

Pamela Cutman and Bob Hudson



The relatively little-known Pyu culture of central Burma was overtaken by the Burmese from the 10th or 11th centuries. This was literally the case with structure 996 at Pagan, where an earlier Pyu construction has been encased within a Burmese shrine dated to around the 11th century (Pichard 1994:224).

A number of early stupas encased in later stupas of the Pagan period are known, although the age of the earlier structures is still a matter for speculation. Monument 996, however, contains a wealth of material linking the earlier structure definitively with Pyu culture, and thereby confirming Pyu occupation in Pagan before the coming of the Burmans. It also reveals many shared characteristics with the later art of the Dvaravati culture in Thailand.

Today 996 is called Paw-daw-mu (recently uncovered) or Gu-byauk (decorated). The site was partially excavated and conserved by engineers from the Archaeology Department between 1995 and 2002, but no analysis or report was made. The authors have visited

the site on a number of occasions from 1995, and Hudson was able to make plans and take measurements after the excavations had ceased in 2003.

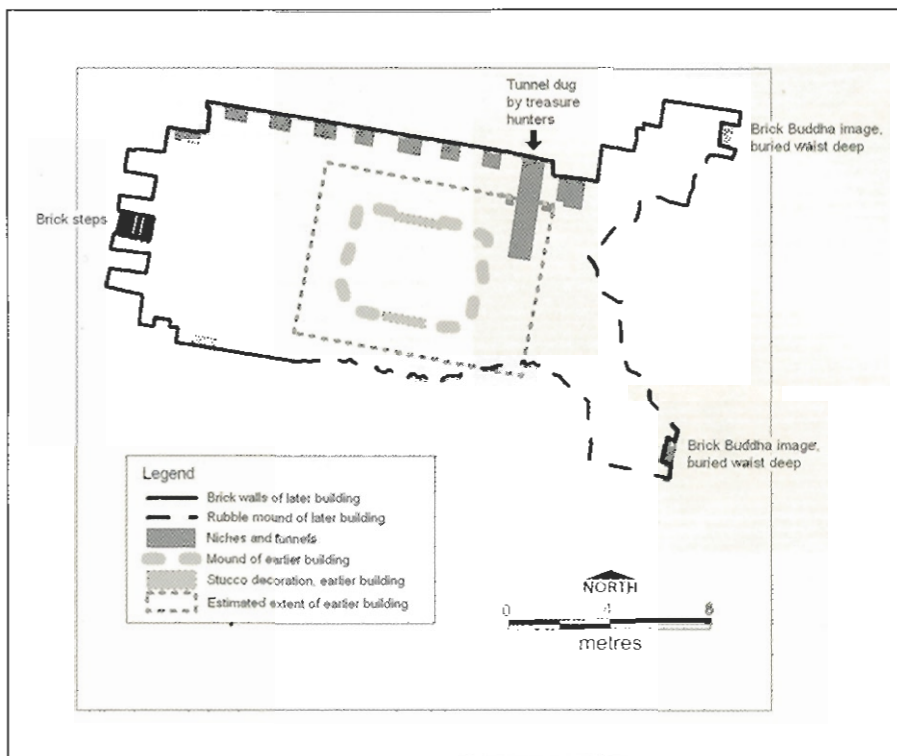
The bases of both buildings are buried 80 centimetres below the present ground level. This can be measured because a tunnel dug by treasure hunters on the north side goes through and under both structures. The lower torsos of brick Buddha images can just be seen at ground level on two projections on the east side of the outer shrine. Brick and stucco Buddha images in *caitya* niches on the outside wall of the inner shrine would have been at a religiously acceptable eye level height before the surrounding area was filled in. The upper part of the inner building has been exposed and covered with a roof for conservation. The exposed area has slumped heavily toward the east, along with its casing of later bricks, suggesting that the motivation for constructing the outer shrine over the inner one was not the collapse of the earlier building, as both seem to have collapsed together. Of particular interest are the *caitya* or *kudu* window motifs which

form part of the decoration of the outer structure, motifs not known elsewhere in Pagan architecture but reflecting the architecture of the inner, earlier structure. The inner building is decorated with ornate stucco, and has niches containing grey sandstone Buddha images at what would originally have been head height from the ground. The remains of six of these images are stored on site, and at least two remain in situ, partially visible through openings in the outer wall.

The most remarkable feature of the inner structure is its figurative and architectonic stucco. While largely fragmentary and in poor condition, it is the best example of Pyu stucco in Burma and rivals that of contemporary Dvaravati sites in Thailand. The main intact section, on the north side, comprises an ornate pediment enlivened with niches. The stucco has been built up over a brick base, and would have originally been painted with earth pigments. A round niche at the top holds an earth-touching Buddha, now unfortunately somewhat broken, although it can be discerned that it had an elegantly conceived face, with a



PEDIMENT ON NORTH SIDE OF TEMPLE 996, PRE 11TH CENTURY, PAGAN, MYANMAR. STUCCO, APPROX. 3.0 M. X 3.0 M. PHOTO BOB HUDSON 2005



long nose, slightly protruding curved lips and a pert *usnisa*. The image is framed with a ring of stylised lotus petals. Below the Buddha are three niches, the outer two in the form of a *caitiya* arch with a head peering through a round window frame, a common motif in the art of Gupta India and early Southeast Asia. Each is surmounted and surrounded with vegetal designs incorporating the lotus. The faces are amazingly alive, the slanted eyes, grinning lips and curled hair having been incised masterfully. They strongly resemble stucco images from the late Dvaravati period, around the late eighth or ninth centuries. The central niche is rectangular and holds a small sandstone Buddha image, again with the right



NAGA FROM PEDIMENT OF TEMPLE 996, PĀGĀN, MYANMAR. STUCCO, HT 12 CM. PHOTO BOB HUDSON 2005

hand touching the earth. He sits on a throne comprising the lower half of an open lotus on a stalk with sharply delineated leaves on either side. The ingenious composition can also be read as a *kirtimukha* ('glory face') head with bulging eyes and bared teeth, often found above entrances.

Broken from above the pediment is an elaborate cobra or naga with bulging eyes and tail wrapped around himself, and also within a round niche with a lotus petal surround. Pre-Indic naga cults are known to have existed in Burma where the naga is associated with the earth and the waters and it features in both Buddhist and Hindu mythology, often as a guardian of underground wealth and keeper of life energy stored in the waters. This is one of the earliest depictions in the art of Southeast Asia. In early Angkorean art the naga was to become a key lintel feature.

A group of unique crudely made demon (Burmese *bibi*) heads were also found during the excavations, their provenance unrecorded. They are characterised by their bulging eyes and madly grinning mouths, some



OGRE PROTECTORS, TEMPLE 996, PĀGĀN, MYANMAR. STUCCO APPROX. 14/13 CM X 13 CM PHOTO BOB HUDSON 2005

with profuberant incised teeth. The backs of the heads are smooth, indicating that they were not attached to the main structure, and they show little or no sign of weathering. We speculate that these were placed around the foundations of the inner shrine, facing outwards in order to deter evil spirits, in much the same way as later in the Pagan period votive tablets were placed facing outwards from the sub-basements of shrines to create a sanctified space.

There are indications that the southern side of the structure was similarly decorated, as a figure peering out of a round window and other ornamentation have been uncovered there.

While no analysis of the stucco has yet been undertaken here or elsewhere in Burma, it can be presumed that its manufacture was related to the method used in Thailand during this period and in Burma today. Made from limestone heated over a long period, it is slaked with water to form quicklime. When this dries it forms calcium carbonate as it reacts with carbon dioxide in the air. To add strength sand or gravel is often added. It would appear that for the figures and more intricate floral work the stucco was hand-formed from slabs of wet stucco, the finer features such as eyes incised with a sharp instrument. Often repeated architectural elements could be moulded. The inner layers are usually made of course stucco with large aggregates and the finer outer layer mixed with smaller particles of sand and possibly some kind of binding medium such as vegetable or animal glue.

Apart from the stucco, the inner shrine has a number of interesting elements. Stamped and finger-marked bricks connect it with the Pyu site of Sriksetra, an important centre from between the 4th and 10th centuries. One brick is stamped with a lotus bud motif found at the Kyaukkat-gon mound at Sriksetra (5), while other motifs such as a horse and a brahmani duck are also found. Fragments of Buddha images made of terracotta and sandstone have been found. The facial features of the sandstone images in particular show a close connection with Dvaravati art. It is also apparent that some architectural fixtures have been glazed.



It would appear that the Pyu inner shrine was square or almost square in plan, with the main entrance to the east. This compares with several shrines at Sriksetra, notably with the vaulted Bebe shrine. The square plan is the most common in Dvaravati architecture also. Early dates for the Sriksetra shrines have been contested as they have features, particularly vaulting, in common with Pagan architecture. Further investigation of site 996 will clarify whether the late Pyu had developed this technique.

The Buddha images discovered so far invariably sit in the lotus position, touching the ground with the right hand. At Sriksetra and other Pyu sites a range of *asanas* and *mudras* are observed. It has been noted that in Thailand the earth-touching posture became the norm in the later Dvaravati period. It is interesting to observe that in the stucco Buddhas a pleated section of the garment protrudes from under the legs, turning inwards to the right. This is also the case in

some later Dvaravati images from U Thong (Boisselier 1975: 76). While the date of the outer structure can be dated to the 11th century, the inner does not appear to be earlier than around the 10th century.

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