

THE STUDY ON THE BUDDHA LIFE STORIES OF BAGAN PERIOD: THE DESCENT FROM *TĀVATĪMSA* *

Mya Theingi Soe¹

Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to study the Descent from *Tāvatiṃsa* on the Buddha life stories depicted in the paintings of ancient temples from Bagan which has now been recognized as a world heritage site in Myanmar. Buddhism has flourished in Myanmar before Bagan period and reached at its highest point in Bagan period. The people of Bagan period, both elite class and commoners, had built religious monuments. Their major aim was that they wanted the Buddhism to last longer until 5000 years. They used to decorate the inner walls and ceilings of temples with mural paintings. Mural paintings that adorned the inner walls of temples during the Bagan period, spanning from 11th to the 13th century CE. This period is often referred to as the ‘Golden Age’ of Myanmar art. The earliest wall painting of the Descent from *Tāvatiṃsa* can be observed in Nagayon Temple in early period. In middle and late Bagan period, the Descent from *Tāvatiṃsa* was also popular and they were beautifully drawn on the walls of the temples. One of the major themes of their paintings was the eight great scenes of the Buddha's life including the Descent from *Tāvatiṃsa* which was one of the most popular themes in Buddhist art of Myanmar. Therefore, the study of Bagan Temples will be provided the remaining of Bagan mural paintings works in “Where and what type of decorative art in Bagan Temples,” which can be seen Temple No. 2157/1451, Monument No. 1152, Monument No. 92 and Monument No. 339/212 (B). The methodology for this research paper is mainly based upon the previously published texts and private field survey and art remains of mural paintings which has been failure in previous attempts are organized with the recent finding.

Keywords: *Tāvatiṃsa*, eight great scenes, religious monuments, mural painting

Introduction

Many temples of Bagan are illustrated with paintings on the interiors as a work of merit. It is one of the most effective ways of spreading Buddhism. In fact, the former one sees in enormous numbers and according to the inventory list, there are totally 3122 structural remains. According to the survey, there are 128 temples but decorative art of the descent from *Tāvatiṃsa* where mostly seen 35 temples and they belonged to the temples with single story temples. People of Bagan Period used to depict the Great Eight Scene as follow: 1. Mt. Meru, 2. Preaching *Abhidhamma*, 3. Preaching *Abhidhamma* and Descending from *Tāvatiṃsa* along the three Stairways, 4. Descending from *Tāvatiṃsa* along the three Stairways, 5. Descending from *Tāvatiṃsa* without Three Stairways and 6. Ascending to *Tāvatiṃsa*, Preaching *Abhidhamma* and Descending from *Tāvatiṃsa*.

Among them four temples which was Descending from *Tāvatiṃsa* without three Stairways will be observed. The eight great scenes from the life of Buddha Godama were one of the popular themes of mural painting in Bagan Period. One of the eight great scenes is the Descent from *Tāvatiṃsa*. The story goes as follow: When the Buddha was alive, Godama wanted to gratitude to mother of his previous life. Then, his mother of previous life became a god, *Thantuthita*, on the *Tāvatiṃsa*, one of the celestial abodes. Godama went to *Tāvatiṃsa* and preached the god *Thantuthita* the *Abhidhamma*, one of the three *pitakas*. He had resided on the

* Special Award (2024)

¹ Department of Archaeology, Yadanabon University

mandhukammalā throne (emerald throne) under *kathic* tree (*Erythrina arborescens*) for three months. The Buddha preached the *Abhidhamma* not only to *Thantuthita* but also to other gods and Brahmās such as *AñKura*, *Ainda*, etc. The Buddha had preached the *Abhidhamma* days and nights for three months. When the Buddha went around for the alms food, Godama left the image, *Nimmika*, to continue to preach the *Abhidhamma*. The Buddha went around for the alms food with brown stone alms bowl, which was donated by four kings of God. The Buddha used to go to the North Island, and partake the alms food at Anotat Lake. After that, Godama went to Sandalwood Forest to clean himself, and went back to *Tāvātimsa*. And then, He continued to preach the *Abhidhamma*. During Buddha went around for alms food, the image *Nimmika* preached the *Abhidhamma* elaborately.

Buddha's life story is the most important role in Buddhism. It has been found in descriptive form in mural paintings. In ancient archaeological landscape of Myanmar, the great scene of the descent from *Tāvātimsa* is mainly exposed in mural paintings. Among them, Descending from *Tāvātimsa* without three Stairways is presented. According to present survey, including usual style of the descent from *Tāvātimsa* scene of mural paintings, have been found in the total numbers of four temples. It was known that in Bagan Period, the scene of the Buddha's descent from *Tāvātimsa* Celestial Realm without three stairways was depicted in eight temples. Among those eight temples, the four temples are presented in this research paper.

Research Questions

How is the scene of the Descent from *Tāvātimsa* without three stairways depicted in the mural paintings of Bagan temples, and what are its distinctive stylistic features?

What religious and symbolic meanings are conveyed through the representation of the Descent from *Tāvātimsa* in the Buddhist art?

How do the selected temples reflect variations in artistic style of the Descent from *Tāvātimsa* scene?

Research Methodology

This research employs a descriptive methodology, primarily based on both primary and secondary sources. The study draws upon previously published scholarly works, inscriptions, and historical records related to Bagan art. In addition, field surveys were conducted to examine the remaining mural paintings in selected temples, allowing for direct observation of stylistic features, composition, and elements. Photographic documentation and comparative visual analysis are used to identify similarities and differences among the selected sites. Furthermore, this study integrates recent findings with earlier research in order to reassess and organize previously overlooked or insufficiently studied mural remains. Through this combined approach, the research aims to provide a clearer understanding of the depiction and significance of the Descent from *Tāvātimsa* in Bagan mural art.

Temple No. 2157/1451 (East of Taungbi Village)

Temple No. 2157/1451 lies on the left side of the Naung U-Bagan Road, near Kheminga temple, in east of Taungbi village (94° 52' 09.6" E & 21° 10' 26.5" N). It is a small temple with Sikhara on the roof and the vestibule faces east. There are beautiful wall paintings in the temple. It was built in 12th century CE. Floral patterns, twenty-eight Buddhas, figures of monks, kenari and kainara, eight scenes of Buddha life and late paintings were painted on the walls. The big Buddha image, 12' 8" height with Bhūmisparśa mudrā, seated on the lotus throne of 5' 3". At the backdrop of the Buddha are eight scenes of Buddha. The scene of the Descent from *Tāvātimsa* is drawn above the left side of the seated Buddha.

In the scene, the Buddha is descending from *Tāvātimsa* in Mahā Karuṇā mudrā. The Buddha is wearing robes which cover both shoulders. In this temple, the scene of the Descent from *Tāvātimsa* was illustrated without the three stairways. The Buddha is wearing flat turban. Brahmā is standing behind the Buddha and shading the Buddha with an umbrella. Brahmā was depicted with three heads. Style of umbrella is similar to the stone umbrellas on pagoda platforms. A god is standing behind Brahmā. Sakka is standing before the Buddha. He is carrying alms bowl in his arms and turning his head back to the Buddha. He is wearing crown. Colour of the robes of the Buddha is red, hair is black. Halo behind the head of the Buddha was painted in white and yellow. However, colour of the painting is faint and figures in the painting cannot be seen clearly.

Buddha Prinivana Scenes		
The Taming of Nālāgiri	The Enlightenment	The Descent from Tāvātimsa
The first sermon		The Great Miracle
The Honey Rice		The Nativity

Source: Thein Lwin (Myan Sar Myay)



N
W + E
S



Figure 1. Temple No. 2157/1451 (East of Taungbi Village)

Source: Photo by Researcher



Figure 2. Descending from *Tāvātimsa* without Three Stairways

Source: Photo by Than Zaw (Geology)

Monument No. 92 (Razathu Temple)

Monument No. 92 (Razathu Temple) is situated in Shin Pin Sa Kyo Pagoda compound (20° 52' 20.8" N & 94° 43' 46.8" E). It is a small single storey temple surmounted with a square tower. There is only one entrance which is facing to the north. Lotus rosacea, circle patterns with lotus designs, Buddha's footprint, five hundred fifty Jatakas and the Great Eight Scenes from the life of the Buddha were painted on the ceiling and inner walls of the temple. According to Sa Kyo Phaya Hla inscription which was inscribed in Innwa period, King Narapati Sithu donated land to Shin Pin Sa Kyo Pagoda in 554 ME (1192 CE). The Great Eight Scenes from the life of the Buddha were painted on the walls of west niche of Razathu Temple. Painting of the scene of the Descent from *Tāvātimsa* is 7 inches wide and 12 inches high.

The Buddha is standing on a lotus in Mahā Karuṇā mudrā in the scene of the Descent from *Tāvātimsa*. The Buddha is wearing robes which cover only the left shoulder. There is no stairway in the painting. Colour of the robes is red, body is yellow and hair is black. A red halo is behind the head of the Buddha. Brahmā is standing behind the Buddha and shading the Buddha with an umbrella. Brahmā is wearing white long sleeve upper garment and white long nether garment. There is a white halo behind the head of Brahmā. Sakka is standing before the Buddha. He is wearing white long sleeve upper garment and white long nether garment. Both Brahmā and Sakka are wearing head gears. Sakka is carrying an alms bowl on his shoulder and turning his head back to the Buddha. Venerable Sāriputtarā is sitting on his knees at the feet of the Buddha and paying respect to the Buddha. He is wearing robes which cover both shoulders. Colour of the robes is red, body is yellow and shaven hair is black.

In Temple No. 2157/145 and Monument No. 92, which are 12th century temples, the Buddha was chubby and in Myanmar style and had physical features like round face and short neck. In mural paintings of Temple No. 2157/1451 and Monument No. 92, such colours as white, black, yellow and red were applied.

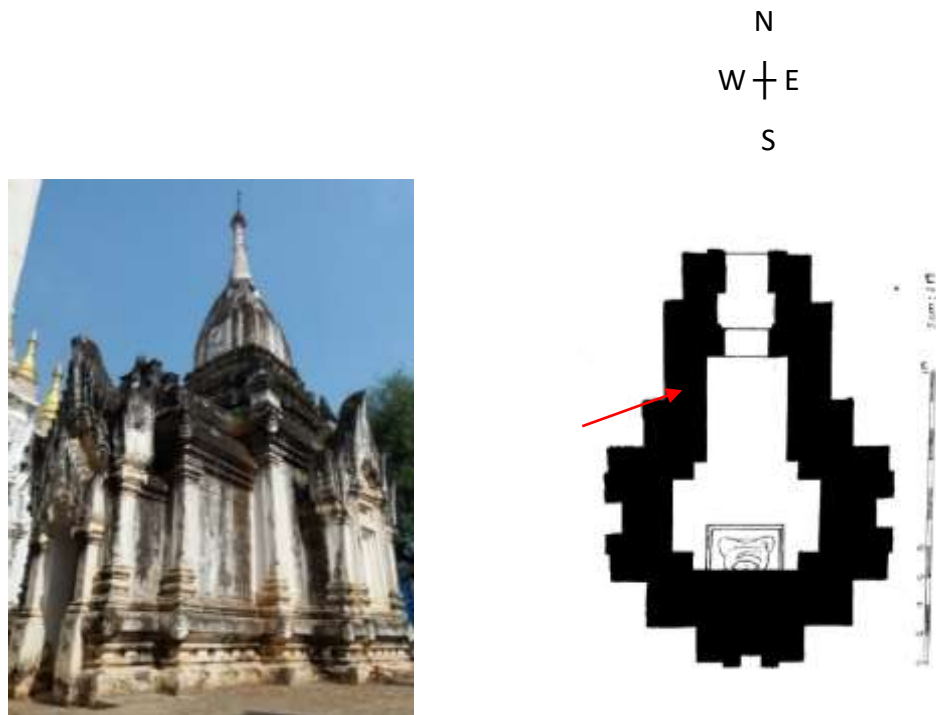


Figure. 3 Monument No. 92 (Razathu Temple)

Source: Photo by Researcher



Figure. 4 Descending from *Tāvātimsa* without Three Stairways

Source: Photo by Than Zaw (Geology)

Monument No. 1152

Monument No. 1152 is located on the east of Kyauk Myat Maw Pagoda, on the west of Monument No. 1150 and on the northwest of Soe Min Gyi Monastery (21° 08' 40.9" N & 94° 51' 17.5" E). It is a small single storey temple surmounted with a square tower. The main entrance is facing to the east. It was built in 13th century CE. Ceilings and inner walls of the temple were decorated with wall paintings. Lotus rosacea and circle patterns with small Buddha figures were painted on the ceilings and friezes of pointed obovals were adorned at the top of the walls. Dummy corner pilasters can be observed in the corners of the temple. Major themes of the wall paintings are the Great Eight Scenes from the life of the Buddha. The scene of the Descent from *Tāvātimsa* is on the north of the niche of the west wall. The painting is 11 inches wide and 2 feet high.

In the scene, the Buddha is descending from *Tāvātimsa*. The Buddha is wearing robes which cover only the left shoulder. There is no stairway in the scene. The Buddha is standing in Mahā Karuṇā mudrā on a lotus and wearing flat turban on the forehead. Colour of the robes is red, body is yellow and hair is black. The halo behind the head of the Buddha was painted in white, red, grey and black. A *pa-de-tha* tree is above the halo, and grey and black were used to paint the *pa-de-tha* tree. Brahmā is behind the Buddha and he is shading the Buddha with an umbrella. The umbrella was painted in white, red and grey. Brahmā was depicted with three heads. He is wearing white long sleeve upper garment and white long nether garment. There is a white and red halo behind the head of Brahmā. Sakka is before the Buddha and he is carrying alms bowl. He is turning his head to the Buddha. He is wearing white short sleeve upper garment and red short nether garment. He is also wearing head gear and earplugs. There is a white halo behind the head of Sakka. Venerable Sāriputtarā is sitting on his knee at the lotus on which the Buddha is standing. He is raising his hands in respect manner. He is wearing robes which cover both shoulders. The halo behind the head of Venerable Sāriputtarā was painted in white and red.

N
W + E
S

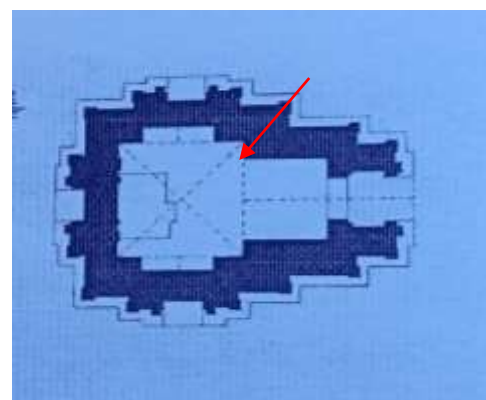


Figure 5. Monument No. 1152

Source: Photo by Researcher



Figure 6. Descending from *Tāvātimsa* without Three Stairways

Source: Photo by Than Zaw (Geology)

Monument No. 339/212 (B)

Monument No. 339/212 (B) lies on the east of Wattanato Monument Group, on the northwest of Sulekone and on the east of Monument No. 2320 (21° 10' 33.7" N & 94° 53' 17.3" E). It is a medium size single storey temple surmounted with a square tower. Vestibule is on the east side of the temple. It was built in 13th century CE. Lotus rosacea, circle patterns with lotus designs, dummy corner pilasters and the scenes from the life of the Buddha can be seen on the ceilings and inner walls of the temple. The Great Eight Scenes from the life of the Buddha were painted on the south wall of east vestibule. Length of the painting is 6' 9" and the width is 3' 8". The painting is seriously damage but the scenes of Descent from *Tāvātimsa* and Preaching Abhidhama can only be seen now. The scene of Descent from *Tāvātimsa* is 10" wide and 1 inch 4 feet high.

In the scene, the Buddha is standing on a lotus in Mahā Karuṇā mudrā. The Buddha is wearing robes which cover only the left shoulder. There is no stairway in the painting. The Buddha is wearing a flat turban on the forehead. Colour of the robes is red, body is white and hair is black. The halo behind the Buddha was painted in white, yellow and black. Brahmā is standing behind the Buddha and shading the Buddha with an umbrella. He was depicted with three heads. There is a yellow and black halo behind the head of Brahmā. Sakka is standing before the Buddha and cradling an alms bowl in his arms. He is turning his head back to the Buddha. He is also wearing head gear and earplugs. The halo behind the head of Sakka was

painted in black. There is a *pa-de-tha* tree above the halo of the Buddha. Top left and right corners of the painting were ornamented with creeper designs.

In Monument No. 1152 and Monument No. 339/212 (B) being the 13th temples, compared to physical characteristic, the Buddha's head seemed to be a little big and his forehead, temple and cheeks were broad and nose pointed. Like nose of Buddha images in the 11th century AD, the nose was not big nor pointed. Mural paintings in Monument No. 1152 and Monument No. 339/212 had mixture of blue and green and bright and pale ochre, and bright and pale cream were commonly used.



Figure 7. Monument No. 339/212 (B)

Source: Photo by Researcher



Figure 8. Descending from *Tāvātimsa* without Three Stairways

Source: Photo by Than Zaw (Geology)

Findings and Discussion

In Bagan, the wall paintings of the Scenes of the Descent from *Tāvatiṃsa* belonged to 12th-13th century CE. In the scene of the Descent from *Tāvatiṃsa*, the buddha was wearing robes which cover both shoulders and the Buddha was wearing robes which cover only the left shoulder.

The Brahmā was standing on the left side of the Buddha and he was shading the Buddha with an umbrella. The umbrellas in the scenes were similar to the stone umbrella and *Pathain* umbrella, Myanmar traditional umbrella. The umbrellas in the scenes of 12th century CE were like stone umbrellas. Later the style of umbrella was changed in the scenes of 13th century CE similar to *Pathain* umbrella. Outlines of the paintings of the 12th century CE were painted in black and filling colours were brown and creamy white. In 13th century CE, yellow, white was used for the paintings to be brighter. The art of wall paintings had been started in the Early Bagan period, and decorating the inner walls of the temples with wall paintings had been popular throughout Bagan period. That practice was more popular in later part of Bagan period.

Conclusion

People of Bagan period used to depict the Scene of the Descent from *Tāvatiṃsa* without Three Stairways in 12th century CE and 13th century CE was series of paintings. In the Scenes of the Descent from *Tāvatiṃsa* without Three Stairways, the Buddha was wearing robes which cover both shoulders and the Buddha was wearing robes which cover only the left shoulder. In the scene, the Buddha was standing in Mahā Karuṇā mudrā. Brahmā was standing on the left of the Buddha and shading the Buddha with an umbrella. Brahmā was depicted with only one head but sometimes he was depicted with three heads. The umbrellas in the scenes are similar to the stone umbrella and *Pathain* umbrella, Myanmar traditional umbrella. The umbrellas in the scenes of 12th century CE was like stone umbrellas. Later the style of umbrella was changed in the scenes of 13th century CE are similar to *Pathain* umbrella. Sakka was standing on the right of the Buddha. He was carrying alms bowl in his arms and turning his head back to the Buddha. In the painting of monument no. 92 (Razathu temple), Venerable Sāriputtarā was sitting on his knees at the feet of the Buddha and paying respect to the Buddha. He was wearing robes which cover both shoulders. The Scene of the Descent from *Tāvatiṃsa* has been popular since Bagan period. And also, it was written for the purpose of the informing about the evolving art works in the Bagan period.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our heartfelt thanks to Rector Dr. Tin Moe Thu Zar and Pro-Rector Dr. Thwe Lin Ko, Dr. Khin Maw Maw Soe and Dr. U Win Naing, Yadanabon University for their interest and encouragement on the research work. We would like to thank Dr. Daw Than Aye, Professor, Department of Archaeology, Yadanabon University for her guidance, suggestions and advice to affectively present our research.

References

Primary Sources

Field trip in Bagan (29.6.2024) to (30.6.2024)

Interview

Interview with U Min Swe (Deputy Director, Research Section, Department of Archaeology and National Museum, Bagan Branch), 10 June 2024

Secondary Sources

Myanmar Books

Bo Kay, U, 1972, ပုဂံသုတေသနလမ်းညွှန် (Guide in Bagan Research), Yangon, Sarpaybeikman Press

Dhamma Sāmī Bhivamsa, Ashin, မူလမဟာဗုဒ္ဓဝင် (*Maha Buddha Vamsa*), Yangon, Khin Cho Tun Publication

Sao Htun Hmat Win, 1986, မြန်မာ့ရိုးရာပဋိမာသိပ္ပံပညာ, (*Burmese Buddhist Iconography*), Yangon, Ministry of Religious Affair

Than Tun, Dr, 1976, ရှေးရိုးမြန်မာပန်းချီ (*Ancient Myanmar Paintings*), Yangon, Ministry of Culture

Zaw Gyi, 1951, ပုဂံခေတ်ပန်းချီသဘော (*The Meaning of Paintings in Bagan period*), Yangon, Shu Ma Wa press

Pichard, Pierre, 1993, *Inventory of Monument of Bagan*, Vol. II, France, United Nation, Monument 1137-1439 UNESCO