

REVEALED IN THE RUINS: BUDDHA IMAGES AND RELIQUARIES FROM A BAGAN PAGODA

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In 1975, Bagan (Pagan) in Myanmar (Burma) was hit by a massive earthquake. Many of the 3,300 historic buildings in the 11th-14th century city were damaged (Hudson 2008), including the Hsutaung-pyi ("wish-fulfilling") pagoda. This brick stupa, located along the road between the Nyaung-u airport and New Bagan, is part of a large Bagan period monastic complex, some of which remains in use. Following the earthquake, the monks recovered some religious objects from the debris. These included a Buddha image characteristic of the 18th-19th century Konbaung period and a screw-top jar containing small pebbles. On the assumption that all the relics were recent, no particular attention was paid to them at the time. In 2003 however, archaeologists from Bagan visited the monastery and realised that there was an earlier group of objects amongst the ruins. The artifacts were taken to the Archaeology Department to be drawn and recorded and as part of the recording process, I was invited to photograph each piece. They were then returned to the monastery to be re-enshrined in the restored stupa.

The most unusual of the finds are two reliquaries carved from translucent quartz (silicon dioxide, also called rock crystal) and decorated with gold. A bulbous stupa has a removable top to allow access to a vertical central chamber which contains granular material. A second reliquary resembles a large canine tooth with a similar central tube. It was found in its own sandstone container. Seven years before the foundation of the Hsutaung-pyi a donor of a pagoda two kilometres away, the Lemyethna at Minnanthu, had said in a stone inscription: "I placed relics of the holy Body...within a casket of crystal" (Luce, G. H.: 1932), suggesting that somewhere else at Bagan, perhaps under undisturbed pagodas, these two reliquaries might have counterparts. The granular or pebble-like materials inside the reliquaries are of a type frequently displayed in pagodas, monasteries or museums in Myanmar. They are believed to be the post-cremation remains of holy people, senior monks, or the "historical" Buddha or his predecessors, many of whose relics, according to doctrinal sources (Bhaddanta Vicittasarabhivamsa 1992: Vol 1 Part 2), were dispersed across the Buddhist world. Different colours and textures in the granules are believed to represent different body parts, such as bone, blood or fat.

GOLD AND QUARTZ STUPA-SHAPED RELIQUARY (HEIGHT 6 CM)
HSUTAUNG-PYI PAGODA, BAGAN, 1230 CE. PHOTO: BOB HUDSON



An 11cm high bronze stupa has four windows made of rock crystal. These are now discoloured, but would have originally provided a view of the bronze Buddha image inside. The bottom of the stupa bell is ringed with cabochon (unfaceted) gemstones. Devotees worship at reveal Buddha seated in *bhumisparsha mudra*, his right hand in the earth-touching position. This ritual gesture represents the Buddha's moment of enlightenment: challenged by the forces of the evil Mara, he calls the earth to bear witness to the meritorious deeds of his previous lives. The water he poured to signify these deeds is wrung from the hair of the earth goddess and washes away the demon army.

A separate bronze Buddha image features a reverse *bhumisparsha mudra*. The left hand touches the earth, rather than the right. The left-hand variant is reasonably common in sculpture and images of the first millennium CE Pyu period city of Sriksetra (Luce, G. H.: 1985 Vol 2 Plates 23, 61), but it is relatively rare at Bagan. It may be an older image recycled, the result of amateur manufacture, or a

TOOTH-SHAPED GOLD AND QUARTZ RELIQUARY
(HEIGHT 12 CM) HSUTAUNG-PYI PAGODA, BAGAN, 1230 CE.
PHOTO: BOB HUDSON.



deliberate choice by the donor. The stylistic rules were obviously not so strict at Bagan as to exclude it from the reliquary deposit.

Two sandstone Buddha images were recovered, one is shown here seated on a lotus throne. The downcast eyes, and the overall downward direction of the nose and chin, described in Burmese as the "crow drinking water" style, are characteristic of the Bagan period. Both images show evidence of having originally been painted.

A sandstone "fat monk" sitting with hands in his lap in the posture of meditation, and lacking the symbolic flame on top of the head that marks a Bagan-period image of the Buddha, has more than a dozen counterparts at Bagan. There are examples in silver, bronze, plaster or terracotta as well as sandstone. G.H. Luce describes it as a popular cult image of the 12th-13th centuries (Luce, G. H. 1969: Vol 3 Plates 90-91).

The stone images and the bronze stupa with its tableau of worshippers have many counterparts (Luce, G. H. 1969: Vol 3 Plates

BRONZE BUDDHA IMAGE WITH LEFT HAND TOUCHING

THE EARTH (HEIGHT 5.5 CM). HSUTAUNG-PYI PAGODA, BAGAN, 1230 CE. PHOTO: BOB HUDSON

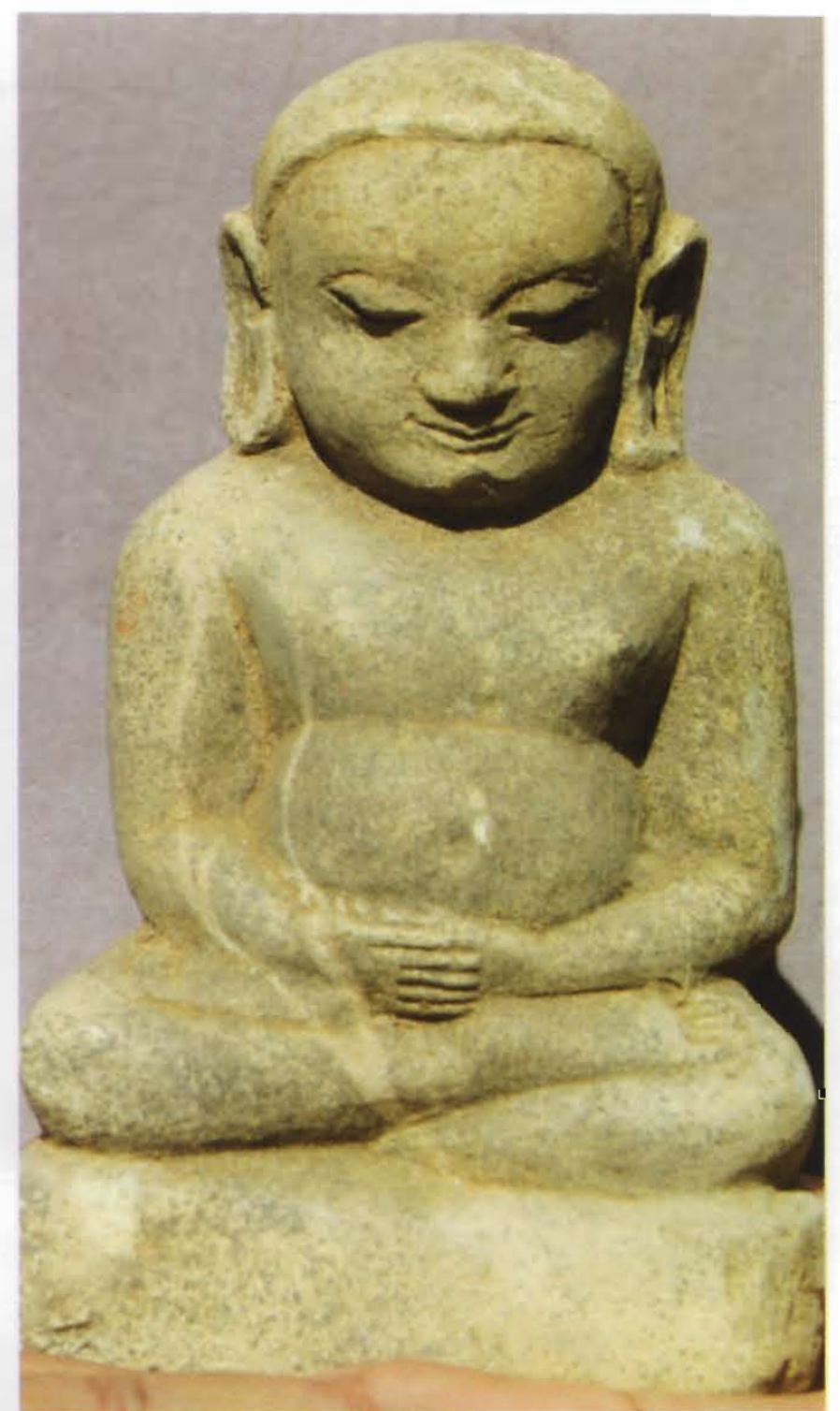


SANDSTONE BUDDHA IMAGE ON LOTUS THRONE

(HEIGHT 13 CM) HSUTAUNG-PYI PAGODA, BAGAN, 1230 CE. PHOTO: BOB HUDSON



SANDSTONE "FAT MONK" IMAGE (HEIGHT 18 CM) HSUTAUNG-PYI PAGODA, BAGAN, 1230 CE. PHOTO: BOB HUDSON



407-10, 425-428) but the gold and crystal reliquaries are a rarity. The inscription mentioned above from the Lemyethna hints that they were not unique to the Hsutaung-pyi. It may be that previous finds were quickly re-enshrined as sacred objects. Should they have fallen into less pious hands, they might have been too tempting in terms of their portability and gold content to make it into the official record.

The provenance of this group of artefacts is imperfect. It is not clear whether there was one relic chamber, with the later materials added, or a separate chamber added some time after the 18th century. To the monks who found the objects in the debris, these were all simply religious relics, of equal importance. Memories of the recovery of the artefacts are hazy, and there is no way of telling whether other items may have been found but have since

disappeared. However a stone inscription dated 1230 CE (Pichard 1994: Vol 4: 114-15) places the original deposition very accurately in time. The objects are most likely to have been made not long before the relic chamber was sealed, with the specific purpose of enshrining them to sanctify the pagoda. On the available evidence, these are elegant examples of the art style, religious imagery and craft techniques of early 13th century Bagan. They provide valuable new material for comparison with other Bagan finds, and with finds in other Burmese locations and contemporary regional centres.

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GEMSTONE-DECORATED BRONZE STUPA WITH DEVOTEES (HEIGHT 11 CM) HSUTAUNG-PYI PAGODA, BAGAN, 1230 CE. PHOTO: BOB HUDSON