





## Hindu Iconography in Bagan



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### [ *Abstract* ]

This study focuses on the iconography of Hindu deities in Bagan period. As a country in Southeast Asia, Myanmar received her culture from Indianized culture. As aforesaid, sailors, traders, and settlers brought with them Brahmanism and Buddhism into Myanmar. A possibility is that local chiefs or the rulers invited Brahmans to conduct coronations, weddings, and burials in Brahmanical rites as they will much impressed by the Brahmanical thoughts and beliefs. Accordingly, Brahmanic icons as objects of worship are found quite in number of places, especially in Thaton, Bago, Vesali, Sriksetra, Bagan and Kawgoon. Apart from Buddhist iconography, the Brahmanic icons of various sects can be found in Bagan. Brahmanic deities are illustrated with Buddhist painting, which is a characteristic of Baganreligious iconography. Most of the scenes on Hinduism are to be found in NatlaungKyaung, Nanpaya and Shwesandaw Pagoda. Myanmar people, however, knowingly or unknowingly ignore some features of

Indian deities and eventually the icons are found in various places in Bagan.

**Keywords:** Hindu deities, Hinduism, Natlaung Kyaung, Nanpaya, Shwesandaw

## I. Introduction

Myanmar in history had its culture Indianized. The essential elements of Hindu culture were absorbed by the peoples, as the kingdoms, both big and small, were being established throughout the region (Majumdar 1955: 21). The Indianization most probably took place in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C., and it can even date further back, from time the land of Myanmar was peopled by the Pyu in the Ayeyarwady valley and by the Mon in Lower Myanmar.

The Brahmanism that came to Myanmar was represented by the two important sects—Sivaism and Vaishnavism. Brahmanical influence is seen in certain ancient place names in both Upper and Lower Myanmar. Among the Pyu cities, the City of Vishnu (Beikthano) was in ancient times used to refer to old Pyay or Hmawza, obviously a centre of Vaishnavite influence (Ray 1932: 8). Beikthano embodies Indian cultural influence vividly, honoring Vishnu, is the Hindu High God of Brahmanism, and consequently making Vaishnavism flourish (Than Tun 2000: 1). From this period, a gradual influx of Indian cultural influence may be observed in, religion, art, architecture, statecraft and social structure, though there was no adaption of the caste system.

Though they were not missionaries, sailors, traders, and settlers brought with them Brahmanism and Buddhism into Myanmar. A more likely possibility is that local chiefs or the rulers invited Brahmans to conduct coronations, marriage and burials in Brahmanical rites as they were much impressed by the Brahmanical thoughts and beliefs (Than Tun 2005: 35). These and numerous other similar references clearly indicate the existence of a considerable number of Brahmans in Myanmar courts—as priests, astrologers, and experts in house-building all

occupying positions of influence and importance. The Brahmanical community have their own gods whom they worship in accordance with their own religious rites. In these localities where the Indian element was permanently entrenched, either by a more vigorous commercial exchange or by settlement, it was likely that their gods have been housed in temples there. The advent of Brahmanism in Myanmar happened much earlier than that of Buddhism. Accordingly, Brahmanic icons as objects of worship are found in quite a number of places, especially in Lower Myanmar where it seems that the faith had a firm place in the local populace of Mon people. Brahmanic icons were found in Thaton, Bago, Vesali, Srikshehra, Bagan, and Kawgoon.

Apart from Buddhist iconography with its origins in India and connections with Hindu and Jain, the Brahmanic icons of various sects can be found in Bagan. The old Vedic gods of Indra, *Sūrya*, and so on, made their appearances in Bagan. The same is also true for other figures present in all arts of Bagan—Deva, Yaksa, Gandharva, Naga, Garuda, Kirtimuka, Makara, and Vyala. The Goddess *Lakshmī*, the consort of Vishnu, bathed by elephants, was a fertility emblem common to Vaishnavism and Buddhism and Jainism (Hillebrandt 1990: 243). Kyanzittha, claiming to be incarnation of Vishnu, was one of the most pious Buddhists who was said to have stood within the walls of Bagan. Shiva is not prominent in Myanmar, but was considered supreme in North Rakhine for centuries (Luce 1970: 203).

## II. Iconography of Vishnu

According to Hindu cosmogony, which has been largely borrowed by Buddhism, the god Vishnu rested from his labors on the coils of the Ananta Serpent, and the self-same Serpent encircles the foot of Mount Meru, the centre of the Universe (Taw Sein Ko 1920: 347). Vishnu as Ishvara is named *Nārāyana*, and represented as reclining upon the serpent *Sheshanāga*, who rests on the cosmic ocean. Brahmā is then born from a lotus that springs from *Nārāyana's* navel. The ten avatars of Vishnu are the

ten forms assumed by him, for the establishment of righteousness when need arises. These incarnations are *Matsya* (fish), *Kurma* (Tortoise), *Varāha* (Boar), *Narasimha* (man-lion), *Vāmana* (Dwarf), *Parashu-Rāma*, *Daś'aratharāma*, Krishna, the Buddha, and Kalki, who is yet to come (Coomaraswamy 1964: 10).

Vishnu sits on Garuda. He has one face and four or more arms. On his right, he holds an arrow, a rosary, a club; on his left, he holds a hide, a cloth, and a rainbow. He also holds a *cakra* (wheel) and *gadā* (mace). The *cakra* symbolizes the rotation of the world, the Wheel of Dhamma, the Wheel of Time, and the Wheel of the Planets. His *Vāharagaruda* is the mind pervading the bodies of all creatures. This is a popular theme in Nepal, North India, Cambodia, Champa and Java, but not in South India. His *S'aikha* conch represents the sky, his *cakra* the air, his *gadā* the light, and his *padma*-lotus the water (Gupta 1972: 29).

The earliest Vaishnavite tradition in Myanmar is connected with Srikshetra, located five miles South-East of Pyay and about 180 miles north-west of Yangon. At Srikshetra, two of the oldest statues of Vishnu, stood on the shoulders of his winged *vāhana*, Garuda. He has four arms, his upper pair of hands holding the discus (*Cakra*) and the conch (*S'aikha*). The lower right hand holds a fruit in front of the body, the lower left holds the Club (*gadā*). The two sculptures are quite different in style. The one found by General de Beylie' in the garden of the Pyay Deputy Commissioner is a thin, rectangular slab of soft sandstone, carved in bold relief. It presents Vishnu and his consort *Lakshmī* standing side by side, the female figure on a double lotus. What remains of the slim, soft, and supple figures has been maintained, but the stone is generally broken from top and bottom, with both heads are missing. Vishnu on the left wears a short natural loincloth and twisted waistband, anklets, and many bracelets. *Lakshmī* has only two hands, her raised right hand holding a bunch of lotus stems, her left hanging by her side with long, straining, and sinuous fingers. The *garuda* is embellished with scales below the waist, its tail-feathers and wings outspread. According to Dr. Ray, the figure is graceful and

characteristic of the south Indian Pallava in style. He dates the image to about 8 century A.D. (Luce 1970: 216). A similarly-themed figure of Vishnu riding the celestial Garuda was also found in Ngu Hanh Son, Da Nang Province, Central Vietnam. It is dated early 9<sup>th</sup> century. Garuda kneels, firmly clasping Vishnu's legs. Two of the four hands are intact, displaying the conch and earth sphere. Garuda is birdlike except for the human arms that secure his divine passenger; his lower torso and legs are feathered. A necklace is his only adornment, apart from some patterning at the edges of his wings (Guy 2014: 154).

Meanwhile, in Kalagankon mound, two sandstone sculptures were found. One slab represents the four-armed Vishnu standing on a mutilated Garuda (Aung Thaw 1978: 28). His tasseled loin-cloth, ribbed with beads and volutes, is quite unlike the softly folded dhoti of the previous sculpture. The whole figure is austere, heavy with ornament, but realistically Pyu (Luce 1970: 216). The other depicts Vishnu reclining on the serpent Ananta. Three lotus flowers stem from the navel of Vishnu. On each lotus is a seated the figures of Brahmā, Vishnu, and Shiva (Aung Thaw 1978: 28). It dates to 8 century A.D.

At Thaton, two slabs of reddish sandstone bear in bold relief the figure of Vishnu reclining on the serpent Ananta. Kawgoon cave has Vishnu sleeping cross-legged on *S'esa* with *Lakshmī* at his feet. The three Gods, Brahmā, Vishnu, and Shiva sit on lotus thrones above. It dates back to 9 century A.D. (Than Tun 2000: 8). At Bagan, a standing bronze image of Vishnu measuring about one foot in height was found of good workmanship in a field at Myinkaba. The god with four arms stands erect on double lotus. His raised right and left hands hold respectively the discus and the conch. The lower right hand is held out before the body in *abhayamudrā*, the lower left palm rests on the top of the mace (Luce 1970: 218). Dr. Ray notes its stiff rigid modeling, hard facial expression, and its simple and crude workmanship by way of its flame-epaulettes, distended earlobes, and its locally-made cast. It dates back to not earlier than the later half of the 13century A.D. (Ray 1932: 45-47) <Figure 1>.



**Figure 1.** Vishnu at Bagan Museum  
**Source:** Luce 1970, Pl. 448

A small sandstone image of the four-armed Vishnu measuring eight inches high, seated in *padmāsana* on lotus was found in Bagan Museum. The god wears a pointed crown. His upper right hand holds the Wheel, his upper left possibly the Club. The two hands before the body may hold a fruit and the Conch <Figure 2>. A weathered stone fragment of Vishnu found in Shwegugyi temple at Bagan shows the crowned head and torso of a four-armed god <Figure 3>. The figure is similar to several old images of Vishnu found at Srikshetra (Luce 1970: 218).



**Figure 2.** Vishnu at Bagan Museum

**Source:** Luce 1970, Pl. 417a



**Figure 3.** Vishnu at Shwegugyi Temple

**Source:** Luce 1970, Pl. 417b



A stone slab sculpture of Vishnu reclining on the serpent Ananta was unearthed from the debris covering the floor of a small square Buddhist shrine west of Mimalaung-kyang temple. Exchange between Bagan and north and south India is evidenced not only by Buddhist art and architecture but also by the presence of a temple dedicated to Vishnu, the Nathlaungkyang. It was probably built during the 11th century by the Indian settlers (Aung Thaw 1978: 73-75). A Tamil inscription discovered at Myinkaba records the building of a porch and a door at a Vishnu temple at Bagan by a native of Malaimandalam belonging to the guild of merchants from different parts of the country. The exterior portion of the building, together with the porch, is lost. Each side of this brick pillar, being high and deep, is provided with an alcove, the main one facing East (Anoanyous: 2005: 26).

Above the height of about 6½ feet from the cement floor, there is a faintly painted plaster with lotus stalk in relief, branching outwards and supporting two double lotus thrones. The one on the left is emptied except for the mark of a halo. The one on the right holds a four-armed god with a crown of braided hair, seated in *padmāsana*, a mallet in his upper left hand, and a knife in the lower. In the centre was probably another four-armed deity, holding a conch. The ten intertwining snake-tails below the right side of the recess, suggests that the main image in the temple was another Vishnu *Anantas'ayin*, in the act of creating the universe. The main image of the god sleeping on the Ananta serpent with his head to the left, is now lost because of treasure hunters. Little remains of the figures except the Shiva on the upper right, the top left hand of Vishnu seated in the center, and the lotus throne and halo of Brahmā on the left <Figure 4>. The central Vishnu stone statue seated on a Garuda, which Phayre also found lying on the floor, and which had now been taken to Berlin, came from the upper niche on the right (Luce 1970: 219). This configuration of Garudāsana is not found in Chola art, but occurs, in various figures, in the Pala art of Bihar and Bengal, where Vishnu often sits, albeit with one leg pendant on a throne over Garuda's shoulders. His vertical

Garuda has more similarities with Khmar rather than the Indian models, and is closest to those found on the lintels from the 10th and 11th century Khmar sites, sharing their power and strength (Gutman et al. 2012: 8) <Figure 5, 6>.



**Figure 4.** Vishnu reclining on Serpent Ananda at Nathlaung Kyaung



**Figure 5.** Vishnu at Nathlaung Kyaung



**Figure 6.** Vishnu at Nathlaung Kyaung  
**Source:** Luce 1970, Pl. 147a

On the three other sides of the inner corridor, set in shallow niches, are three brick images of the standing four-armed god. The image on the southern section seems to embody at least three of the usual attributes: *cakra*, *s'aṅkha* and *gadā*. All these walls were once covered up to the roof with paintings, now difficult to read from below the whitewash. U Mya said that all the paintings represent seated figures of Vishnu with his devotees. Some attributes may be distinguished from the images such as the presence of, the *cakra*, conch, lotus, club, or sword. Some of the Vishnu images have four hands, while the other two are distinguished by marks discernible only with the presence of four hands. The devotees are ascetics wearing beards and moustaches, with hair tied up into two knots, one on each side above the ear. Each ascetic is seated with the legs folded on one side, and a hand raised in the *namaskāramudrā* facing the fire in a salver before him (Duroiselle 1930-34: 193) <Figure 7>. So the few depictions of Vishnu from Bagan, Srikshetra, and the Kawgoon caves near the Mon capital of Thaton show Vishnu with a mitred headdress in the Pala style of the 11th century, and in the fashion of the Vishnu avatars at the Nathlaung Kyaung.



Figure 7. The Standing four-armed Vishnu at Nathlaung Kyaung

Only the inter wall of the outer corridor of the temple is left. It contains ten niches rounded at the top: four on the east side and two each on the south, west, and north sides near the corners. Their chief purpose is to house stone reliefs showing the Avataras of Vishnu, Preserver of the Universe. The series starts from the center of the eastern section, with the worshipper keeping his right side to the temple as he makes the circuit (Luce 1970: 221). According to the southern recension of the *Mahābhārata*, the Ten incarnations are the Fish (Representing the beginning of life), the Tortoise (Representing a human embryo just about to grow tiny legs and a huge belly), the Boar (Representing a human embryo which is almost ready), Manusiha or the Man-Lion (Representing a new born baby-hairy and cranky, bawling and full of blood—and is regarded as the greatest

and most powerful avatar), the Dwarf (Representing a young child), *Paras'uRāma* (Representing both an angry young man and a grumpy old man simultaneously), *Dās'arathiRāma* (Representing a married man with children; Lord Rama is considered a Purna avatar, which means he is a full incarnation of Vishnu), *BalaRāma* (the Elder brother of Lord *Krishna*), Buddha, and Kalki (Coomaraswamy 1964: 10). At present, there are only seven stone sculptures in these ten niches. If we number the niches 1 to 10, the Avatars in the order given above also as 1 to 10, we find a fair degree of correspondence at the beginning.

The Preserver Vishnu appeared in the form of a great fish and rescued Manu, the progenitor of the new human race. Manu was chosen on account of his great piety in an age of depravity. Various accounts of the flood are given. The Puranic accounts tell us that besides Manu, the seven Divine Risis along with their wives were also saved, and they populated the world afterwards. Vishnu appears as half-tortoise, half-fish, and half-man, with the lower part being that of a fish. He has four hands. In two, he holds the conch and the wheel, while the other two hands are giving and protecting of benefit by way of the *mudrās*. He is wearing a kiritamukuta and other usual ornaments. The sculpture is missing (Gupta 1972: 29).

Vishnu descends in the form of a Tortoise to support Mt. Mandara, which the Asuras, in their search for ambrosia, were using as a churning rod to churn the ocean. Vishnu is shown as half-tortoise and half-man, the lower half being that of tortoise. He carries in two hands the conch and the wheel, while the other two hands are in giving and protection gestures. The sculpture is missing (Luce 1970: 221).

Vishnu descends in the form of the boar that saved the earth-goddess from the waters of the flood or in the form of a lion, when he struck down an impious king who dared to question his universal divinity (Rowland 1954: 26). The sculpture is on the south sector near the southeast corner. The boar is seen with *Prthivī* on his left shoulder <Figure 8>.



Figure 8. The Boar, avatar of Vishnu at Nathlaung Kyaung

The atheist demon *Hiranyakas'ipu* (Gold Cushion) ill-treats his son *Prahtāda* for praising Vishnu. *Hiranyakas'ipu* asks where Vishnu is. His son replies that the god is everywhere, even in the palace-pillar. Furious, the demon kicks the pillar. The Man-Lion emerges and tears him to pieces. Brahmā had not granted the demon to slain by man nor animal. The sculpture is on the south face near the southwest corner (Luce 1970: 221) <Figure 9>.



Figure 9. The Man-Lion, avatar of Vishnu at Nathlaung Kyaung

The origins of *Vāmana* incarnation can be traced to the distinction of Vishnu, of conquering Heaven and Earth by his immense strides. The demon Bali, priding himself of his dominion over the three worlds, was outstripped by Vishnu, who appeared before him in the form of a dwarf holding a *kamanhdhalu*. In a sort of a contest, Bali boasted of being able to conquer as much land as he could pace in three steps: the dwarf, expanding himself, deprived him of heaven and earth in two steps, but left him the sovereignty of the lower regions (Williams 1951: 723). The *Vāmana* sculpture is shown on the west sector near the southwest corner <Figure 10>.



Figure 10. Vāmana, avatar of Vishnu at Nathlaung Kyaung



Figure 11. Vāmana, avatar of Vishnu at Nathlaung Kyaung



*Balarāma Halāyudha* features the weapon-holding elder brother of Krishna. He was also called Haladhara, carrying a peculiar weapon shaped like a ploughshare. The sculpture is on the west part near the northwest corner (Luce 1970: 221) <Figure 11>.

*Rāmacandra, Dās'arathiRāma*, son of *Dasāratha*, the King of Ayodhyā was the hero of the *Rāmāyana*. In order to recover his faithful wife *Sītā*, he advanced southwards, killed the demon *Rāvanha* and subjugated his followers, the *Rākshasas* and tells the story of the barbarous aborigines of the south. *Rāma* stands dehanche. His right hand holds an arrow and left hand is a bow. He wears a Kiritamukuta. The sculpture is on the north side near the northwest corner (Williams 1951: 262) <Figure 12>.



Figure 12. Rāmacandra, avatar of Vishnu at Nathlaung Kyaung

Vishnu was born as *Parasurāma* for the sole purpose of the extermination of Kastriyavarna. In the history of early India, a long and intense power struggle between the Brahmanas and the Kastriya as they raced for supremacy (Gupta 1972: 32). *Parasurāma* stands on a lotus throne flanked by two full-blown lotuses. It is



crowned by a usual headdress and it is adorned with usual ornamental decorations. The body stands erect but the head is slightly slanted towards the right. Each of the two hands, hold respectively a staff-like object, perhaps a *khadhga* or sword raised upwards, and an axe, resting on the left shoulder (Ray 1932: 41). The sculpture is found in the north sector near the northeast corner <Figure 13>.



**Figure 13.** Parashurāma, avatar of Vishnu at Nathlaung Kyaung

The adoption of Buddha as an incarnation of Vishnu may be traced with the desire of the Brahmans to effect a compromise with Buddhism. Buddha has curly hair, and his feet and palms carry the lotus marks. He is usually depicted as graceful, calm and serene. Buddha is also seated on a lotus throne wearing a yellow robe. The lobes of his ears must be pendant. The hands are supposed to be in the gesture of blessing and providing protection (Gupta 1972: 32). The sculpture is supposed to be found near the north corner of the east sector but is now missing.

Kalki, who is yet to appear at the close of the fourth or Kali age, stands for final destruction of the wicked, the

reestablishment of righteousness upon the earth, the renovation of all creation, and the restoration of a new age of purity. According to some, he will be revealed coursing the skies, on a white horse, holding a drawn sword blazing like a comet. The figure of the horse plays an important role in this incarnation, that it has also yielded the name *As'vāvatāra* (Williams 1911: 108). He has face of a horse and a body of a man as in the ordinary Vishnu image. He holds a conch, wheel, sword, and shield. While riding a horse, he carries a bow and an arrow. But Dr. Ray has rightly argued that there is in this final niche a sculpture of *Sūrya*, the Sun God (Ray 1932: 45). N.K. Bhattasali remarks that the images of the Sun-god are a plenty in Eastern Bengal, next only to those of Vishnu. The Varmans and the Senas, who followed the Buddhist *Pālas*, specifically called themselves Saura, i.e, worshippers of the Sun-God (Luce 1970: 222) <Figure 14>.



Figure 14. Sūrya, avatar of Vishnu at Nathlaung Kyaung

### III. Iconography of Shiva

The third in the Hindu Trinity is Shiva. He is a severe and terrible god of destruction who moves his devotees by fear rather than love. Shiva is euphemistic. His name is propitious and used as a deprecating and complimentary title for the god of terror. In Sanskrit, it means "The Auspicious One" or "relating to the God Shiva". The term in Sanskrit also refers to one of the principal sects of Hinduism. In Tamil, Shiva means the supreme one or Red.

Shiva is best conceived as the Dancer, whose dance is Evolution, Continuance, and Involution, and also as the Great *Yogī*, chief of ascetics, absorbed in contemplation through the *Himālayan* forests with *Pārvatī* and the bull Nandi. Shiva and *Pārvatī* have two sons, Ganes'a and *Kārttikeya*, gods of wisdom and war, respectively (Coomaraswamy 1964: 10-11). Shiva is *Nivṛtti* and *S'akti* is *Pravṛtti* and in the ultimate state they remain in a union of oneness. From the cosmological standpoint, Shiva is said to be the Bindu (his White color suggests comparison with the seed or semen) and *S'akti* is Rakta (his Red color suggests the comparison with the ovum). This Bindu and Rakta unite together to produce the principle of I-ness or egoism (Dasgupta 1958: 99-100).

Temples dedicated to Shiva and erected for his worship did certainly exist, possibly near modern Thaton as well as in Bagan. Shiva images have also been discovered in many places in Myanmar. Coins bearing Saivite symbols have been found in several districts, especially in Rakhine where a Saivite dynasty of a long line of Kings held fort for a long time (Ray 1932: 51). The Great Chronicle mentions the name of *Canhdī*, *Parames'varaDurgā* and Shiva or *Mahes'vara* along with other divinities in the foundation of the city of Hmawza (Pe Maung Tin et al. 1960: 14).

In Rakhine, some coins may be found on the obverse of the figure of a recumbent, humped bull, which comes with a legend narrated above it in *Nāgarī* characters; on the reverse may be seen the trident of Shiva with garlands hanging from the

outer blades. On the reverse are some symbols of the sun and moon. The *Nāgarī* legend can respectively be read as *Vammacandra*, *Prīticandra*, *Prhticandra* and *Vīracandra*. The names are obviously Indian and the symbols Saivite. It is thus reasonable to conjecture that the Candra dynasty of the kings of Rakhine, who ruled from c. 400 A.D to c. 1000 A.D., belonged to the Brahmanical fold and were evidently followers of the cult of Shiva (Ray 1932: 52).

The excavation at *Vesāli* yielded a broken statue resting on a pillar, and showing a double lotus throne with *Dūrgā*, consort of Shiva, visible from the waist downwards, standing with right foot and with a trident proudly planted on the *mahishāsura*, the Buffalo Demon, whom she has slain (Duroiselle 1921: 19). Ray dates C. 6-7 A.D. (Ray 1932: 62).

At Srikshetra, signs of Sivaism are scarcely to be found. "The end of a stone trident from a bas-relief, and the four arms of a statue of Shiva near a fragment of a statue of the Buddha" are found near Yahanda Gu. Duroiselle reported the discovery in Kalagangon of a *laīga*, 14 inches in height, an indisputable proof of the existence of Sivaism in Pyay, alongside Vishnuism and Buddhism (Duroiselle 1927: 182). Dr. J. A. Stewart found two yoni stones at the site excavation near the palace site of Bago, east of Hintha ridge (Stewart 1917: 16-17). A small laterite yoni may also be seen, with spout and groove and an incised circle in the solid centre at the Khemathiwun monastery near Kyaik Khauk pagoda, south of Thanlyin (Luce 1970: 214).

At Thaton, a stone with a tapered rectangle arching to a peak, was once regarded as the grandest stone relief in Myanmar. It measures 4 feet in height and 2 feet and 4 inches in length. Dr. Ray calls it Shiva and his consort *Pārvatī* (Ray 1932: 57-58). Besides the lotus pedestal of the God's *vāhana*, the Bull Nandi crouches under his right foot, facing the Buffalo-demon *mahishāsura* under his left knee. The god, with his head coiffed and mitred within a magnet-nimbus leaning to the left, sits in a pose of strenuous ease or *ardhaparyāñkāśana*. Four massive arms branch out like limbs of a swastika. The upper left hand holds

the mallet, the upper right, probably the trident; the lower right holds the rosary, while the lower left, the citrus fruit. The snake garland falls his left shoulder. Against his left thigh sits *Pārvatī*, holding a yaktail flywhisk, her chin pressed between his two arms. The whole design of the weighting of the left bottom corner, the tense diagonal of the head, the zigzag energy of upper arms and knee, the fluid fall of snake-thread, lower arms and thighs is masterly (Luce 1970: 214-215). It dates 9-10 century A.D, and is in Orissan Style (Ray 1932: 79) <Figure 15>.



**Figure 15.** Stone Slab of Shiva, in bold relief from Thaton  
**Source:** Ray 1932, Pl. XV

At Bagan, a badly damaged image of Shiva was exposed by flood on the riverbank, close to a tank west of Shweonhmin monastery, Myinpagan. Duroiselle says that it is seated in the *Sukhâsana* on a stylized lotus placed on the pedestal. The right leg is pendent, the foot resting on a small figure lying on its side, which seems to be *Apasmāra*. This enables us to identify the image as that of a form of Shiva. It has four hands. The stone measures 2 feet and 4 inches, and one feet 6 inches with a thickness about 9½ inches (Duroiselle 1929: 112) <Figure 16>. Dr. Ray thinks the upper right hand holds the trident, and the lower left the rosary. He confirms that the male figure that lies

prostrate under his right foot is the *apasmārapurusha* known only in South India as associated with Shiva. The *apasmārapurusha* was the symbol of Dirt (mala) (Ray 1932: 60-61). Coomaraswamy says that the scene has been depicted as early as the pre-*Kushāna* times, 1 century B.C., on the *GudhimallamS'ivalirigam* at North Arcot. In later times Shiva *Natharāja* is commonly shown dancing on it (Coomaraswamy 1927: 39).



**Figure 16.** Shiva at Shweonhmin monastery at Myinpagan  
**Source:** Ray 1932, Pl. XVII

At Bagan Museum, the standing four-armed statue of Shiva found by Crawford in 1826 and by Phayre in 1853, used to lay on the floor of Nathlaung kyaung. The attributes were clear—trident and mallet in the upper right and left hands, sword and

mace in the lower ones. It is crowned of braided hair, *jathāmukutha*. The image is much disfigured, but its Indian anklets are visible, and beneath the feet is an animal broken, probably representing a bull. The image is that of Shiva (Luce 1970: 215). Dr. Ray comments that it is carved out of grey soft sandstone in bold and round relief. Its form and execution is distinctly South Indian, and may on stylistic grounds be dated not earlier than 12 century A.D. The presence of elaborate ornamental details is a characteristic feature of late mediaeval sculptures, and the static heaviness invariably remains one that is South Indian, especially Cola (Ray 1932: 59-60, 82) <Figure 17>.



Figure 17. Shiva at Bagan Museum

Pictures of Shiva can be found at the south wall of the inner ambulatory of Abeyadana temple. In one picture, the god wearing a dhoti sits with one knee raised and the other flat, but the upper part of his body wears no cloth, with hairs upright resembling a crown. He wears a snake bracelet and snake anklet, while on its neck dangles rosaries and a skull garland. In another picture, his hair is done and on his wrists, some bangles

and a bead of skull. The god only wears loin-cloth. The extraordinary feature of this image is the god taking a female corpse on his back, suggesting the painter's familiarity with the mythology of Shiva. The central figure in these pictures are Shiva, and the corpse on the god's back may that be of a consort (Mya 1968: 81-84).

At the same level to that of the pictures of Shiva, on the south wall of Abeyadana, is a picture of Karli Devi, the consort of Shiva. She sits cross-legged, with her six hands holding an arrow, scimitar, ring, sword, and a skull. She wears a garland of skulls around her neck. The other picture has a figure standing on the lying figure below. This painting can be found at the west end of the south wall. The standing figure is that of Karli Devi, the lying figure on which she stood must be that of the God Shiva. However, the discovered Buddha images along with the paintings of Shiva and his consort in Abeyadana temple forming a whole, looks like that of the Elura and Ajanta caves of India where we can find Buddha images side by side, with the sculpturing of Hindu gods (Mya 1968: 85-86).

#### **IV. Iconography of Brahmā**

The supreme Brahmā is properly only an object of internal knowledge, never an object of external worship except through secondary manifestations. Brahma and Brahmā are two different deities. Brahma is the one Eternal Spirit, who first created the waters, and deposited within them a seed which became a golden egg from which sprang Brahmā. Brahma is an Ineffable Essence and cannot be represented by means of material objects, while Brahmā, a member of the Hindu Triad, can be so represented. The worship of Brahmā was evidently in vogue in India in Vedic times. Brahmā's worship appears to have taken place during the interval that may have elapsed between the composition of the Vedas and the Upanishads, and the compilation of the Purānas, for in these last works no mention occurs of either rites, ceremonies, festivals, temples, or holy



places being dedicated to Brahmā. There were also no recorded legends to attest and magnify his divine power (Taw Sein Ko 1918: 171-172).

In post-Vedic times, Brahmā is the positive aspect of creation. A four-headed Brahmā in Indian art is in the Vishnu *Anantas'ayin* sculpture at the *Das'avatāra* temple at Deogarh which dates back to circa 600 A.D. The subject of the Creation or rather the Re-creation of the world by Vishnu was popular from the 6th century onwards in India, and from the 7th to the 11th century in Myanmar. In the intervals of creation, Vishnu sleeps on the Endless World Serpent *S'esha*, the sole survivor of the previous world. At Deogarh he sleeps with his head to the right, but in Myanmar, always to the left. From his navel issues the lotus, which supports Brahmā above him. In Myanmar, the lotus always branches to form thrones for the Hindu Trinity, Brahmā, Vishnu, and Shiva. With them, Brahmā sits always to the left, with Vishnu at the centre and Shiva to the right (Luce 1970: 211).

Four stone sculptures are extant in Myanmar. The first one was taken from Srikshetra, Kalagangon, and it measures 15½ inches in height and 14½ inches in length at the base. Dr. Ray dates the image to circa 8th century A.D. The two stone sculptures are found at Thaton. The first one is a stone relief with three *ste'le'* at the top, measuring 3½ feet and 1 feet and 10 inches. The sculpture dates back to circa 9th century A.D. The other one is a broader stone relief, and it measures 4½ feet and 3 feet. It also dates back to circa 9th century A.D. (Ray 1932:28, 31-33). The last one was from Kawgoon cave, and it measures 4 feet 7 inches in height, 2 feet 7 inches in length, and 9 inches in thickness (Anoanyus 1958: 64).

The fifth stone sculpture found in the main image niche of the Vishnu temple at Nathlaung kyaung, is made of brick and plaster from the early Bagan. But nothing of it remains except the Shiva above, one hand of Vishnu, the lotus seat and halo of Brahmā and the ten twisted tailends of the endless serpent, below on the right. On the Srikshetra and the broader Thaton,

Brahmā has four arms on the relief. Elsewhere he has only two, and the poses and attributes varying. He generally sits cross-legged in *padmāsana*, but in the broad Thaton relief, he sits in *ardhaparyārikāsana*, right knee raised. His crown is usually and correctly the crown of braided hair *jathāmukutha*, but on the narrower Thaton relief, it is that of the pointed *kirīthamukutha* (Luce 1970: 211) <Figure 18>.



**Figure 18.** Brahmā at Kalagan-kon Mound Kawgoon cave, Thaton and Bagan  
**Source:** Ray 1932, P1. V

The finest representations of Brahmā in Myanmar, eight altogether, are to be seen in the Nanpaya, on the south of the Manuha temple at Myinpagan. The four richly carved stone pillars supporting the centre of the interior form a sort of ban open shrine around the central pedestal, which is now empty. It may have borne a life-size standing bronze image of the Buddha. The figure of Brahmā is engraved on the inner side of the pillar and therefore each pillar has two Brahmās in relief. The Brahmā is in relief on the side of stone bricks. The side or thickness of the brick is only 3 inches and the bricks are laid very closely. The figure is wrought on a rectangular plane of 52 inches by 49 inches. There are altogether sixteen layers of brick for one figure (Tin Tin Win 2002: 3-4). Each Brahmā is seated in *ardhaparyārikāsana* within a lovely forest of lotus, each two hands sustaining two of

the flowers. The pose of hands and the lotus forest are strikingly like those of the Brahmā pair in the porch paintings of Myinkaba Kubyaukkyi. The gods in the paintings however sit in *padmāsana* with their head erect and their arms symmetrical. In the Nanpaya, one knee is raised on which the elbow rests. The head with its gorgeous tower of braided hair and double-lotus finial gently leans that way. The flattened knee is always toward the centre, the outer knee raised, the supported elbow slightly higher than the other. The faces are more flexible in their eternal calm and posture <Figure 19 a, b>.



Figure 19 a. Brahmā at Nanpaya



Figure 19 b. Brahmā at Nanpaya



Figure 20. Brahmā at Myebontha Payahla Temple  
Source: Luce 1970, Pl. 251

The Myebontha Payahla temple was built in early 12th century, northeast of Shwesandaw. On the four sides of the central block are recesses with colossal brick and stucco carvings of the Four Scenes, mounted on enormous thrones. Inset in the thrones are long rows of solemn stone Brahmās. Each Brahmā with a pyramid of braided hairs at cross-legged on lotus mats in *padmāsana*, each hands in *namaskāramudrā* with foliages all around him (Luce 1970: 212) <Figure 20>.

The Brahmā figure was found on the wall of the Theinmazi temple. In an attitude of adoration, he sits on a cushion depicting the heads of mythical monsters. The figure is robust and well-developed, but the hands are somewhat attenuated, as they indicate a person's high stature. There is a halo round the head of the figure. The picture appears to show that there are four legs represented as being folded in an attitude of adoration. He wears a crown surmounted by a high peak, which is surrounded by six lower ones, and has four eyes, two nose and two mouths, and holds some conical flowers in both hands to be offered at the shrine. The multiplicity of eyes, noses, mouths, hands, and legs is a common oriental symbolism to indicate superhuman might and power (Taw Sein Ko 1920: 313-314).

## V. Iconography of other deities

The *Ganes'a*, the elephant-headed god is the son of Shiva and *Pārvati*, and the god of wisdom and of obstacles. He is represented as a short fat man with a protuberant belly, frequently riding on a rat or attended to denote his sagacity has the head of an elephant. He has four hands holding the parasu, laddus, tooth, and lotus. *Ganes'a* is an age-old Hindu god. The Rig Veda mentions Ganaptai twice, but referred to Brihaspati, not *Ganes'a*. In the *Boudhāyana DhamaSūtra*, Ganapati is referred to as Vighna, *Vināyaka* and so on. In the course of his assimilation into Aryan worship, *Ganes'a's* character changed. From being an evil and inauspicious deity, he became an auspicious one (Gupta 1972: 48). As the Remover of obstacles, he was also called

Vināyaka, from which his Old Myanmar name, *Mahāpinaypurhā* is derived (Luce 1970: 205). According to tradition, the original name of Anawrahta's Shwesandaw is *Mahapeinnè*, and it is sometimes called the Ganesh temple after the elephant headed Hindu god (Aung Thaw 1978: 75) *Ganes'a* and other Hindu divinities were placed at the corners of the different pyramidal stages as guardian deities of the Buddhist shrine. The stone figures of Hindu deities were placed originally at the corners of the five terraces of the Shwesandaw <Figure 21>. They symbolically guard, the ascent of Mt. Meru with the *Cūlāmanicetiya* of *TāvatiÑsa* at the summit (Luce 1970: 205).



**Figure 21.** Ganes'a and other divinities at Shwesandaw (Mahapeinnè)  
**Source:** Luce 1970, Pl. 84 b, c, e

Both the Indian community of traders and merchants and nearby Buddhists took to *Ganes'a* as they dealt with everyday life. When Indian traders and merchants began to move towards the countries beyond the seas in the wake of trade and commerce, it was natural that they would take with them their favorite god. In Myanmar, especially in the deltaic regions, small images of *Ganes'a*, more or less roughly executed, have been found in considerable number. They are all of a very modest size, and crude in execution. At Bagan, *Ganes'a* came to be the most favorite god among people who engaged in commerce, and who crossed to Myanmar from the other side of Bay of Bengal (Aung Thwin 1976: 137-138).

A photograph of a crowned *Ganes'a* seated beside Brahmā was found by F.O. Oertel who took it from Phayre Museum. Dr. Ray mentions two stone images of *Ganes'a* in the Yangon Museum, one with six arms, the other with the usual four. The four-armed figure is represented as if dancing on his two slim legs but is really seated. The two upper hands hold a discus and noose, while the two lower hold the vilva fruit and the trunk. The other is seated in *padmāsana* and has six hands (Ray 1932: 67).

At Bagan, small single images of *Ganes'a* are fairly common, and are found in relic-chambers together with Buddhist images. They are made of stone, mica, bronze, baked clay, and white plaster. Usually, the crowned god sits in *padmāsana*, but sometimes the right knee is raised. The belly is present but sometimes not, bulging. Both tusks, if any, are shown. The god has usually four hands, and the upper ones may hold the Hook, Cakra, Fruit, or Conch; the lower may support the trunk or belly, but sometimes, the lower right hand holds a rosary, which hangs touching the earth. The best-preserved image, from a mound west of Somingyi pagoda, has three creatures on the pedestal- a Tortoise on the left, a Fish on the right, and a Mongoose in the front (Luce 1970: 206) <Figure 23>. The most interesting figure of *Ganes'a* was found in Guthonlon pagoda at Kyauksauk near Bagan. It is made of bronze and 1 feet 7 inches in height. A curious feature of this bronze image is that the figures have their

eyes covered with their hands <Figure 22 a, b>. In Bagan such images were used by magicians in working charms of different kinds (Duroiselle 1936-37: 166).



**Figure 22 a, b.** Ganes'a at Guthonlon Pagoda

**Source:** Luce 1970, Pl. 89 f, g



**Figure 23.** Ganes'a at Somingyi Pagoda

**Source:** Luce 1970, Pl. 89 a



*Sūrya* was an important solar deity in early Vedic period. In Vedic mythology, the sun is sometimes depicted with one horse, sometimes seven, but in ancient Indian iconography, always four. At *Bhājā* and *Bodhgayā*, *Sūrya* is attended by his women, shooting arrows with their bows. At the *Pāla* relief of *Amrhita* of the British Museum, *Sūrya* as depicted to have seven horses only appeared in the 10th century. In the 11th century, *Sūrya* is depicted as moving threateningly with bow and arrow on the pedestal, with the winged charioteer *Aruṇa* in the centre and *Ushā* and *Pratyūsha* on the extreme right and left (Luce 1970: 209).

The sun-god has not been seen in any Buddhist temple in Myanmar. There are two *Sūrya* icons discovered in Myanmar—the one of the north Indian type at Shinngedettaung hill in the southeast of Mrohaung in Rakhine, and the other one, of the South Indian type at the east end of the outer corridor of Nathlaunggyaung in Bagan.

The Rakhine stone dates to about 8th century A.D. by Duroiselle (Duroiselle 1923: 28). Dr. Ray dates it 7th or 8th century A.D., but in another it dates 6th-7th century A.D. Duroiselle says that the reverse of the stone is filled with writings in north Indian Gupta characters, dating to about the 8th century A.D. Dr. Ray adds that it is in Sanskrit, and the palaeography of the record dates it to the earlier half of the 8th century A.D. (Ray 1932: 70, 92). The sculpture depicts on the obverse face, *Sūrya* riding his chariot drawn by seven horses. The horse in the centre is facing outward, and is placed in a niche that is in the shape of a horseshoe. The figure of the Chariot-driver is missing. The principal figure is much defaced, but enough of it remains, showing two hands both lifted up to the level of the shoulder, each carrying a circular or round object. It has a high headdress, large earlobes, and a necklace, and is flanked on either side by what remains of a small standing figure, which looks female. The one on the right is carrying a bow, and that on the left, a staff or an arrow. These two small figures probably represent the two goddesses, *Ushā* and *Pratyūshā* (Luce 1970: 208-209) <Figure 24>.



Figure 24. Sūrya at Rakhine

Source: Ray 1932, Pl. XIX

At Bagan, *Sūrya* can be seen in the last niche of Nathlaunggyaung, on the right hand side of the entrance steps. Duroiselle describes it as standing on a lotus flower from which two other smaller ones spring. The arms are placed close to the body, which is bent upwards at the elbows, and with each hand holding a lotus bud on a level with the shoulders. It wears a crown, its distended earlobes hang down and touch the shoulders under the weight of the large ear-ornaments. It has bracelets, armlets, and anklets, its lower garment is tucked up and reaches as far as the knees. Lines showing the folds are visible. This also represents one of Vishnu's Avataras (Duroiselle 1912-13: 138) <Figure 25>.



Figure 25. Sūrya at Nathlaung Kyaung

Dr. Ray remarked precisely for this reason that it is not one of the avatars of Vishnu, but seems to be an image of *Sūrya* of the South Indian type. The position of the two hands as well as the lotus buds held in one line with the shoulders is a significant indicator. No less significant is the number of the hands, which is a distinctive feature of South Indian *Sūrya* images, as well as the strictly erect standing posture. *Sūrya* in South India does not generally wear boots nor ride a horse-drawn chariot. Dr. Ray stresses the very intimate relation of Vishnu with the Vedic *Sūrya*. In the Vedas, *Sūrya* is never a supreme god, but is always identified with the sun. The idea that Vishnu is the sun appears to be still maintained in the worship of the Sun as *Sūrya Nārāyana* (Ray 1932: 42-43).

*Srī* or *Lakshmī* is the goddess of wealth and prosperity. If Vishnu accompanied by Bhū or Sarasvatī, Sarasvatī inevitably keeps with *Srī*. When she appears alone with Vishnu, she is called *Lakshmī*. Though *Lakshmī* is a more senior wife of Vishnu, independent sculptures of her is very rare. *Srī* has two hands, and she holds a sṛifala and a lotus. She is accompanied by two female chauri bearers and two or four elephants carrying ghatas. As *Lakshmī*, she is represented with two, four, or eight hands. If she has two hands, she holds conch and lotus; if four,

she holds the wheel, conch, lotus and mace, or the mahālunga, lotus, or the lotus and vessel of ambrosia; if eight, she holds bow, mace, arrow, lotus, wheel, conch, wooden pestle, and goods (Gupta 1972: 56).

*Srī* appears first in the middle of the top of the south torana of Sanchi, 1st century B.C. She stands on a full-blown lotus with elephants to her left and right, pouring water over her head. If *Srī* is depicted with an elephant, she is called *Gaja-Lakshmī*. In the late 1st century B.C., *Srī* appears again on the tympanum at the entrance to the Cetiya cave at Manmoda Hill, Junna north of Poona. Earlier about 100 B.C. *Srī* appears on a tympanum-doorway at the Jaina cave, Anantagumphā, at Khandagiri in Orissa. *Srī* as an architectural form is originally a fertility emblem. When she entered the world of old Mon culture, the goddess *Srī* became the symbol of fortune and splendor, which was also adapted in the Old Myanmar. By way of the Kyanzittha inscription, we come to know that she occupies her place in the top center of the arch pediment, (Duroiselle 1919: IX) when her elephants transformed into floral arabesques in Bagan temples. We can find some of the finest representations of *Srī* on the window exteriors of Nanpaya, where she sits in every apex, her arms drooping and outspread, holding lotus stalks (Luce 1970: 287) <Figure 26>.



**Fig. 26.** *Srī* at Nanpaya

**Source:** Luce 1970, Pl. 123b

A remarkable figure of Vishnu and his consort *Lakshmī* standing side by side was found by General de Beylie in the garden of Pyay Deputy Commissioner. It is a thin rectangular slab of soft sandstones, carved in bold relief, bearing the standing figures of Vishnu with his consort *Lakshmī* by his right side (Luce 1970: 216). The stone is broken from top and bottom with both heads are missing. But what remains of the slim, soft and supple figures of Vishnu standing on a Garuda and with *Srī* on a double lotus, is wonderfully clean and distinct. Vishnu on the left wears a short natural loincloth and twisted waistband. He has anklets and many bracelets. *Srī* has two hands only, holding a bunch of lotus flowers in her raised right hand. Hanging on her left side is her long, straining, sinuous hands. A defaced garuda is embellished with scales below the waist and tail feathers and wings outspread (Aung Thaw 1978: 28). It is quite unorthodox to find a stone sculpture where Vishnu and *Lakshmī* stand side by side. Also remarkable is the fact that this Vishnu standing on a Garuda is found in Myanmar alone. The image is dated to about 8th century A.D. (Ray 1932: 24-27) <Figure 27>. No separate image of *Srī* or *Lakshmī* image is to be found in Myanmar as an object of worship, but only as an architectural decoration which we can find everywhere on temples.



**Figure 27.** *Srī* (or) *Lakshmī* at Pyay Museum

## VI. Conclusion

The religious influence of Indians who traded in the region made it possible for Brahmanical culture, and its elaborate paraphernalia of rites and rituals, gods and goddesses and myths and legends, penetrate Southeast Asian countries, especially Myanmar. The people of Myanmar are racially Mongoloid, but the culture professedly Hindu and Buddhist. Various aspects of Myanmar culture is of Indian origin. It is true that certain traces of Brahmanical rites and rituals, myths and traditions, have come to be interwoven into the texture of the social and religious life of the country. Hindu ideas influenced Bagan administration and politics. In other words, the political ideology of the Kings, who were at the apex of the Bagan society, was greatly influenced by Hindu ideology. In Myanmar it tolerated Brahmanical rituals and ceremonies presided over by Brahman priests, but never allowed Brahmanical gods to trespass its own sacred precincts.

We have just made a bare outline of the Brahmanical iconography from about the beginning of the Christian era right down to the fall of the Bagan dynasty at the close of the 13th century. Bramanic icons worshipped by the Indians of Bagan would have been taken by migrant Indians themselves. Later, they would produce Bramanic icons locally in Myanmar. Eventually, they built Hindu temples for their worship. The prototypes came from India and S'rilanka and to a lesser extent from Tibet and China. Myanmar people, however, knowingly or unknowingly, ignore some features of Indian deities and eventually the icons are found in various places in Bagan.

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