

ART AND ARCHITECTURE OF NAGAYON TEMPLE IN THE BAGAN PERIOD

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Abstract

The Nagayon temple, one of the most important architectural specimens ever built by King Kyanzittha to the early Bagan Period. The main characteristic feature of the earlier temple in Bagan is either square or extension added to make it rectangular. Nagayon usually has a square plan. Nagayon architecture is a part of the architectural heritage that has been handed down to us from the Bagan Period. The architecture of Nagayon temple shows its aspect in the perspective of the architectural movement as briefly described in this paper.

Keywords; architectural, characteristic feature, earlier temple, square plan.

Introduction

The Nagayon temple, one of the most important architectural specimens ever built by king Kyanzittha dates to the early Bagan Period. The temple has its story of a Dragon (Naga) shaded Kyanzittha in his sojourn when he was punished by King Sawlu. The building is supposed to have been built in memory of that Naga episode. Nagayon architecture is a part of the architectural heritage that has been handed down to us from the Bagan Period. The main characteristic feature of the earlier temple in Bagan is either square or extension added to make it rectangular. Therefore, this kind of planning is simple. The wall spaces of these corridors have niches to contain Buddhist sculpture. The sculpture shows a series of Buddhist developments from Buddhist Jataka stories. The most striking feature is the decorated addition of *Mahayana and Brahmanic* images added with Buddha images. Nagayon becomes one of the earliest temples that show how architectural development began from the earliest temple to the tallest at the zenith and smaller in the later period. The includes decorative arts of mural paintings are educative for Bagan people dissemination of the Buddhist scriptural knowledge in Mon and Pali languages. The life episodes of the historic Buddha and the past twenty-four Buddha image and scene sculptures of their prophecies. The important trait of the painting is the exposure of Sutta Pitaka which is comprehensively studied by Professor G.H Luce. He is the only scholar who can give these paintings different explanations. Its archaeological interests lie in its architecture, painting, and sculptures.

Art and Architecture of Nagayon Temple in the Bagan Period

Bagan is the most important architectural complex in Myanmar. Allowed to quote the Glass Palace Chronicle, King Sawlu (1077-84) was wrath with Kyanzittha, the latter was forced to abscond from the King's wrath and slept alone in a grazing ground for horses while he slept, a Naga-Dragon watched over him. At that place when he became King, he built the Nagayon Temple, to commemorate this event.¹

Nagayon temple, (No.1192) coordinates N 21.1477, E 94.8590, is situated east of Abeyadana temple near Myinkaba village which is one mile away to the south of Bagan. The temple faces towards the north in the direction of the Bagan palace, seemingly to recognize and revere the donor of the temple King Kyanzittha. It is one storey edifice assuming the early architectural characteristics. The rectangular plan of Nagayon temple of the image chamber at the

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¹ Paul Strachan, *Art and Architecture of Old Burma*, Singapore, Kiscadale Publications and printed by Kyodo Shing Loong, 1989, p.62 (Hereafter cited as Paul Strachan, *Art and Architecture*)

middle and those of the corridor are joined at the roof by arches and vaults. The shrine of Nagayon is more distinctive while Abeyadana looks like a hollow cut into a central massive pillar.¹



Figure 1. The Site Plan of Nagayon Temple Vestibule the Nagayon Shrine

(Source from Researcher)

The rectangular plan of Nagayon temple consists of the main shrine in the center surrounding by a dark corridor, curvilinear roofs, the terraces, the Sikhara and the crowning finial stupa foreshadows Kyanzitha's incomparable achievement with the construction of Ananda temple. This corridor, though dark as it is, is not completely air-tight.² The plan of Nagayon has a longitudinal axis, thereby having more space to make for five perforated windows on each side, on the east, south and west. These window openings are arched to bring out the openings distinctively. The windows of the vestibule have timber lintels.



Figure 2. Five Perforated Windows at Nagayon Temple

(Source from Researcher)

The brick work is in the form of latching with vertical and horizontally laid bricks of nine inches in breadth. Among the bricks they also used stone bricks for reinforcement of the building.³ Stone reinforcements in the arches and vaults made the structure strong and last.⁴ The laying bricks vertically would be helpful in keeping the structure plumb upright as well as enhancing its load bearing capacity.⁵



Figure 3. Brick Works at Nagayon Temple

(Source from Researcher)

¹ See Fig.1

² U H R C, *Glimpses of Glorious Bagan*, Yangon, University of Yangon Press, 1986, p.42 (Hereafter cited as U H R C, *Glimpses of Glorious Bagan*), See Fig.2

³ Taung Goe, *Plastic Arts Adorning the Nayayon Temple* (Minbu Aung Kyaing, Letya Asone Nayayon Myanmar Original), Yangon, Tun foundation sarpay committee, 2009, p.13 (Hereafter cited as Taung Goe, *Plastic Arts Adorning*)

⁴ Pirre Pichard, *The Invertery of the Monuments at Bagan*, Vol-V, Milanostampa in Italy, UNESCO, 1995, p.76 (Hereafter cited as Pirre Pichard, *The Invertery of the Monuments*)

⁵ Taung Goe, *Plastic Arts Adorning*, p.13

⁵ See Fig.3

The general discussion about Nagayon temple, it is built on a low plinth on which rises the basement of the structure. The roof of the Nagayon temple is crowned by a spire or sikhara or a series of terraces and the top most architectural representation is mostly a stupa. This basement has conics and crenellation at its top. Then there comes a series of off-sets at the base of the spire or Sikhara. A small corner next to the top most level of the temple. This external form, therefore, bears resemblance to that of the famous Ananda temple in Bagan.¹ There are no other decorations of stucco or glazed tiles on the body of the basement, then at the corners, four miniature stupas at the lowest level or terrace to repeat similar erection of corners stupas and crenellations.²



Figure 4. The Corners Stupas and Crenellations at Nagayon Temple
(Source from Researcher)

The general view as a large single storey temple at the center of a walled enclosure having four gateways and four satellite stupas in the corner.³ The four corner stupas may stand for the four queens of King Kyanzittha.⁴ The gate of Nagayon is capped by a small stupa-like dome whose shape is assumed to be like a fruit (Sanskrit) in Indian architecture. Inside the gate are seated figures with one leg-pendent with patches of surviving stucco works. Similar figures are found in the gates of the Ananda temple. These figures are most likely Bodhisattvas. The large enclosure wall is still in good condition, with sunk crenellate-facing on both sides, and four grate gateways, one in the center of each face. Each gateway-roof has four small corner-stupas, and a short *amalaka*, with tapering *chattravali*. Inside, each gate has a cella arched with four pendentives filled with tornadoes of large lotus.⁵



Figure 5. The Exterior Four Gateways of Wall at Nagayon Temple
(Source from Researcher)

The main topping spire, the tower has three terraces and the corner stupas of the temple was completely destroyed by the 1975 earthquake but has been repaired. There are small portions of the original stucco works surviving which are conducive to favorable comparison with the finest kind of the early work at Bagan. The wide barrel vaulted hall of Nagayon contains a

¹ Ministry of Union culture, *Pictorial Guide to Bagan*, Yangon, Yangon University Press, 1955, p.43 (Hereafter cited as Ministry of Union culture, *Pictorial Guide to Bagan*)
² See Fig.4
³ Pirre Pichard, *The Invertery of the Monuments*, Vol -V, p.74
⁴ Min Bu Aung Kyaing, *လက်ရာအစုံ နဂါးရုံ*, (*Art and Architecture of Nagayon*), Yangon, Tun Foundation, 2009, p.11 (Hereafter cited as Min Bu Aung Kyaing, *Art and Architecture*)
⁵ G.H Luce, *Old Burma Early Bagan*, Vol-I, New York, New York University Press, 1970, p.312 (Hereafter cited as G.H Luce, *Old Burma Early Bagan*), See Fig.5

radiating arch and a leader's bricks protecting it deeply. The walls were designed to affix the under surface to the inner walls.¹



Figure 6. The Radiation Arch at Nagayon Temple
(Source from Researcher)

The temple was named Nagayon and became the main statue protected by a serpent or *naga*-giant serpent in the shrine. The Buddha image is gilded and it is of brick work. Flanked by two standing Buddha these are probably the Bodhisattva *Lokanatha* and *Metteyya* on the right and left of the main statue. *Lokanantha* and *Mettayya* stand for Mahayanic faith, with the main Buddha statue on the synthesis of the faiths or two schools of Buddhism: Theravada and Mahayana here. The two flanking Buddha images have their hands in *Dhammacakka mudra* images while the main Buddha image in the center has his right hand in *Abhaya mudra* and left-hand *Varada mudra* attitude. There are altogether 13 serpents with six each on either side of the main image fashioned from wood and painted. Of these 12 serpents flanking the one in the main image, five have been decapitated with the passage of time.²



Figure 7. The two flanking of Buddha Images at Nagayon Temple
(Source from Researcher)

From the architectural point of view a distinctive feature of this temple is in its employment of hardwood timber in the arched pediments of its porches. The wood carvings for adornment in plasticity is used on the beams in the front porch and those on the beam in entrance to the hall, the figuring in high relief and floral arabesque are finely exacted with an eye for detail. These belong to early Bagan and are a representation of the wood carrier's finest expressed nine centuries ago.³ These wooden beams serve both the purposes of strength for structural and embellishment for esthetic appreciation.

The temple was built in a walled compound with four gates. These gates or entrance pavilions have roofs constructed of vaults, and these vaults were constructed standing on the thick teak beams. It is a dangerous solution in the long run, the beams were already bending in the 1990s, and these are now supported by steel frames.⁴ At the gate and vestibule, they made a brick arch over these large beams about one foot. Large blocks of teak around one foot are relatively safe, but due to the nature of the wood, there may be movement such as (dynamic load) and the brick parts resting on them may break if there is movement. Although the Nagayon

¹ Donald M. Standtner, *Ancient Bagan Buddhist Plain of Merit*, Bangkok, Bangkok Printing Co.Ltd Press, 2005, p.181(Hereafter cited as Donald M. Standtner, *Ancient Bagan Buddhist*), See Fig.6

² See Fig.7

³ Min Bu Aung Kyaing, *Art and Architecture*, pp.13-17

⁴ Kyaw Lat, *Art and Architecture of Bagan and Historical Background*, Yangon, Mudonsarpay, 2010, p.160 (Hereafter cited as Kyaw Lat, *Art and Architecture*)

Temple has been around for almost 1,000 years, there are still no cracks to worry about. It has been affected by earthquakes several times, but it is still in good condition and it is remarkable to build a building that can only exist before the wood decays.¹



Figure 8. Wooden Beam of Nagayon Temple

(Source from Researcher)

There are altogether 17 satellite stupas on the roofs. The bricks in the Nagayon are of the same size as those in the Ananda and all have rice husks buried in them. The bricks are 17 inch by 8.5 inch and 2.5 inch thick. The outer wall extends 443 feet north to south, 374 feet east to west, with a height of 10 feet and a thickness of 6 feet.

Each portal on the wall measures 13 feet 6 inches in breadth, the porch extends 28 feet 8 inches in length and are guarded by two *dvarapala* guardians just inside. There are a total of four portals on the outer walls. The interior wall measures 195 feet north and south and 13 feet 6 inches east to west with a height of 4 feet and a thickness of 3 feet. The height of the Nagayon pagoda is 85 feet, and measures 137 feet north to south and 82 feet east to west. It is probable that a covered passageway extends from its northern porch. Existed originally, a bricked pathway 150 feet long and 15 feet wide can be seen.²

Medical stupa skylights on the second terrace admit light from three sides into the central Shrine. Roofs are all sloping, with low crenelle-lines, pranked out at the corners with green glazed facing. The pockets of the three upper terraces have squared glazed tiles, also the sides of the Hall-roof.³



Figure 9. Green Glazed tiles of Terrace at Nagayon Temple

(Source from Researcher)

It is distinctive of employing glazed tiles on its inner ambulatory as well as in the passageway between the exterior and interior walls and on the pagoda platforms in the north, east and west platforms, corridor, also paved with green glazed stones, runs around the central shrine where remnants of the original tiles can still be found. The glazed bricks lining the platform of the Nagayon are coloured green and brown. It could be a unique monument in Bagan where the Pagoda platform, the inner ambulatory and the apron around the platform are lined with glazed bricks. Mostly they are in three sizes; 18 inches square, 15 inches square and 7 squares. Nagayon has a stone glazed threshold measuring 9" _ 7" _ 23".⁴

¹ Kyaw Lat, *History and Theory of Art and Architecture*, Yangon, Yaung Zin Printing House Press, 2005, p.238 (Hereafter cited as Kyaw Lat, *History and Theory*), See Fig.8

² Field Research (18 March- 2009)

³ G.H Luce, *Old Burma Early Bagan*, p.312, See Fig.9

¹ See Fig.10, Field Research (22 March- 2009)



Figure 10. Glazed Bricks lining the Platform of Nagayon Temple

(Source from Researcher)

Stucco art, crafts of the mason, wood carvings were found on the exterior of the Nagayon temple. On the exterior wall of the main hall, there are remnants of floral arabesques with ogre heads while the front porch also has a band of ogre heads clutching garlands. The stucco art to be found on the backdrop of the vestibule windows.¹



Figure 11. Floral Arabesques with Ogre Heads at Nagayon Temple

(Source from Researcher)

Masonry sculptures of *dvarapala* (door guardians) posted at the porches on the exterior walls of *Metteya*, the future Buddha and *lokanatha* are very well made with bricks shaped by hand and mortar. The pattern of laying bricks in vertical and horizontal clutches is to be found on the walls of the pagoda and exhibits fine workmanship. The finials at the top of the walls are also symmetrical and elegantly composed. The vaulted arches inside are symmetrical and pleasant to see.² This is supposed to be a *Theravada* temple though the archway between the hall and the corridor on the west wall, there is a standing figure who looks like *Tara' devi* flanked by two crowned Bodhisattvas. Nagayon architecture is a part of the architectural heritage that has been handed down to us from the Bagan Period.



Figure 12. *Dvarapala* Statue at Nagayon Temple

(Source from Researcher)³

One of the characteristics of Nagayon is its mural paintings. On the walls of its corridors, they prove to be rich in its conventional and free-hand styles. They are educational and decorative for their dissemination of the Buddhist scriptural knowledge in Mon and Pali Languages and they also make the walls beautiful in harmonizing the figures of dramatics personal, of their respective stories, their styles, their manners, and their colours.⁴ Nagayon murals “the walls of the corridor are decorated with paintings illustrating scenes from the life of the Buddha and the jatakas with ink glosses in Mon and Pali”⁵. The north face of the inner wall

¹ See Fig.11

² Dr Than Tun, *Buddhist Art and Architecture*, Yangon, Monywa Books, 2002, p.35 (Hereafter cited as Dr Than Tun, *Buddhist Art and Architecture*)

³ See Fig.12

⁴ G.H Luce, *Old Burma Early Bagan*, p.312

⁵ Aung Thaw, *Historical Sites in Burma*, Yangon, Ministry of Union Culture, 1972, P.51 (Hereafter cited as Aung Thaw, *Historical Sites in Burma*)

of the corridor, on the east face of the corridor and the Majjhima Nikaya follows, covering about 76 suttas. Out of them, 25 suttas can still be read. These panels measuring 2'6" high and 1'8" broad are conventional as a rule.¹

Southern Corridor- Lord Buddha's visit to his son the reverend Rahula and scenes at the death of the Buddha (Digha Nikaya 16, 148-162) This mural also describes the Malla Princes all make seven references to the passing away Lord Buddha.²



Figure 13. Scene of Lord Buddha Visit to his son Rahula South Wall at Nagayon Temple
(Source from Researcher)

North Corridor - The Buddha's preaching of Mahasamaya Sutta (Digha Nikaya 20) in the Mahavam near Kapilavasthu. The Buddha's deliverance of this Mahasamaya Sutta is attended by all Brahmas, Devas, Yakkhas, Gandharas, Nagas, Kumbhandas of 10,000 coming to pay Buddha their reverence. Mara comes to disturb the gathering.³



Figure 14. Maha Samaya Sutta (North East corner at Nagayon Temple)

(Source from Researcher)

Western Corridor - The visit of king Bimbisara to the Buddha, Devadatta's second attempt on the Buddha's life by hurling a rock upon him, the Buddha's entry into Rajagaha city. Here also Devadatta sending the drunken elephant Nalagiri to kill the Buddha is described on this wall. Kurudhamma Jataka No 276, Sonananda Jataka No 532, Mahasuta Soma Jataka No 537 are portrayed in this mural.⁴

¹ G.H Luce, *Old Burma Early Bagan*, P.315

² See Fig.13

³ See Fig.14

⁴ See Fig.15



Figure 15. Scene of the Buddha and the drunken Elephant Victory over Nalagiri west wall
(Source from Researcher)

Eastern corridor - Buddha Dipankara's prophecy concerning Sumedha Pandit Khuddaka Nikaya, Buddhavamsa. The hermit Sumedha, the future Buddha Gotama, receives a prophecy from the Dipankara Buddha that he would be the desired Buddha in this Badda Kappa. In the east wall also is portrayed Jataka 531 with the Bodhisattva Gotama Buddha as King Kusa. He is shown with an army of 6000 elephantry, 6000 cavalry and 6000 chariots arresting the seven kings who come to lay siege on the city. This mural shows that the artists of Bagan were well acquainted with the strength of their country's martial capability in the portrayal.



Figure 16. Scene of Lay Devotees dedicated to the Monks Kusa Jataka (No. 531)
(Source from Researcher)¹

There are large spaces from the mural paintings which have faded and fell off from the walls due to ravages of the time. Seepage water coming through the cracks in the roof and clouds of dust raised by the Lorries and other motor vehicles from the road side has caused the mural's damages.²

The ambulatory passages in the main chamber are decorated with murals depicting 550 birth stories of the Buddha and they are aided by ink glosses. At the base of its wall on the eastern side, a series of figures including musicians playing the drums and cymbals, blowing conches and sinuous girls dancing stoles are depicted. This shows how the inhabitants of Bagan at that time were not only religious in their devotion and veneration of the Buddha and his religious tenets but also they relaxed with their Love of music and merry making hobby to release themselves from the toils of day to day life. Paintings on the upper parts of the corridor relate the future Buddha with a retinue of hermits who shows a variety of hair styles supported by one single knot or others done in two knots.

¹ See Fig.16

² Taung Goe, *Plastic Arts Adorning*, p.13



Figure 17. A Series of Figures Including Musicians and Girl dancers at Nagayon Temple

(Source from Researcher)¹

The reduction of heterodox iconographic elements, such as the inclusion of *Tantric, Mahayana and Brahmanic* deities employed in the painted wall decorations, may indicate that, by the time when Nagayon was built, the great purification of Buddhism at Bagan, taken up by the early kings, had begun to exert influence on the visual arts.² Nagayon murals in accordance with the above criteria may be designated as ancient classical works of very rare variety that could not be reproduced or copied in the later generation. It would be wise if they might be recorded in colour photography for use by posterity.

On the walls of shrine, Vestibule and the corridor wall used to contain murals or sculptural reliefs in stone, or in stucco the niches are found at the corridor wall. The circumambulatory passages, the shrine or the image chambers of the two buildings are the same while the Nagayon has more spaces for the niches to contain the stone sculpture. These sculptures in the Nagayon temple may be roughly classified into two groups; the life episodes of the historical Buddha and the past twenty four Buddha beginning with Dipankara to Kassapa who had given their prophecies to the historical Gotama Buddha in the niches.



Figure 18. Interior niches at Nagayon Temple

(Source from Researcher)³

These scenes represent the principal episodes in the Buddha's life. They are intended, mainly for educational purposes. These episodes portray the first sermon, parilayyaka retreat, kalanaga and the golden bowl, the Defeat of the Heretics at Savatthi, Descent from Tavatimsa and Parinivana. These scenes, indeed, represent not only the main episodes but they portray the general outline of the Buddha's life span for dissemination to the laymen and scholars alike for grasping.⁴ It has nine scenes of the Buddha's life episodes. Nagayon temple reveals the story of the Buddha's life and its representative sculptures.

Nagayon sculptures illustrating the Buddhavamsa history are the next Logical development from the reliefs at Kyauk gu u min which are the earliest at Bagan and the works of at least a decade earlier.⁵ At the beginning of the past 24 Buddhas were described them in sequential order. The sculptures lining both sides of the corridor are dedicated to the theme of the

¹ See Fig.17

² Paul Strachan, *Art and Architecture*, p.62

³ See Fig.18

⁴ G.H, Luce, *Old Burma Early Bagan*, PP.104-105

⁵ Paul Strachan, *Art and Architecture*, PP.62-63

28 Buddhas. Here the only Buddha to be shown standing is Dipankara, the Buddha who prophesies the enlightenment of the Gotama Buddha. The series runs clockwise in the correct sequence, beginning on the outer wall, to the right of the shrine door. All the past twenty-seven Buddhas are shown in sitting posture with the only Buddha to be shown standing is Dipankara, the Buddha who prophesies the Buddhahood of Gotama¹There are a total of 56 niches, each filled with an image of a Buddha. But the emphasis is on the image rather than the narrative.²Nagayon sculptures must be a direct derivation from the Pyu artistic achievement. Now, most of Myanmar archaeologists are wont to regard the Pyu, their works, their artistic endeavor as native original, and free from foreign influences.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Nagayon temple is unique in its architecture, paintings, and sculpture. They not only belong to the classical period of Bagan history but also keep in good tradition the architecture which has its counterparts in SriKsetra Period. There are, of course, comparisons in detail to be made with those of the SriKsetra building. The murals of Nagayon are remarkable because they portray the different Sutta Pitiaka of Buddha's teaching which studied. The sculptures are usually of two compartments. The large upper portion is not interesting with the Buddha in mudra the lower one-third of the portion is given to the episode which explains how the prophecy is made. The figures in this segment show the Bagan ways of life, their dress, their manner and their attitude. We can say in conclusion that Nagayon temple is the unique example of Bagan art, architecture and sculptures.

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