883 silver scroll.

plaques on the exterior walls of pagodas such as those seen at Bagan, the contents of relic chambers were not meant to be viewed, except on the occasion of their enshrinement. The insertion of relics related to Buddha or Buddhism (the latter might be in the form of scriptural excerpts, for example) consecrates a building. In the Burmese context, it is now a *phaya* or holy thing. The same term is used for a Buddha image.

Reliquary contents represent a single dedicatory event. While the event may be datable, some of the contents may

be the result of redeposition. When devotees in the past have recovered objects from a ruin they have generally proceeded to re-enshrine them. Today, this does not necessarily mean the objects will disappear from view. The Botataung pagoda in Yangon, bombed in World War II, was rebuilt in concrete with an internal corridor after its concealed relic chamber was excavated (Ohn Ghine 1953). Its relics and various donated items remain on display in glassed-in compartments.

The earliest directly dated group of relics

The Konbaung period began in 1752 when the provincial leader Alaungpaya of Shwebo defeated a Mon army that had captured the capital, Ava, and founded his own dynasty. Silver scrolls dated CE 1763 describe the construction of the Shwebawgyun pagoda complex at Shwebo and mention the contents, including the scrolls, of several relic chambers endowed by Alaungpaya's four widows and his son and successor, Naungdawgyi. These chambers yielded hundreds of items ranging from granular material considered to be corporeal relics of Buddha, to votive offerings of gold and silver flowers, gemstones, and models of boats, guns and soldiers (ASI 1904: 145–167). The treasures included a set of 28 silver Buddhas with Bodhi trees, the Buddhas of the present and previous world cycles. Representations of the principal incidents of Buddha Gotama's life included the First Sermon in the deer park, the Mucalinda lake with a silver *naga*, Buddha under a jewelled shelter, Brahma offering flowers, the evil Mara riding an elephant, Buddha protected by a *naga* and Cincamana falsely claiming that Buddha had made her pregnant. The inclusion of these well-developed narrative elements suggests that this practice derived from an earlier period. Texts such as the *Mahavamsa* had provided at least since the 11th to 14th century Bagan period a model for the enshrinement of relics in its description of the construction of Buddha's stupa:

(t)he events during the seven weeks he commanded them to depict duly here and there in the relic chamber

... the encounter with the elephant ... the subduing of Alavaka ... of the robber Angulimala ... the naga-king (Geiger and Bode 1908: 204–205).

The historical context of the Yazagyo images

The reign of King Bodawpaya (1782–1819), a period of political and economic expansion, was accompanied by religious fervour and reform, a hallmark of which was a program of construction of religious buildings. When Bodawpaya established his capital at Amarapura in 1783, one of his earliest orders was that a *Shwe Gu*, a Golden Cave Temple, be constructed in every town in the kingdom. More than 200 were built (Royal Orders 1: xxv). The author of the *Sasanavamsa*, Pannasami, gives a long list of the monasteries Bodawpaya built for monks who were reputed for their piety, and adds that he could give a more extensive list, but his book would be too long (Ray 1946: 233; Law 1952: 131ff).

These royal construction programs were repeated in a smaller scale at the village level. In 1912, bronzes described by the Archaeology Department as possessing "... no interest from the aesthetic point of view and very rough in workmanship" were recovered from the rain-damaged Hledauk pagoda at Nyaunggon, a few kilometres north of Mandalay. This collection parallels that of Yazagyo. A glass vessel contained "seed-like things which pious Buddhists assert are relics of Buddha." The bronzes included Dipankara and Sumedha, the 28 Buddhas, the Nativity, the Bodhisatta in his chariot and the four ominous figures he saw, the jewelled walk, the jewelled shelter, Buddha sitting near Mucalinda Lake sheltering under the coils of the naga, the offering of the grass-cutter, the first sermon, and a "lying in state" version of the *mahaparinirvana* (ASI 1912: 149–151).⁴

4 Plate 69, Figure 4 of this volume provides a good quality photographic record of the finds. In 2008, the authors inspected a similar collection of bronzes, similarly recovered from ruins, at the Dipankara monastery at Kalaymyo. In 2005, Win Maung and Bob Hudson were shown a collection

From the time of Bodawpaya onward, bronzes were manufactured just north of the Amarapura palace complex, in the craft quarter of Tampawaddy, "copper-town," where the lost wax bronze-casting tradition has continued until today. The old Ava period bronze-making site across the river at Sagaing may still have been operating and a regional production center has been recorded on the outskirts of Monywa (Fraser-Lu 1994: 128; Hardiman 1912: 122). With at least three centers containing individual workshops, it can be expected that there would be variations within the broad convention of producing identifiable figures or scenes, either as individuals or as a tableau on a base. The crude nature of the bronze images suggests that they were not made for display but for enshrinement.

Each object represents a scene in the narrative of Buddha's life. The challenge for the craftsman was to represent a distinct event in three dimensions, without the aid of the captions often found in murals or Jataka plaques. Generally this involved a simple, literal presentation of the core elements of the story. The First Sermon in the deer park, for example, may be indicated⁵ by two deer sitting at Buddha's feet among his disciples (see figure 4). One departure from this approach is the presentation of the 28 Buddhas. These are often portrayed in murals each sitting under a distinctive tree,

of 221 items from a rain-damaged pagoda at Legyi village, 55 km south of Mandalay, which included dozens of repousse silver images of Buddha as well as a program of bronzes similar to those at Kalaymyo, Hledauk, the Shwebawgyun and Min-kyaung. The large volume of these bronzes deposited during the Konbaung period is also attested by the prevalence of the artifacts in antique shops in Burma. The British Museum holds a collection of bronzes of this period. Variants of the Great Departure and other scenes appear in Karow 1991.

5 In the depictions of the First Sermon, the Buddha is portrayed incorrectly in earth-touching mudra rather than in *dhamma-cakka*, with two hands at the chest, his fingers setting the wheel of dhamma in motion. The deer tell the canonical story. The technically incorrect Buddha figure is an indication, along with the holes in the bronze frames in which figures appropriate to a particular narrative can be inserted, of a workshop turning out generic bronzes in response to high demand (see also note 13).

Figure 4: The First Sermon (h. 13 cm).

accompanied by the name of the Buddha and perhaps the name of the tree.⁶ The bronze casters, like the silversmiths who supplied images to the Shwebawgyun (above), generally took a simpler approach, providing multiple figures with identical stylized trees above their heads (see figure 5).

6 The trees as depicted at Bagan are described in Luce 1969 I, 392ff and II, 317ff. I.B. Horner extensively discussed this topic with Luce in the preparation of her edition of the *Buddhavamsa* (1975), see esp. her introduction and pp. xxxvi ff. For the 18th century, Chew 2005 pp. 211–212 and Munier and Myint Aung 2007.

Figure 5: The 28 Buddhas (h. 7 cm).

The Yazagyo Images⁷

The images illustrate the Buddha narrative accepted in Burma from at least the Bagan period, and closely follow texts such as the *Buddhavamsa*.

⁷ The images held at the Min-kyaung monastery, bronze unless otherwise indicated with numbers of each version found, include: Dipankara (4), Nativity (3), the carriage (4), the old man (4), the sick man (4), the corpse (4), the monk (4), the Great Departure (5), death of Kandika (1), cutting the hair (5), Sotthiya (2), First Sermon (8), Buddha's funeral bier (5), repousse silver Buddha (6- two with silver trees), Buddha under a tree (22), Buddha standing on Mount Animiksa (5), Buddha walking on the jewelled path (5), Buddha sitting in the jewelled shelter (5), Buddha protected by the naga (4), Mara on an elephant (1), Alavaka (1), Nalagiri elephant (1), Cincamana (1), Nandopananda (1). There were also two repousse stupas, five silver boxes containing relics, two silver scrolls and the set of 28 Buddhas under diamond-shaped trees shown in figure 5. The images were collected from the ruins by local devotees. There is no reliable information about which items came from which structure.

Figure 6: Dipankara and Sumedha (h. 11 cm w. 16 cm).

1. Previous lives

The 28 Buddhas

The 28 Buddhas already referred to sit at the base of the trees under which they reached Enlightenment, an event which can only occur when this world is in a relative state of harmony and when they have succeeded in their determined endeavour, lasting for aeons, to fulfil the perfections to the highest degree (see figure 5).

Dipankara and Sumedha

This story is told both in the Sanskrit *Mahavastu* and in the Pali *Buddhavamsa*. In his previous life, the Bodhisatta was an ascetic called Sumedha. In the story, he offers flowers to the Buddha Dipankara, who was the first of the 28. The flowers are represented in this image by the garland held by the kneeling flower seller, who will be the Bodhisatta's wife in his final incarnation as Gotama. Sumedha, his hands in a prayer

position above his head, is offering himself as a human bridge over a patch of mud. Dipankara prophesised that Sumedha would become a Buddha in a future life. Here, Dipankara, the flame of enlightenment projecting from his head, is accompanied by monks carrying their bowls. This image shows a characteristic technological feature of Konbaung bronzes in which the problem of moulding a complex scene with a number of characters is solved by casting separate figures which are then placed in holes made for them in the base (see figure 6). Figures found loose in the Yazagyo reliquaries will fit several different bases representing different scenes. It may be that generic devotees in various poses were supplied by the bronze workshops.

2. Scenes from the life of Gotama Buddha

Nativity

Two consecutive events are depicted in this image. The mother of the Buddha-to-be, Maya, leans against the *sala* tree in order to give birth, supported on her other side by her sister. In the foreground, the child has taken his first seven steps, announcing his arrival to the world (see figure 7).

The Four Omens

The future Buddha, sheltered from the realities of life by his royal upbringing, leaves the palace in his carriage and sees an old man, a sick man, a corpse and a monk (see figure 8). These figures are cast separately. Four of each were recovered from the Min-kyaung pagodas. The old man leans on a stick. The sick man sits with one hand to his head, or with both hands on his knees, his misery communicated by the simple pose. The monk carries a fan. The corpse, often shown in gruesome detail in illustrations of the Konbaung period, and in modern illustrations that decorate monasteries or pagodas, is represented here by a coffin. The coffin style varies (see figure 9). The small coffin sitting alone, without bearers, still tells the story. The variation in poses suggests that the images in the Yazagyo reliquaries may have come from different suppliers.

Figure 7: The Nativity (h. 10 cm).

Figure 8: The Bodhisatta confronted by the Four Omens (h. 4cm–16cm).

Figure 9: Stylistic variations on the omen of the corpse (tallest figure 9 cm).

Figure 10: The Great Departure (h. 18 cm).

Figure 11: The horse Kanthaka (h. 7.5 cm).

The Great Departure

Siddharta has resolved to become an ascetic. He leaves the palace on his horse, Kanthaka, spirits muffling the horse's steps. The spirits, which in some other bronzes are shown as humanoid figures, are suggested here by sinuous lines extending from the hoofs of the horse. The servant and charioteer Channa clings to the tail of the horse, while the evil Mara unsuccessfully tries to block the way. The bronze illustrated (see figure 10) has two figures missing from the front, and there is no guarantee that the figure sitting in the third hole is original. In the five versions of the Departure found at Min-kyaung, Channa and the spirits are moulded or brazed to the frame of each, while there are between one and five holes in the frames for extra characters in the story.

Kanthaka dies

The faithful horse who pulled the carriage from which the Bodhisattva saw the four omens, and then carried him from the palace, dies of grief because he knows his master will never return. A similarly grief-stricken Channa kneels beside him (see figure 11). While the scene is often portrayed in paintings, this bronze version is uncommon.

Handfuls of grass

Soththiya⁸ offers the Buddha-to-be eight bundles of grass to sit on while meditating (see figure 12).

3. *The Seven Weeks*

Buddha spent a week meditating under the *bodhi* tree. At the end of this period, he attained enlightenment, indicating his defeat of Mara and the demon army by touching the ground with his right hand, calling the earth to witness. Several representations of this most significant moment, in repoussé silver over lacquer moulds, were found at Yazagyo (see figure 13) as well as bronze versions (see figure 14). In the second week, he stood looking unblinkingly (in Pali, *animisa*) at the *bodhi* tree (see figure 15). In the third, he walked along the jewelled pathway, or *Cankrama*. In the fourth, he sat in the *Ratanagara* or jewelled pavilion (see figure 16). In the fifth, he sat under a banyan tree⁹ belonging to the goatherd Ajapala.¹⁰ In the sixth,

8 Soththiya is variously described as a Brahmin or a man collecting material to thatch his house or to feed horses.

9 There are more than 20 images at Yazagyo of Buddha sitting under trees, which come in several different shapes. These may have been understood at the time they were enshrined to represent particular instances, and may have been placed next to figures such as Alavaka or Cincamana. However, the relic chambers when excavated were filled with mud, and any information about the placement of the images is lost. If contemporary practice is any guide, the placement of items in relation to each other and to auspicious directions would have followed a strict scheme.

10 Karow (p.155) has a bronze described as a "farmer taking his goats to the meadow," and it is tempting to suggest, despite its lack of provenance, that it may have been a reliquary item illustrating this episode.

Figure 12: Sotthiya offers a handful of grass (h. 9 cm).

he sat protected by the hood of the *naga* Mucalinda (see figure 17). During the seventh week, he sat under the linlun tree. Two merchants, Tapussa and Bhalika, who in the Burmese/Mon tradition are the founders of Rangoon, offered food.¹¹

¹¹ A 15th century Burmese version of the seven weeks is described in detail in Stadtner 1991.

Figure 13: The Enlightenment: repoussé silver over lacquer core (h. 18 cm).

Figure 14: The Enlightenment (h. 12 cm).

Figure 15: The Buddha looks back at the bodhi tree (h. 15 cm).

Figure 16: The Buddha meditates in the jewelled pavilion (h. 24 cm).

Figure 17: The Buddha protected by the naga (h. 10 cm).

4. *Eight Challenges, Eight Victories*

Buddha faced eight challenges. These were: 1, his ongoing battle with, and ultimate defeat of, the evil Mara; 2, converting the child-devouring demon Alavaka; 3, taming the wild Nalagiri elephant that had been sent to attack him; 4, converting Angulimala the finger cutting bandit; 5, disproving a claim by Cincamana, a woman from a rival ascetic group, that Buddha had got her pregnant; 6, converting the hermit Sisaka, a great philosopher who knew a thousand religions but was shown the true path by Buddha; 7, subduing and converting the celestial *naga* Nandopananda; and 8, travelling to heaven to convert the Brahma Baka.¹² There are representations of some of these among the Min-kyaung bronzes. Complex stories are reduced to simple images.

Mara is often shown in wall art mounted on his elephant Girimekhala and leading a vast army,¹³ but at Yazagyo the mounted elephant with an aggressively upraised trunk tells the story (see figure 18). The ogre Alavaka, identifiable by his protruding fangs, kneels in homage (see figure 19). The Nalagiri elephant, who had been encouraged by Devadatta to attack Buddha, is overcome by the Buddha's spiritual power and, like Alavaka, falls to his knees (see figure 20). Cincamana is often shown in Konbaung period wall art as pointing an accusing finger at Buddha. She was sent by heretics to claim, falsely, that Buddha had made her pregnant. In some versions of the story, a rat runs up her skirt and bites the string holding the object she has put there to pretend pregnancy. The bronze figure simplifies the imagery: breasts and belly are enough to identify her (see figure 21). Her punishment seems severe compared to the fate of some of the other "challengers." Alavaka, who ate his victims, and Angulimana, who wore a

12 These events appear in a medieval poem, the *Jaya-mingalar-gatha* or "song of victory and blessing," with a slightly different list of participants (see Houtman 1990: 120).

13 Plaques around the base of the Ananda temple at Bagan show various monstrous members of Mara's army of evil. Some have snakes coming out of their ears, mouths, noses or eye sockets.

Figure 18.

garland made from the fingers of those he murdered, both became *arahats* following their conversion. Cincamana went to hell.

5. The death of Buddha: lying in state.

The death of Buddha is represented here not as Buddha lying on his side propped up on one hand, but lying in state, his body prepared for cremation. Around the base of the bronze are perforations in which would be placed the separately-cast figures of devotees (see figure 22). In all the Konbaung period relic collections we have been able to inspect, the death of Buddha is represented by a funeral pyre.

Figure 19.

Figure 20.

Conclusion

On the assumption that the six buildings in the cluster from which these bronzes came were constructed around the same time, we suggest that they can be dated on the basis of the 1883 scroll to the latter half of the 19th century. At this time, the Kabaw Valley was becoming depopulated due to attacks by Chin tribesmen. Some villages were destroyed, others were abandoned, their residents moving to larger centers for protection (Carey and Tuck 1896). Yazagyo, surrounded by earthworks and a palisade, was one such refuge. While there are several clusters of Konbaung period pagodas at Yazagyo, the Min-kyaung group is in the geographical center, an auspicious position. The construction of the pagodas and the enshrinement of the bronzes to sanctify the structures was a standard expression of religious behavior, a means of accumulating merit for future existences. The timing and location hints that as they placed the images in the relic chambers, the donors might also have been hoping for a little protection from present dangers.

Figure 21.

Figure 22: The funeral pyre (h. 14 cm).

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Pamela Gutman was a pioneer scholar of Arakan, and an expert in the historical links between South Asian and Southeast Asian art. Her research ranged from Arakan to the “Pyu” system of Upper Burma, and from the first millennium CE to the nineteenth century. She died in 2015.

Win Maung (Tampawaddy) is a heritage architect who has restored buildings in Myanmar ranging from the Mandalay Palace to ruined pagodas. He has wide-ranging interests in Myanmar history and antiquity, and has published with international collaborators and among local research groups. The parenthetical addition to his name, Tampawaddy, distinguishes him from other people named Win Maung. It points to the suburb of Mandalay in which he lives, Tampawaddy or “bronze town.” Bringing a historical link to the theme of this paper, Win Maung is also a descendant of a minister responsible for bronze production in the government of the Konbaung kings. He can be reached at: winmaung.tampawaddy@gmail.com.

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