

Myanmar (Burma)

The Temples of

Bagan

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Introduction

Travel guidebooks for the ultra curious, Approach Guides reveal a destination's essence by exploring a compelling aspect of its cultural heritage: art, architecture, history, food or wine.

Bagan, the ancient Buddhist capital in central Myanmar (Burma) that thrived from 850-1300, is one of the most magnificent and inspiring sites in Southeast Asia. It is yours to uncover.

What's in this guidebook

- **Comprehensive look at Bagan's art and architecture.** We provide an overview of Bagan's art and architecture, laying out the two types of religious structures (temples and stupas) and the art forms used to decorate them (paintings and sculpture). To make things come alive, we have packed our review with high-resolution images.
- **A tour that goes deeper on the most important sites.** Following our tradition of being the most valuable resource for culture-focused travelers, we offer a detailed tour of twenty-one of the premier sites. For each, we present information on its history, a detailed plan that highlights its most important architectural and artistic features, high-resolution images and a discussion that ties it all together.
- **Advice for getting the best cultural experience.** To help you plan your visit, this guidebook supplies logistical advice, maps and links to online resources. Plus, we give our personal tips for getting the most from your experience while on location.
- **Information the way you like it.** As with all of our guides, this book is optimized for intuitive, quick navigation; information is organized into bullet points to make absorption easy; and images are marked up with text that explains important features.

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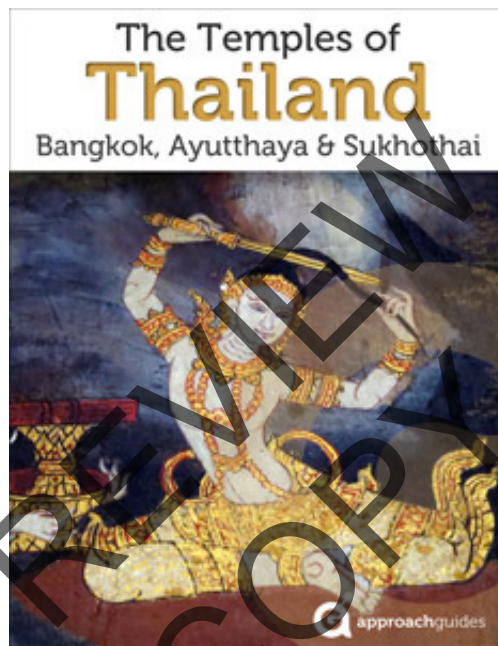
We hope that this cultural guidebook offers you fresh insights into Bagan's art and architecture and sets you on a path to making your own discoveries.

Have a great trip!

David Raezer

David and Jennifer Raezer
Founders, Approach Guides
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Guide to Myanmar (Burma): The Temples of Bagan (Pagan)

Version 1.1

by [David Raezer](#) and [Jennifer Raezer](#)

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Map of Bagan

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7. Gubyaukgyi * (near village of Wetkyi-in)

8. Lawkananda

9. Lokateikpan

10. Mingalazedi

11. Nagayon *

12. Nandamanya *

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16. Payathonzu *

17. Shwesandaw *

18. Shwezigon *

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—

The whole, as seen from the river,
might pass for a scene in another planet,
so fantastic and unearthly was the architecture ...
Of the number of the temples at Pagan
I feel scarcely able to form any estimate ...
But of all sizes I should not guess them at less than eight hundred,
or perhaps a thousand ...
In these there is an actual sublimity of architectural effect,
which excites wonder, almost awe,
and takes hold of the imagination in a manner that renders
apology for them as “Burmese,” absurdly out of place.

—

Captain Henry Rule, on the ancient city of Bagan in 1855.
You can [download for free the entire report](#)
he presented to the sponsor of his expedition,
the Governor-General of India. It contains some valuable insights.

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BAGAN'S ART AND ARCHITECTURE

Getting Started

The following introductory sections explore four aspects of Bagan's impressive architectural and artistic legacy.

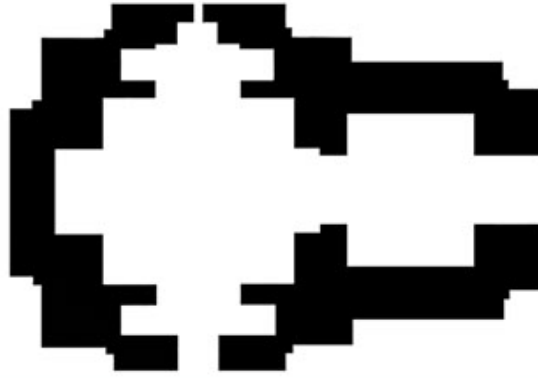
- **Temple architecture.** Temples are the primary religious structure in Bagan. This section walks through the defining features of Bagan's temples, including their floorplans, layout, structural features, and decoration. For each of these features, this guide discusses how it was shaped by historical influences and evolved over Bagan's 450-year history.
- **Stupa architecture.** This section offers a similar review of Bagan's stupas, exploring the influence that earlier Indian and Sri Lankan stupa prototypes had on Bagan's architects.
- **Painting.** Paintings were used to decorate temple interiors. This section covers the two dominant painting styles and typical subject matter.
- **Sculpture.** Sculpture was the other primary temple decoration. This section profiles the Bagan sculptural style, specifically as it relates to Buddha images.

Following this four-part review, this Approach Guide reviews 21 of the most impressive temples and stupas in Bagan, providing a framework for understanding the role each plays in Bagan's artistic and architectural landscape.

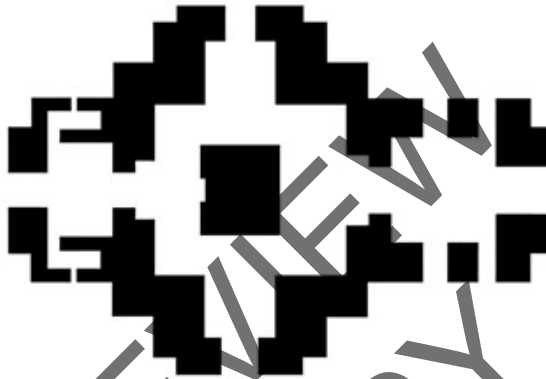
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Floorplan Type #1: Central Shrine



Floorplan Type #2: Solid Core Shrine



Floorplan Type #3: Central Shrine w/ Ambulatory

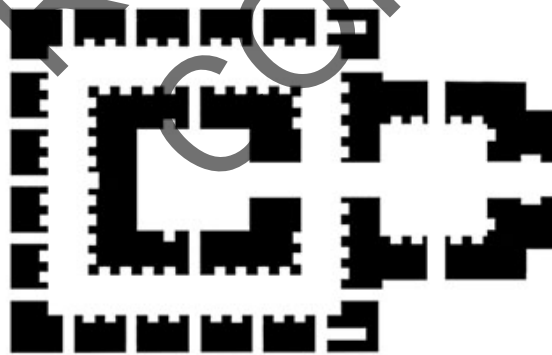


Fig. 1. Bagan temples: three floorplan types.

Bagan's temples adhere to **three basic floorplans** (see **Fig. 1**), each of which is explored in detail below. We will **continue to refer to back to these three floorplan types** when we profile specific temples in the second part of this guidebook.

Keep in mind, while many other temple features show a linear progression in styles through time, this is not the case for floorplans, as all three floorplan types are employed consistently throughout Bagan's history.

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Superstructures

Types of Temple Superstructures

The typical Bagan temple has a **stair-step pyramid of terraces** (green highlights in Fig. 5), usually three, that sits atop its roof and supports the superstructure.



Fig 5. Stupa-only superstructure (Myinpyagu temple). Highlights added.

The superstructure itself generally assumes one of two forms: stupa-only or vimana with small stupa.

Superstructure #1: Stupa-only

Some temples are topped exclusively with a bell-shaped stupa. See yellow highlights in Fig. 5.

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models, which necessarily yielded a unique, less natural-looking lion. This leads us to conclude that while the Bagan lion was derived from Indian precedent, it was passed through Chinese intermediaries, rather than through direct contact.



Fig. 9. Kirtimukha-bead-lotus cornice (Thambulla temple). Highlights added.

Kirtimukhas with Beads and Inverted Lotus Buds

Often a frieze — consisting of demon faces (*kirtimukhas*) disgorging strings of pearls and inverted lotus buds — lines temple cornices. In **Fig. 9**, the kirtimukha is marked with red highlights; pearls with green; and an inverted lotus bud with yellow.

The self-devouring monster Kirtimukha (also known as *kala*) has bulging eyes, sharp teeth and tiny hands. As told in the Skanda Purana, the lion-like monster Kirtimukha was created by Shiva in a moment of anger and forced to consume his own body to avoid starvation; he ate until only his head remained. This omnipresent gatekeeper reminds visitors of the monstrous nature of human existence (dictated by the attachment to duality, the pairs of opposites) and the resulting need to abandon attachments to the ego (consume the self) in order to reach enlightenment. In reminding the visitor to confront the monster that is himself upon entering the realm of the gods, kirtimukha fulfills a fundamental symbolic function.

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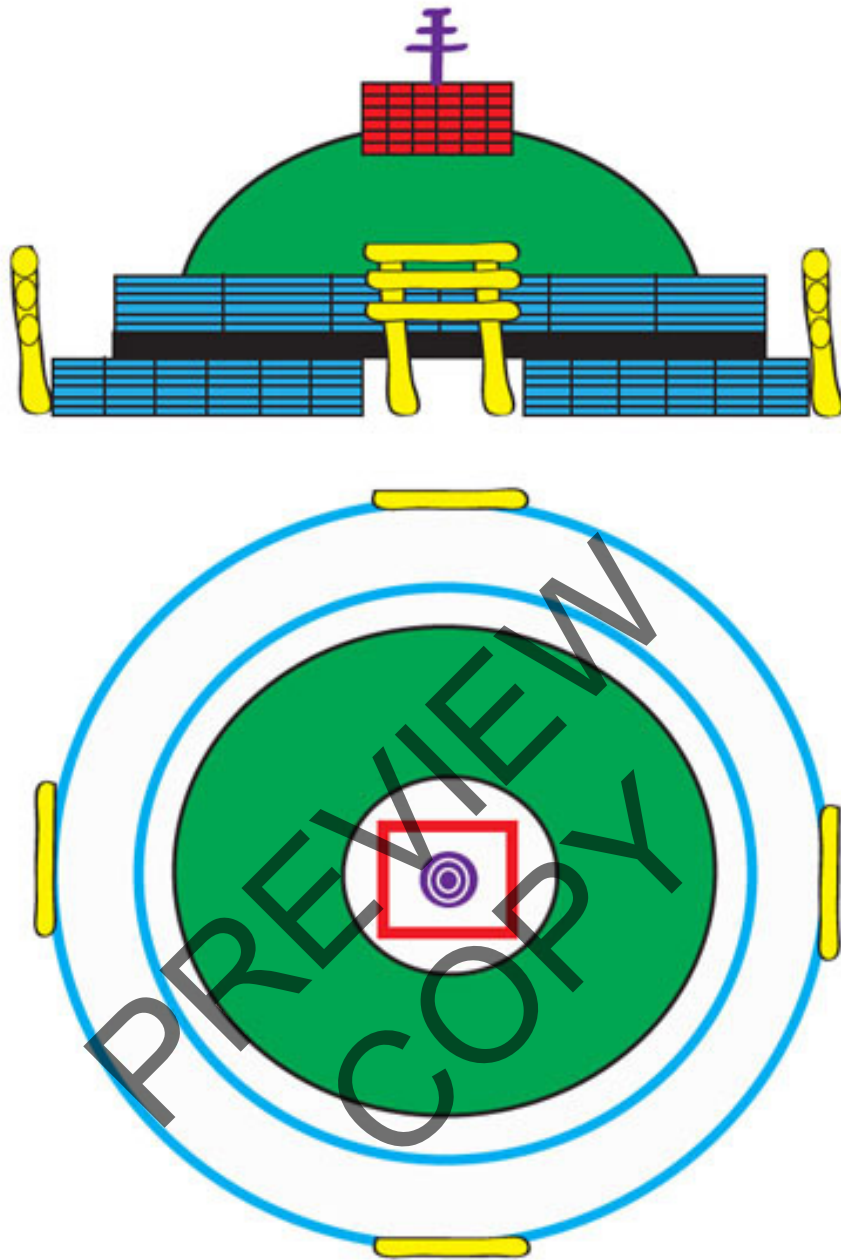


Fig. 14. Elevation and floorplan, Great Stupa, Sanchi, India. Highlights added.

In its most basic sense, **the stupa form is derived from the key elements of a sacred burial site**. The following three elements have been borrowed from life and serve as the fundamental elements of all stupas worldwide:

- **A hemispherical mound (*anda*).** The anda's domed shape recalls a mound of dirt associated with a burial site and consists of stone facing over a rubble core. The original stupa contained actual relics of the Buddha; the relic chamber, buried deep in its rubble interior, is called the *tabena*. The anda, which makes up the primary mass of the structure, has no accessible interior; this defines the structure as necessarily non-congregational. Over time, this hemispherical mound has taken on an even grander symbolic association: the center of the

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Fig. 17. Bagan bell-shaped stupa (Shwesandaw stupa).

Stepped terraces

As with other East Asian stupas, Bagan stupas typically have three (but up to five) stepped terraces that rise from a molded base (see yellow highlights in Fig. 17). They are a distinctive element of Bagan's stupas and mark a clear push away from earlier Sri Lankan prototypes which used no terraces.

The Sri Lanka-Inspired Early Period Stupa

In addition to the primary stupa at Bagan described above, there is also a unique stupa form that was employed in some of the earliest structures in Bagan: While maintaining a bell-shaped profile, it has **a more bulbous anda and (sometimes also) a harmika**. In these respects, it bears **close resemblance to Sri Lankan stupas**. These features are marked in red and yellow highlights, respectively, on a Bagan stupa topping Pahtothamya temple in Fig. 18.

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Fig. 22. Bodhisattva in the Decorative style, Gubyaukgyi (Myinkaba) temple.

Decorative Style

The Decorative style's primary purpose is to **awe the viewer and inspire an emotional reaction**. In this style, Buddhas are idealized and static, displaying a simple mudra. Accompanying, secondary figures (most notably, bodhisattvas) assume fanciful forms and appear to float in an otherworldly, religiously charged space (see [Fig. 22](#)).

Overall, the Decorative artist's attention was **focused on the form of the figure** and was likely inspired by Bengali prototypes that were Mahayana Buddhist in orientation. There is **minimal narrative** and heightened effect was often achieved through **repetition and all-over images** (see more detailed discussion below).

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Map of Bagan



Map of Bagan. See satellite view in [Google Maps](#).

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6. Gubyaukgyi * (near village of Myinkaba)

Overview

Gubyaukgyi (Myinkaba) is an **Early Period temple**, built in 1113 under King Kyanzittha (ruled 1084–1113).

Author Tip: While it pioneers a meaningful architectural development (an upper floor shrine), Gubyaukgyi is best known for its excellent paintings that, for the first time, begin to incorporate a heightened didactic agenda into the prevailing Decorative style. Bring a flashlight.

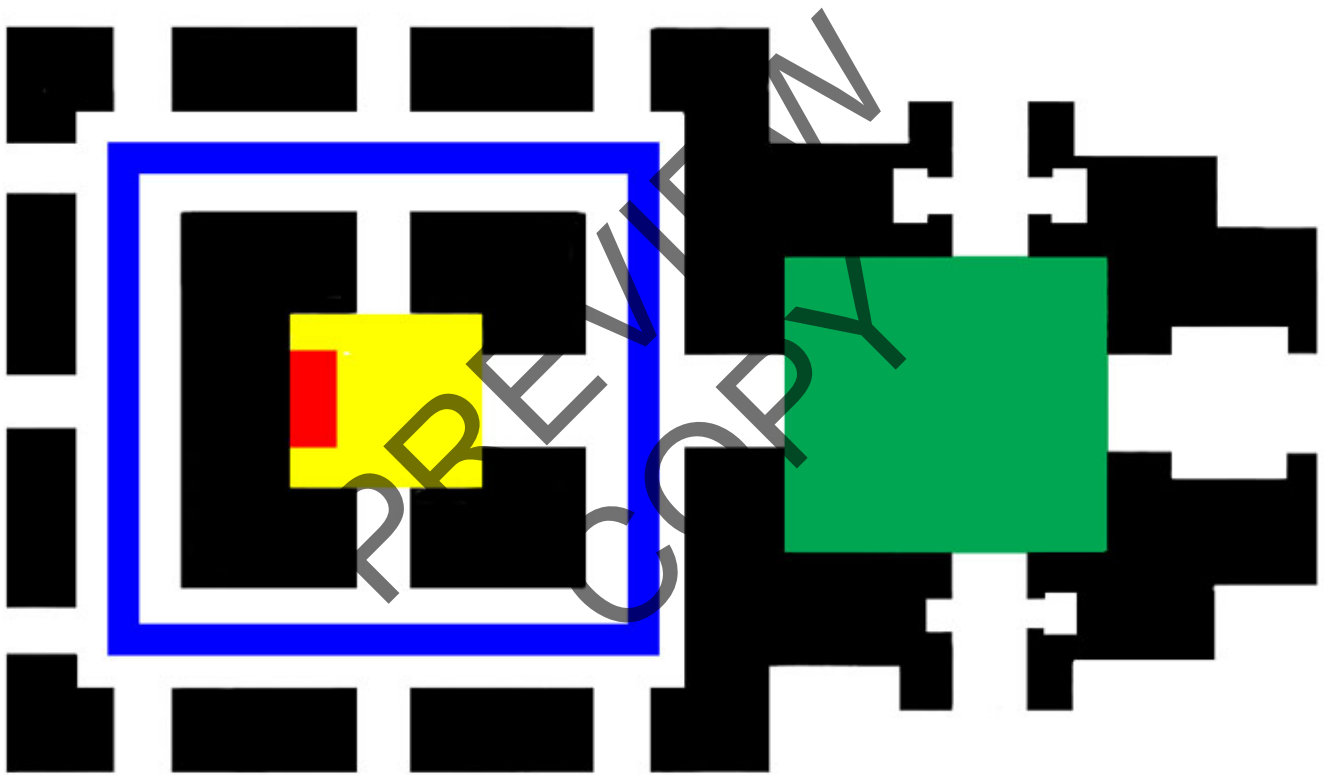


Fig. 54. Floorplan, Gubyaukgyi (Myinkaba). Highlights added.

Layout

Gubyaukgyi adheres to a **central shrine with ambulatory plan** (floorplan type #3). In **Fig. 54** and **Fig. 56**, the **shrine** is highlighted in yellow, the **primary Buddha image** in red, the **ambulatory** in blue and the **entrance hall** in green.



Fig. 55. Exterior, Gubyaukgyi (Myinkaba).

Exterior Appearance

Gubyaukgyi's superstructure consists of a vimana tower topped with a small stupa (see [Fig. 55](#)). And notably, **the stepped terraces that typically support the vimana tower have been eliminated** in favor of simple horizontal moldings. Small stupas sit on the corners of the ground floor's roof.

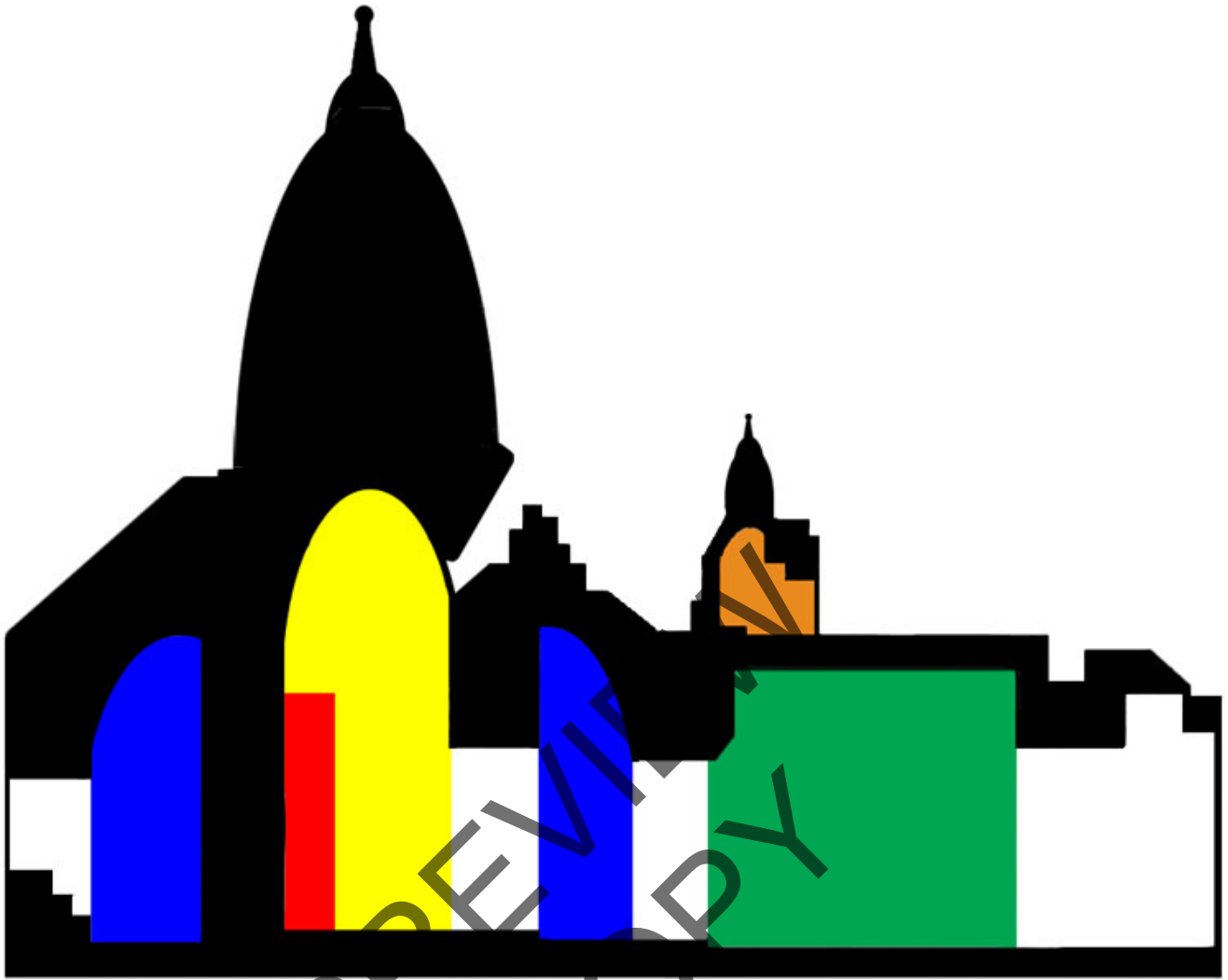


Fig. 56. Elevation cross-section, Gubyaukgyi (Myinkaba). Highlights added.

The move toward an upper shrine begins

A transitional structure, Gubyaukgyi **marks the beginning of the move to the two level, double-shrine temple** that prevails in Bagan's Late Period. Positioning a small shrine on the roof of the entrance hall was the first step in this development (see orange highlights in Fig. 56). This temple is a perfect example of this early model, what we have termed Stage 1 in the "Temple Architecture" section.

In later temples (Stage 2), the upper shrine was enlarged and moved back under the vimana tower; it typically became the temple's primary shrine. This transformation was made structurally possible by **changing the ground floor sanctuary from an open central shrine (floorplan type #1 or type #3) to a solid core arrangement (floorplan type #2)**; only a solid core arrangement could support the added weight associated with both the enlarged upper shrine and the vimana tower. However, at Gubyaukgyi, the old model prevails: the central shrine arrangement was maintained on the ground floor.

Exterior Stucco Reliefs

The **quality of the stucco work is of very high quality**, surpassing that of earlier temples. For the best examples of this high standard, look at the highly decorated window frames (with elaborate stupa tops) and pilasters. There is also a well-executed kirtimukha frieze with beads, inverted lotus buds and inverted V shapes. See [Fig. 57](#).

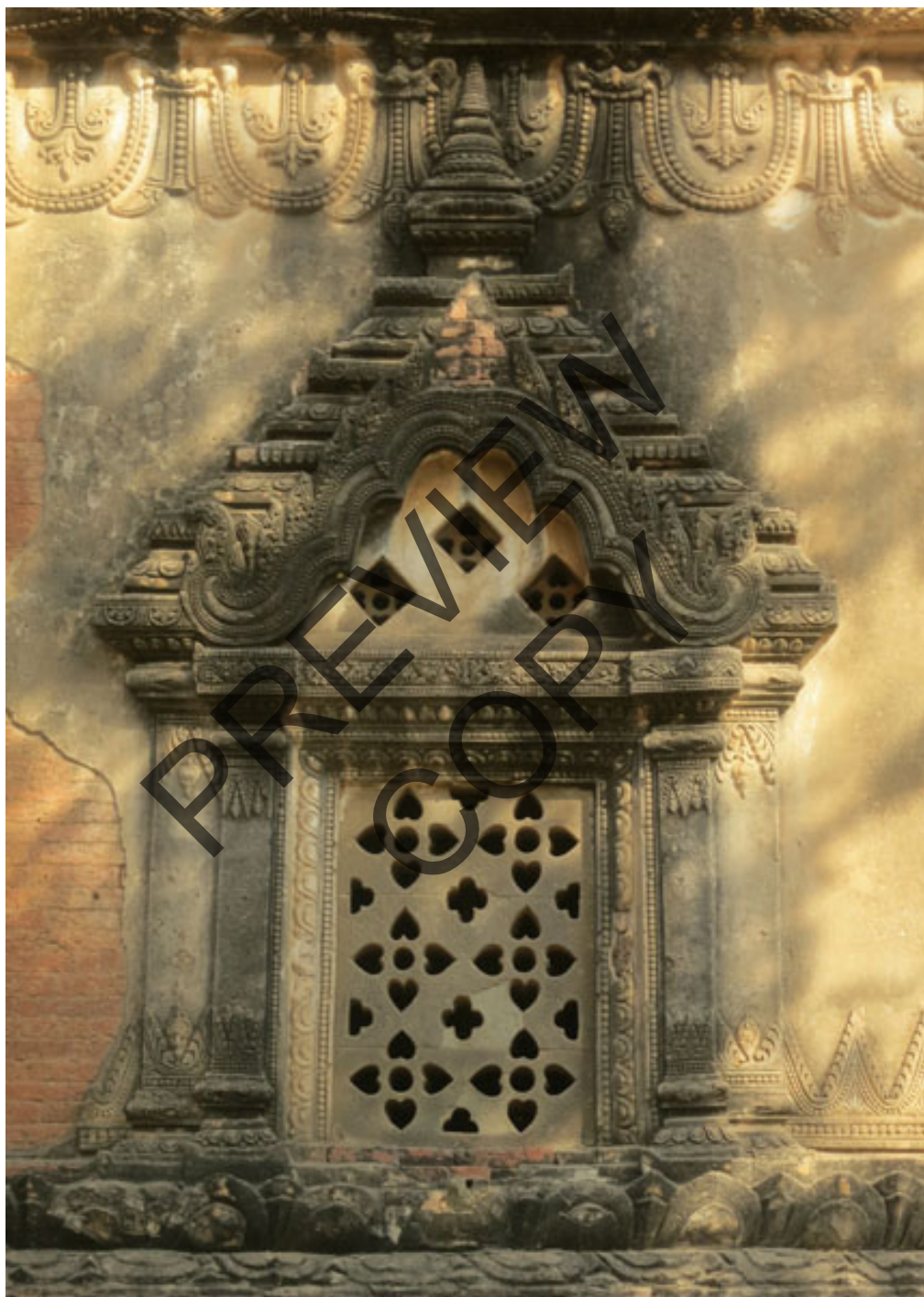


Fig. 57. Window decoration, Gubyaukgyi (Myinkaba).

Excellent Frescoes

Gubyaukgyi's **painted frescoes are some of the most impressive in Bagan**. While paintings in the entrance hall are badly deteriorated, those in the ambulatory and shrine are well preserved. Both styles — **Didactic** (outer wall of ambulatory) and **Decorative** (inner wall of ambulatory) — are in evidence.



Fig. 58. Didactic style Jataka fresco, outer wall, ambulatory. Gubyaukgyi (Myinkaba).

Didactic style frescoes

While this temple technically falls into the Early Period, it was built subsequent to the city's increased contact with Sri Lanka that began with the sacking of Thaton in 1060. **This makes it one of the first temples (after Pahtothamya) in whose paintings there is an infusion of greater narrative content** tied to a strict interpretation of Theravada Buddhist sutras (discourses of the

historical Buddha). At Gubyaukgyi, the Didactic style is just getting started.

The Jataka scenes on the outer wall of the ambulatory — tightly framed and discretely organized into six horizontal rows that rise to the ceiling — **are painted in this style.**

In a number of ways — e.g., size of frame, subject matter and the reduction of the depicted scene to the bare essentials — these scenes very much **resemble the Jataka terracotta plaques used to decorate the exterior of temples and stupas.** Further, consistent with their didactic agenda and Jataka plaque precedent, there is text (in the Mon language) below the image detailing the scene depicted. See [Fig. 58](#).



Fig. 59. Decorative style bodhisattva, entrance passageway. Gubyaukgyi (Myinkaba).

Decorative style frescoes

Despite the emergence of the Didactic style, the Decorative style remains strong. Paintings executed in this style are **concentrated on the inner wall of the ambulatory** (which depicts key events in the life of the Buddha) **and around the shrine**.

Look for the following:

- **Magnificent bodhisattva guardian figures** (see Fig. 59) are positioned at the entrance to the shrine and on the sides of the passageway between the entrance hall and the ambulatory.
- Inside the shrine, **a series of adoring figures** line the walls and face the primary Buddha.
- Although it is in a low state of preservation, Buddha's **Victory over Mara** is another highlight. Look for it on the western side of the temple (opposite the entrance), on the ambulatory's inner wall. The Earth Mother is clearly visible in a white aureola, wringing her hair to release the waters that decimate Mara's forces.
- To the immediate left of Victory over Mara on the same wall is Buddha's **Descent from Tavatimsa Heaven**. To spot it, look for the filmstrip-like ladder on which he descends to earth.

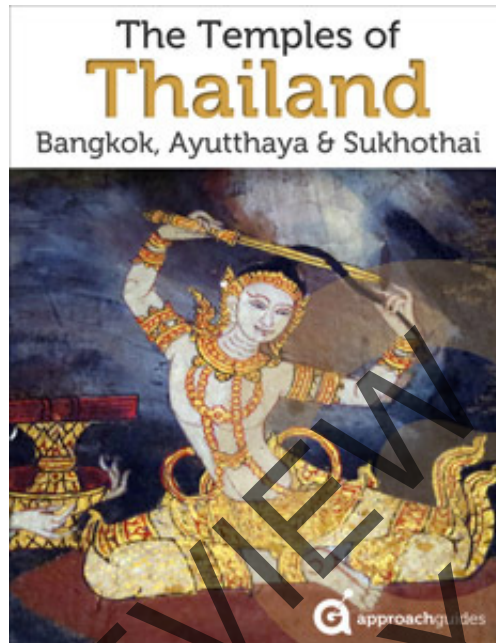
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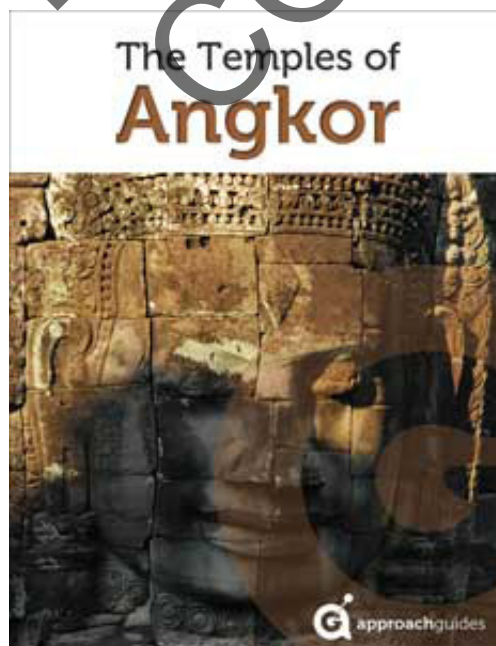
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- **"Burma Blossoms"** A once-impenetrable country reveals itself to the author one meal at a time. A great introduction to the country's cuisine. *By Matt Gross.*
- **Burmese Folk and Traditional Music** Listen to the sounds of traditional music in Myanmar in this compilation from Ethnic Folkways Library.
- **Buddha in your Backpack: Everyday Buddhism for Teens** For teens looking to learn more about Buddhism, this book introduces Buddha's teachings with advice for navigating everyday situations. *By Franz Metcalf.*

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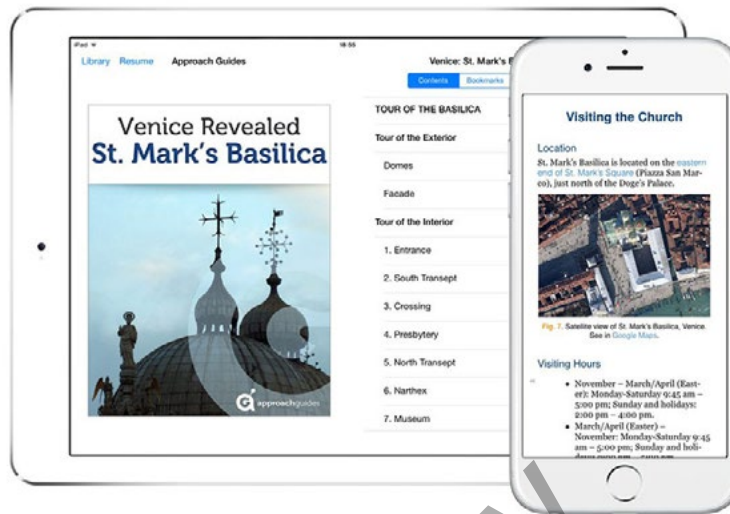
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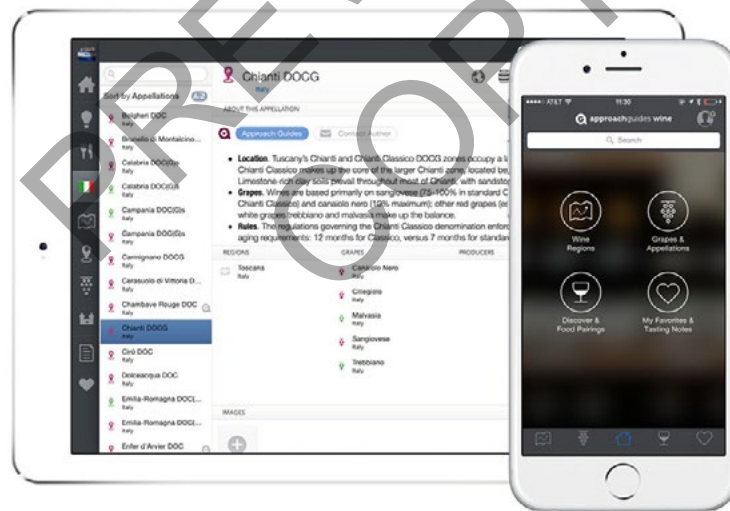
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