

The Temples of
Java
Borobudur & Prambanan



Introduction

Previewing this book?

Please [check out our enhanced preview](#), which offers a deeper look at this guidebook.

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.

Java is home to two of the most impressive temples in all of southeast Asia: Buddhist Borobudur and Hindu Prambanan. Borobudur (built 760-830) rises gradually in a series of majestic tiers, a testament to its stupa-mound inspiration; while Prambanan (built 850-856) soars vertically, drawing on south Indian temple prototypes. Both inspire with their innovative architectural designs, world-class narrative reliefs and compelling sculptures. Still infused with their historical magic, they are yours to discover.

What's in this guidebook

- **Art and architecture review.** We provide an overview of 800 years of Javanese art and architecture, isolating trademark features that you will see again and again while touring temples in central and east Java. To make things come alive, we have packed our review with high-resolution images.
- **Detailed tours of Borobudur and Prambanan.** Following our tradition of being the most valuable resource for culture-focused travelers, we offer detailed tours of Borobudur and Prambanan. For each, we reveal its most important architectural and decorative elements and provide 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.

Contact us anytime

Our readers are our greatest inspiration. Email us at founders@approachguides.com to let us know about your experience with Approach Guides — many of our recent updates have been inspired by customers like you. We personally respond to every email.

We hope this cultural guidebook offers you fresh insights into Java's incredible temples and sets you on a path to making your own discoveries.

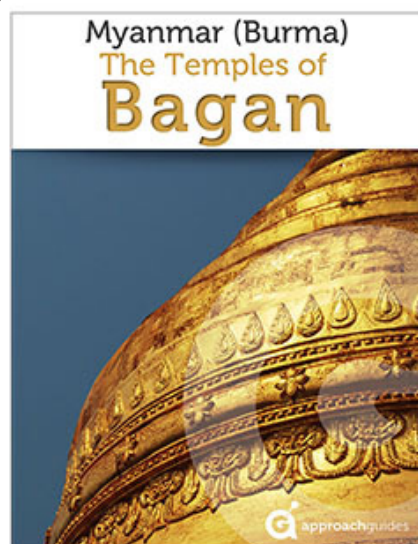
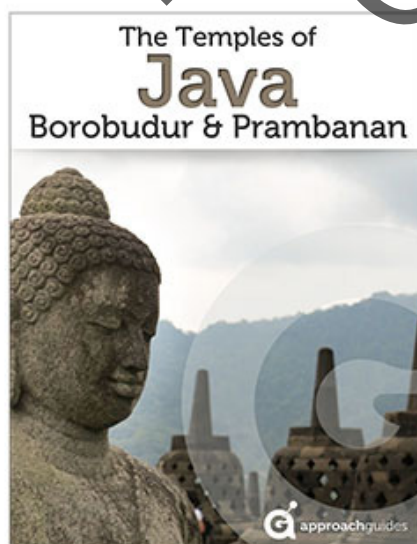
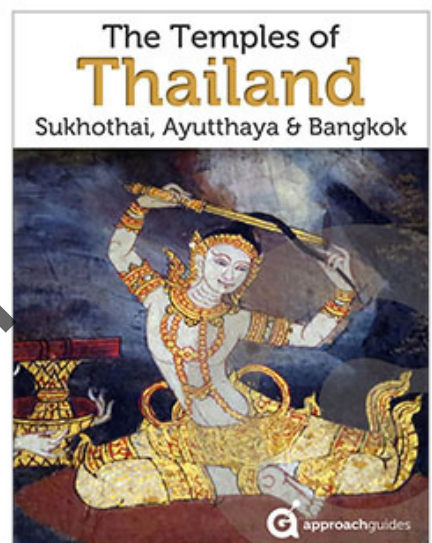
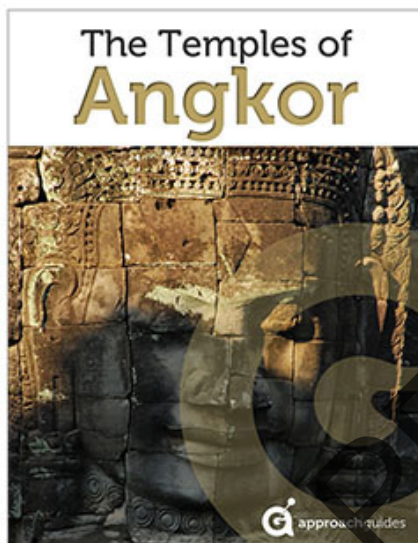
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David Raezer

David and Jennifer Raezer
Founders, Approach Guides
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The Temples of Java: Borobudur & Prambanan

Version 2.0

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

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—
The antiquities of Java have not, till lately, excited much notice;
nor have they yet been fully explored ...

The grandeur of their ancestors sounds
like a fable in the mouth of the degenerate Javan;
and it is only when it can be traced in monuments,
which cannot be falsified,

that we are led to give credit to their traditions concerning it.

Of these monuments ... none are so striking
as those found at Brambánan [Prambanan] ...
and Bóro Bódo [Borobudur] ...

The ruins ... are admirable as majestic works of art.

The great extent of the masses of building
covered in some parts with the luxuriant vegetation of the climate,
the beauty and delicate execution of the separate portions,
the symmetry and regularity of the whole,
the great number and interesting character
of the statues and bas-reliefs, with which they are ornamented,
excite our wonder that they were
not earlier examined, sketched and described.

—
Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles,
as recounted in "The History of Java," published in 1830.
Raffles, Lieutenant-Governor of British Java (1811-1815),
was responsible for the rediscovery of both
Prambanan (1811) and Borobudur (1814).

[Download a free copy of the book.](#)

Watch Before You Go

Insights Series Videos

Watch the Java episode of Insights, an online travel show from the creators of Approach Guides, which takes you on a tour of Borobudur's best narrative reliefs.

To see all episodes in the series, visit approachguides.com/video or subscribe to our [YouTube channel](#).



Borobudur's best narrative reliefs. [Watch the video.](#)

Getting Started

Java's Hindu and Buddhist temples — known locally as **candis**, meaning ancient shrines — are like nowhere else. Initially inspired by Indian prototypes, they take on a whole new life on this trade-linked island. With this guidebook, we provide insights to help you appreciate what makes them special, one of the world's greatest cultural treasures.

How to Use This Guidebook

This guidebook is divided into two basic sections.

- **Tours of Borobudur and Prambanan.** Borobudur and Prambanan are the two premier monuments on the island, unrivaled in scale and cultural significance. We offer a detailed tour of each, providing perspective into the most important architectural and decorative features.
- **Touring the island.** Subsequent sections help you explore the island's less well-known temples, pointing out how they fit within the island's 800-year temple-building tradition, from its origins in central Java to its final expression in east Java.

Author tip: Remember to use the table of contents. We have designed this guidebook for quick navigation. Since each site is broken down into a number of discrete chapters, even if you don't strictly follow our touring itinerary, you can always get the information you are looking for when you need it.

BOROBUDUR

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First Impressions

HORIZONTAL LINES DOMINATE, THE MOST CONSPICUOUS BEING THOSE OF THE ENCASEMENT BASE (LEVEL 1)

UNDERSIZED CENTRAL STUPA

RICHLY-TEXTURED TERRACES CREATE A DYNAMIC INTERPLAY OF LIGHT AND SHADE

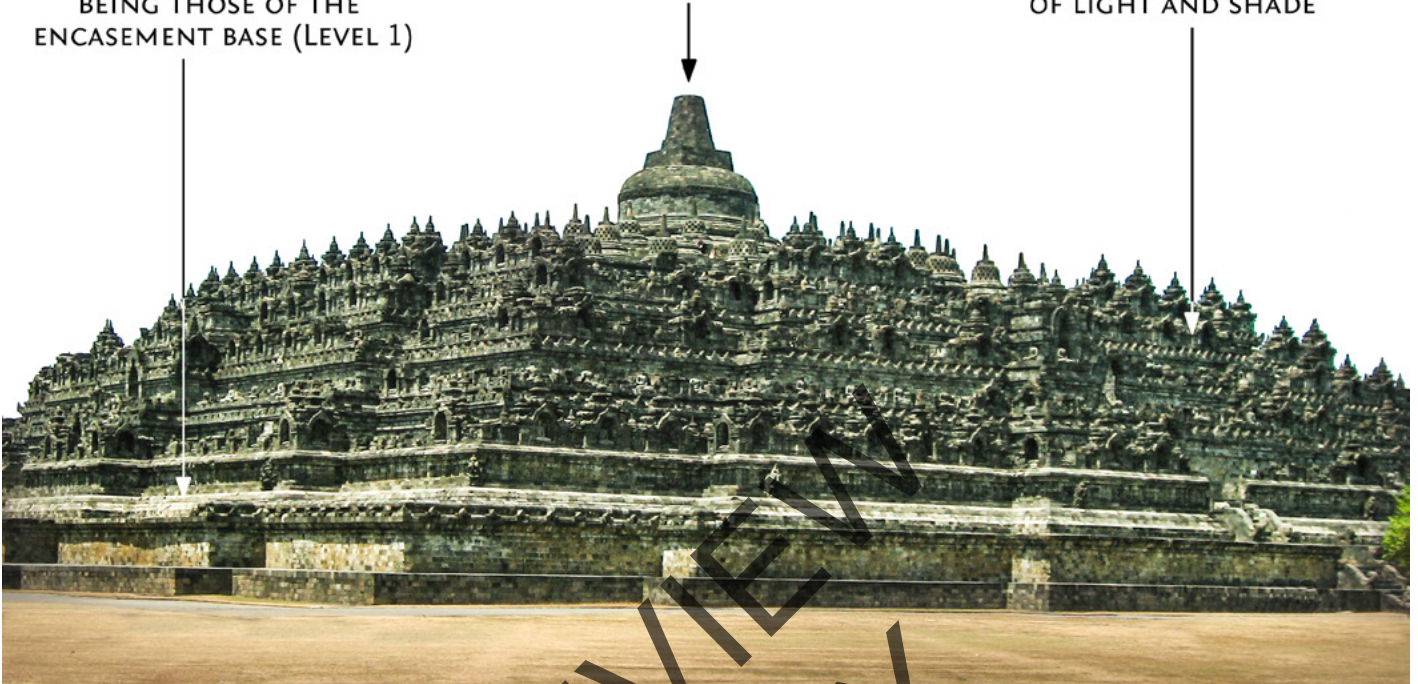


Fig. 3. View from the northwest corner.

Author tip: Given the size and shape of the platform on which the structure sits, the view from the east (entrance) side is not ideal for seeing Borobudur in its entirety. To get the best vantage, we recommend walking around to the opposite (west) side where the platform extends, allowing you to step far back and take it all in.

Defining Characteristics

- **A unique form with no parallel in the Buddhist world.** Borobudur's profile lacks precedent in the Buddhist world. First off, it has no core inner sanctuary to house a large Buddha image for ritual interaction, the primary function of an image house or temple. Lacking such interior space, many have likened it to a gigantic stupa. (For more on stupas — including what they look like and what they symbolize — see the section entitled “Upper-Level Buddhas & Stupas - Borobudur's Stupas”.) However, this identification lacks resonance since the central stupa itself is actually rather small. At Borobudur, we have **something altogether new, a learning institution par excellence**: the massive terraces — filled with relief decoration that teaches the faithful as they perform ritual circumambulation (*pradakshina*) — dominate, making up the bulk of the structure (Fig. 3). At Borobudur more than anywhere else, education and the symbolic reenactment of Buddhism's sacred journey — from profane to divine, which plays out over many lifetimes — are paramount.
- **Favors horizontal over vertical.** From an architectural perspective, Borobudur favors

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Fig. 5. Aerial view. [Watch a video](#) which provides a detailed aerial perspective.

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Things to Look For



Fig. 10. Lion at base of stairway.

Lions

- **Position.** Lions flank the entrances to the temple stairways. Similar to those of Buddhist civilizations in Myanmar (Bagan) and Thailand (Ayutthaya, Sukhothai), Borobudur's lions have a square-shaped mouth and snout (**Fig. 10**), differing considerably from the more naturalistic

depictions of India. The deviation is perhaps understandable based on the fact that lions are not indigenous to the island — artists had to depend on secondhand descriptions or models.

- **Symbolism.** The lion functions as both a guardian and a symbol for the Buddha, who was metaphorically known as the “lion of the Sakya clan,” so profound were his teachings that they had the resonance of a lion’s roar.



Fig. 11. Symbolism, makara head disgorging lion.

Makaras Disgorging Lions

- **The makara.** Makaras are mythical water creatures with hybrid features (**Fig. 11**): alligator (the most prominent), elephant, lion and fish, among others. They are cosmologically responsible for releasing water and represent its life-giving properties. The creature’s hybrid nature, then, alludes to water’s importance for all living things and assumes particularly high significance for an agriculture-based civilization such as Java.
- **The lotus.** A rhizome carries the lotus flower upward from the lion’s mouth (**Fig. 11**).
- **Symbolism.** The lotus flower symbolizes the teachings of the Buddha (the lion). It rises from muddy water (the makara’s mouth), breaking through the surface to reveal an immaculate bloom that reflects their truth, purity and immunity to corruption. At the same time, the flower likely carries an agricultural association: abundance that flows from makara-released waters, a gift from the Buddha.

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1. Buddha asked to descend from heaven

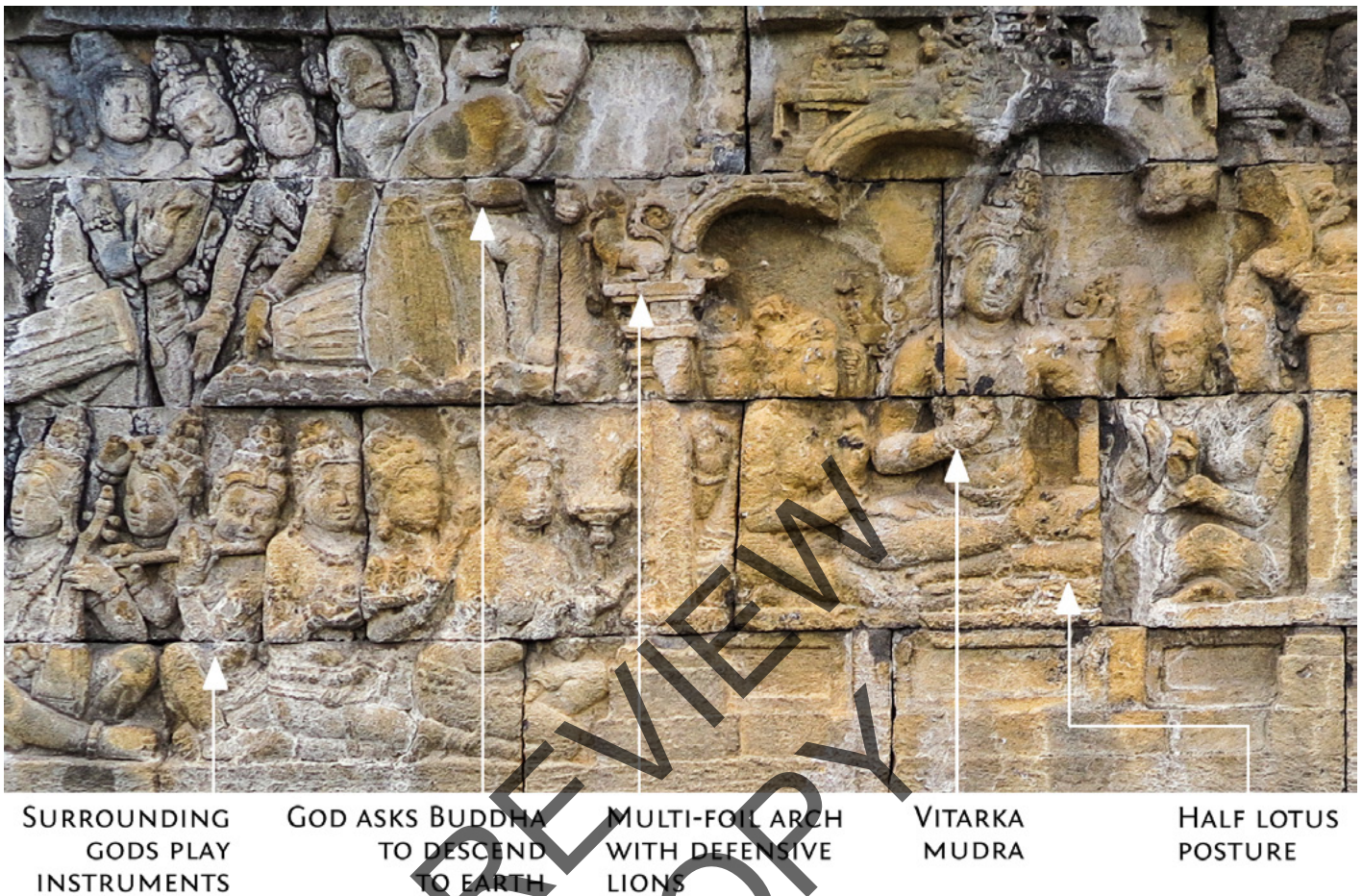


Fig. 17. Buddha asked to descend from heaven.

- **Location:** East-facing inner wall, upper register, just south of the primary east entrance stairs (#1 in Fig. 16).
- **Relief number:** 1 of 120.
- **Narrative:** The Buddha — enthroned in Tushita heaven — is asked by the gods to reincarnate on earth in order to free humanity from its suffering. In a subsequent scene, he is shown accepting this request. It will be his last incarnation, the one in which he will finally achieve enlightenment and share his wisdom with the world. In this life, he will take on the human form of prince Siddhartha.
- **Look for** (Fig. 17 and Fig. 18) The Buddha wears a crown and sits — in half lotus posture, consistent with Sri Lankan prototypes — under a multi-foil arch. He displays the *vitarka* (teaching) mudra with his right hand. A god appears on the upper left, bending over slightly while making a request for the Buddha to reincarnate a final time, while others play instruments.

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Sanchi stupa.

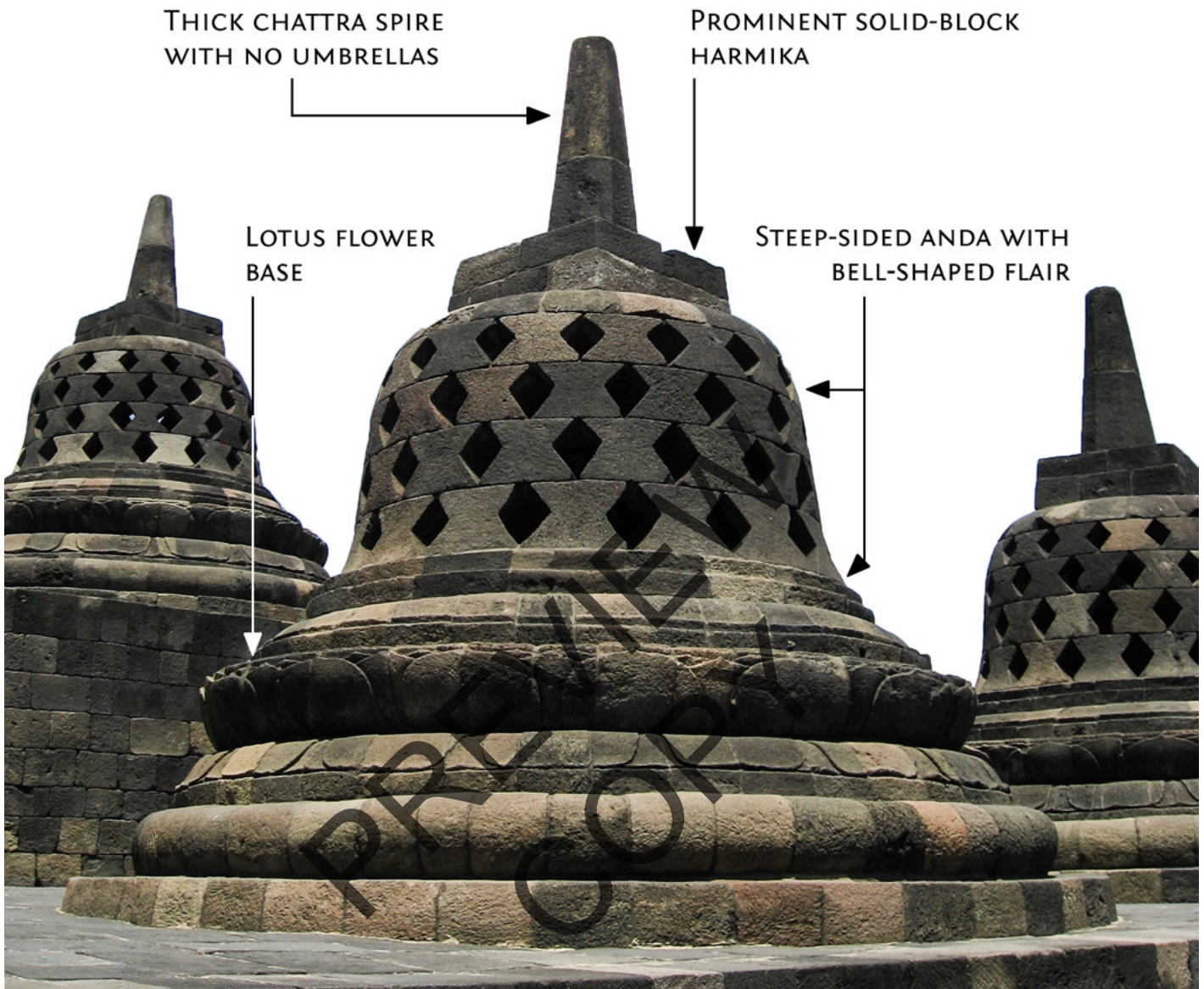


Fig. 37. Borobudur stupa.

The Borobudur Stupa

Clearly inspired by Sri Lankan prototypes, stupas at Borobudur take on their own unique aesthetic (Fig. 37).

- **Steep-sided, bell-shaped anda.** While its steep sides were carried over from Sri Lankan stupas, the Borobudur stupa has a distinct flaring to the bottom edge of the anda, which affords it a bell-shaped profile.
- **Prominent solid-block harmika.** Just like its Sri Lankan prototype, the Javanese stupa has a prominent solid-block harmika.

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En Route: Candis Mendut and Pawon

If you have sufficient time, we recommend making a quick stop at these temples — likely linked by a single linear processionway to Borobudur — either before or after your visit. Both temples are believed to have been built around 800, the same time as Borobudur. Again, see the relative positioning of the temples in relationship to Borobudur in our [detailed Google Map](#).



Fig. 44. Candi Mendut.

Candi Mendut

In terms of scale and quality of decorative details, Candi Mendut is the more impressive of the two temples.

- **Layout and appearance.** Resting on a substantial platform and accessed via stairs on one side, the square-plan temple faces northwest. The tower rising over the sanctuary is partially broken, but enough remains to show that it consisted of diminishing tiers with strong horizontal moldings and stupa decoration ([Fig. 44](#)).
- **Entrance.** The sidewalls under the corbelled arch that affords access to the sanctuary carry

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The primary Shiva temple — explored in detail in the next section — is the largest and features four sanctuaries: three supporting shrines around a central one dedicated to Shiva. The Brahma and Vishnu temples, by contrast, have only single central sanctuaries.

Author tip: In earlier temples, the primary structure (in this case, the Shiva temple) typically sat at the absolute center of the enclosure wall. However, by dividing the square core temple zone into four equal quadrants (dotted lines in Fig. 51), it is clear that the temple has been shifted slightly off-center. This new design for the temple compound — placing the most important structures to the western side, opposite the entrance — was developed further in east Java. To see how it plays out, see the later section entitled “East Java - Temple Profile.”



Fig. 52. Three primary temples, core temple zone.

Secondary Structures

- **Mount shrines.** Each temple is fronted by a square shrine that faces west toward its entrance (Fig. 51). The shrines originally housed images of the gods’ sacred mounts, mythical transportation vehicles: Nandi (a bull) for Shiva, Garuda (a bird-man) for Vishnu and Hamsa (a goose) for Brahma. Unfortunately, only Shiva’s Nandi survives.
- **Apit temples.** Near the north and south entrances stand two narrow apit — meaning

“pinched,” due to their narrow plans — shrines, the historical functions of which are unknown (Fig. 51 and Fig. 53).

- **Marker-stone shrines.** Small shrines were erected over eight marker stones that temple architects used to determine the interior arrangement and sanctify the space (blue highlights in Fig. 51; Fig. 53).



Fig. 53. Apit temple (left) and marker-stone shrine (right).

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First Impressions

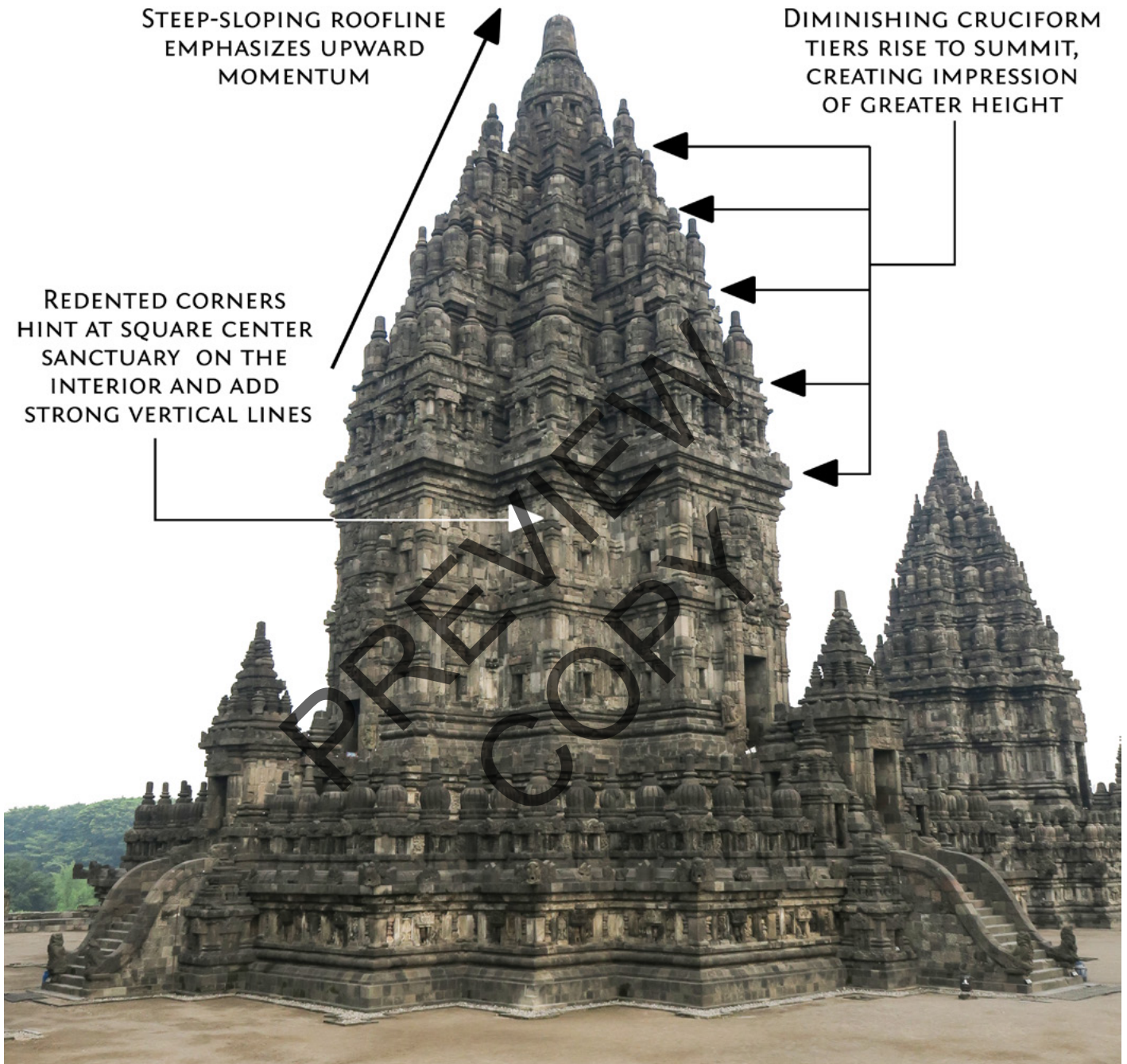


Fig. 55. Shiva temple, view from southeast.

Temple Soars Skyward

The Shiva temple's strong vertical bias contrasts sharply with the horizontal bias of Borobudur. At Prambanan, every effort was made to emphasize the vertical. As a result, there is no mistaking its

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Kirtimukha

Above the entrance door, partially obscured by the entrance pavilion, is an enormous snarling face of Kirtimukha (aka Kala), the “face of glory.”

- **Distinctive features.** Although the scale is larger here, the iconography is identical to that of Borobudur (Fig. 59): bulging eyes, sharp teeth (upper jaw only), long tongue with flowers and a tree of life rising from the top of its head.
- **Symbolism.** For a detailed review of Kirtimukha’s symbolism, resonant with both Hindu and Buddhist worldviews, see the section in Borobudur entitled “A Walk Around the Temple - Things to Look For.”

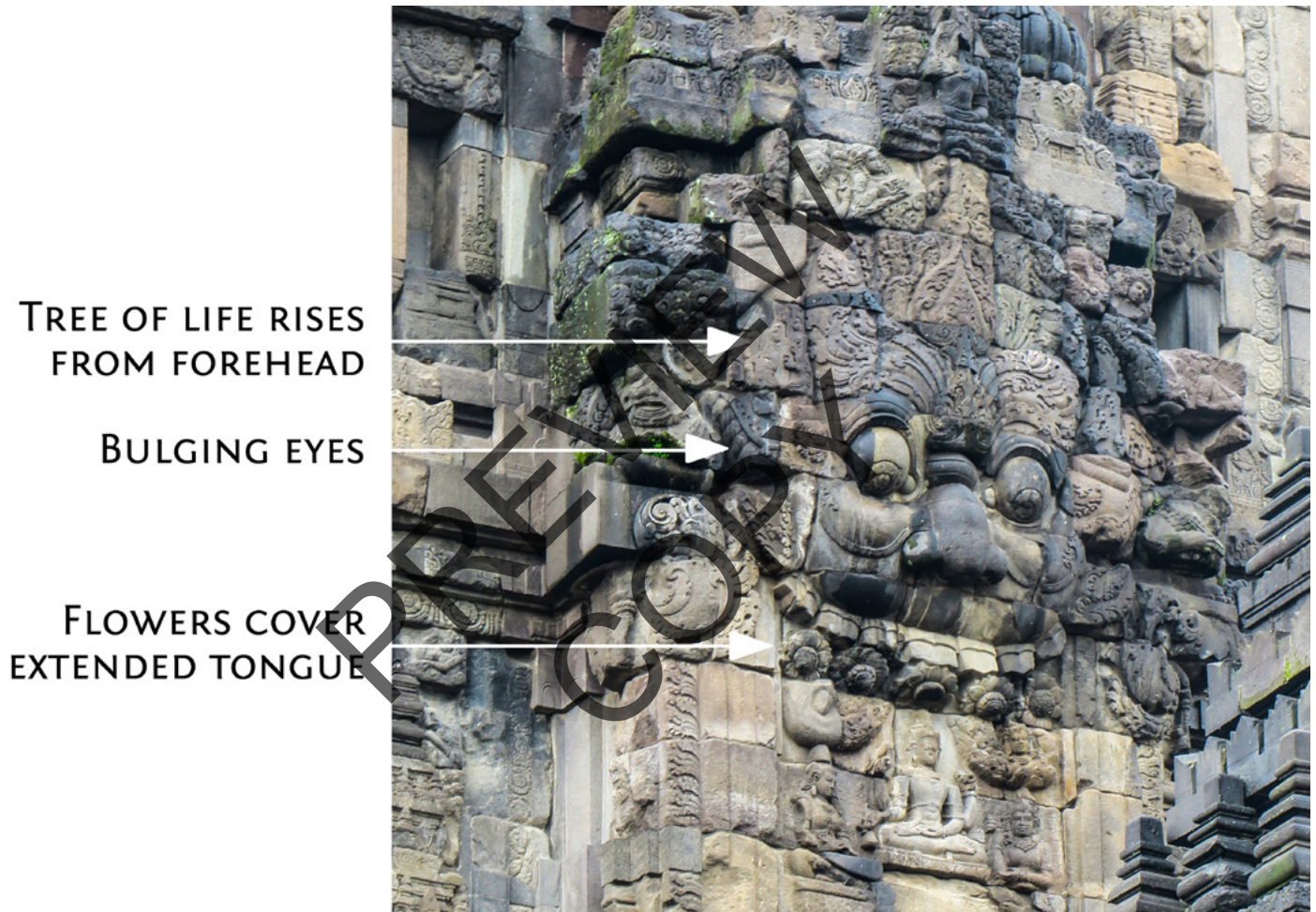


Fig. 59. Close-up, Kirtimukha (Kala) face over east entrance.

Makaras

Also borrowed from the Indian iconographic canon, makaras are yet another ever-present feature (Fig. 60). Their open mouths form the ends of the railings that line the stairways leading to the entrance pavilion (Fig. 58).

- **Symbolism.** As we mentioned in our review of Borobudur where similar decoration appears,

makaras are mythical water creatures with hybrid features: alligator (the most prominent), elephant, lion and fish, among others. They are cosmologically responsible for releasing water and represent its life-giving properties. The creature's hybrid nature, then, alludes to water's importance for all living things and assumes particularly high significance for an agriculture-based civilization such as Java.

- **Emerging lion with lotus.** A lion appears in the makara's mouth. While associated with the Buddha in earlier Buddhist structures (most notably Borobudur), the lion here likely represent a Hindu deity and the power of the ruler as his avatar.
- **Comparison with Borobudur.** We encourage you to compare this makara-lion combination with a similar one at Borobudur (Fig. 11 in the section entitled "Borobudur - A Walk Around the Temple - Things to Look For"). Here, the depiction includes an incremental lion riding on top of the makara's head who drops a lotus — a symbol of purity — from its mouth down into that of the makara (Fig. 60). While the symbolism is harder to speculate on, it appears to emphasize a bidirectional (cyclical) flow, from earth to the watery depths (the makara's mouth) and back again. This might indicate a more explicit, active role for the earthly ruler in the divinely-ordained release of life-sustaining water.

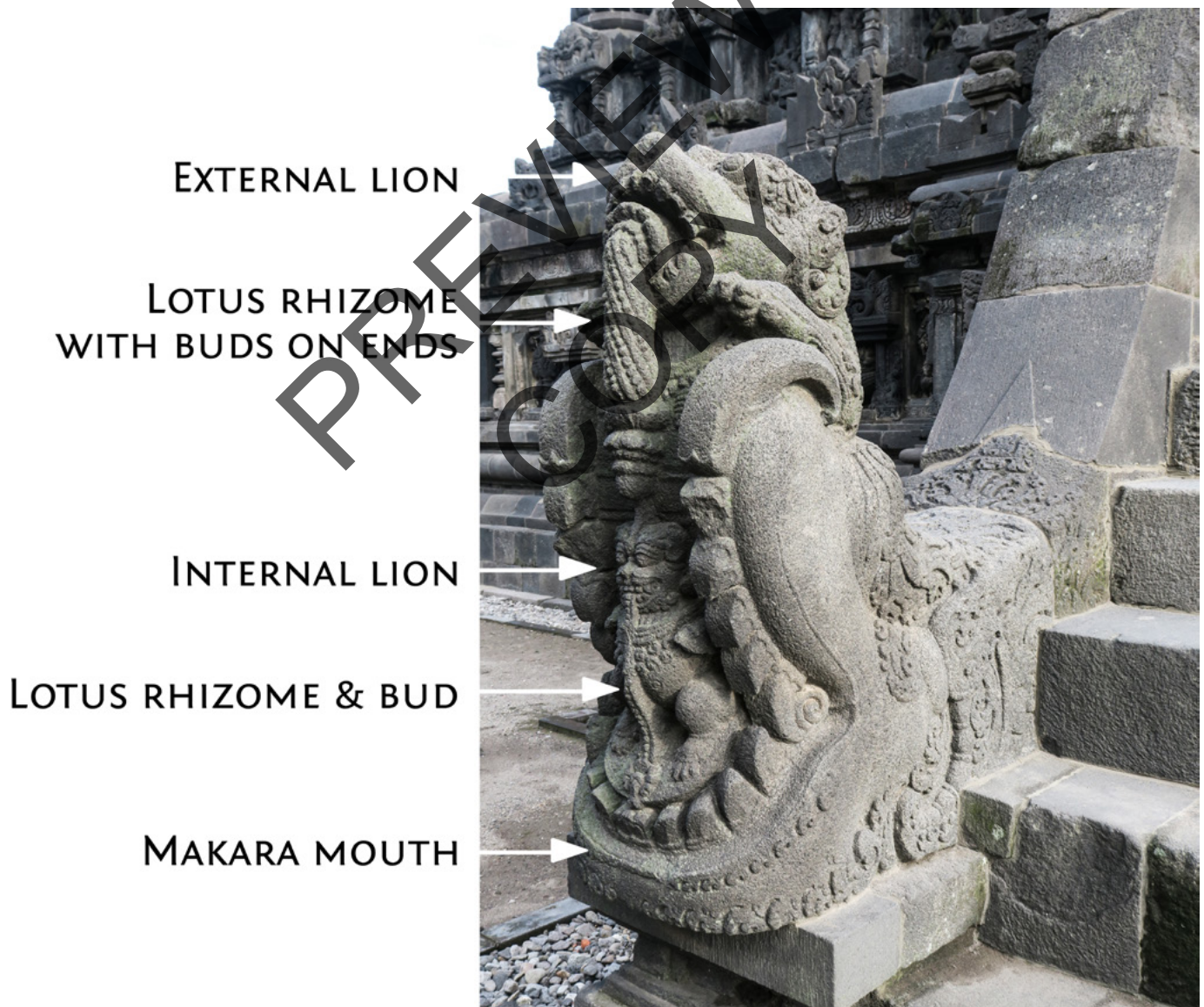


Fig. 60. Lions and open mouth of a makara.

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Shiva Temple Sanctuaries

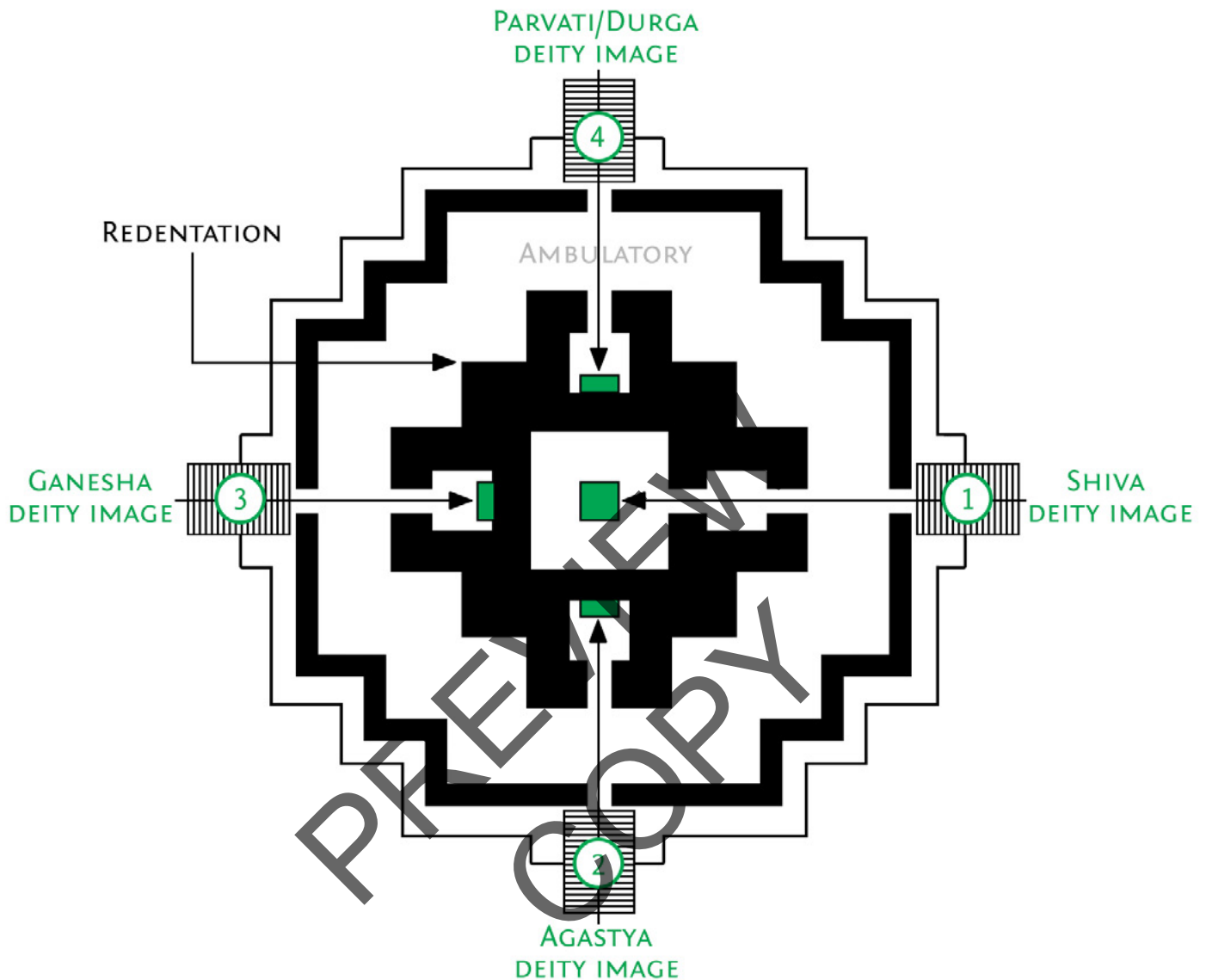


Fig. 66. Layout, Shiva temple.

Layout of the Shiva Temple

- **The primary temple.** This is the central and tallest (47 meters) of Prambanan's three temples.
- **True cruciform plan.** It is the only one that employs a fully-realized cruciform plan, a carry-over from the Sailendra Buddhist temples that immediately preceded it (Fig. 66). For more on these Buddhist temples and to learn why the Sailendras pioneered a cruciform plan, see the section entitled "Central Java - Buddhist Temples - Temple Profile."
- **Center sanctuary.** Positioned directly under the temple's enormous tower, the center sanctuary that holds an image of Shiva is the most sacred location at Prambanan.

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4. Durga Sanctuary



Fig. 71. Durga, north sanctuary.

- **Position:** Durga occupies the north sanctuary.
- **Background:** Durga is a fierce manifestation of Shiva's wife, Parvati. She represents *shakti*, the underlying female creative energy of the universe, the yoni to Shiva's lingam. Here, she is depicted as *Mahishasuramardini*, the slayer of the buffalo demon and savior of the gods who required her prowess in order to defeat the beast.
- **Look for (Fig. 71):** In the shrine, an eight-armed Durga — wielding weapons of war supplied

by the gods — stands triumphant atop the slayed buffalo demon (Mahishasura). As is typical, she holds the tail of the buffalo demon with her front right hand and cradles the head of a dwarf (symbol of the defeated buffalo demon, now her faithful servant) with her front left. In terms of quality of workmanship and state of preservation, it is the **premier sculpture in Shiva's temple**.

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4. Rama shoots golden deer



SITA SITS
WITH LAKSHMANA

RAMA SHOOTS THE
GOLDEN DEER

MARICHA, RELEASED FROM
WOUNDED DEER, CALLS FOR HELP

Fig. 82. Rama shoots golden deer.

- **Location:** Inner face of railing, southwest quadrant (#4 in Fig. 78).
- **Relief number:** 12 of 24.
- **Narrative:** As part of an elaborate plan to capture Sita, Maricha — Ravana's uncle — disguises himself as a golden deer to attract her attention. Sita asks Rama to capture the deer for her. The new husband honors her request and pursues the deer deep into the forest. When Rama shoots and mortally wounds the deer, Maricha reveals himself and, with his last breaths, impersonates Rama's voice and calls to Lakshmana for help. Although skeptical, Lakshmana sets out to help Rama, leaving Sita alone. As we will see in the next panel, this was just the opportunity Ravana needed.
- **Look for (Fig. 82):** The handling of the deer-to-Maricha transformation once struck by Rama's deadly arrow is especially clever: the figures of Maricha and the deer are tightly connected, with Maricha appearing to rise directly out of the animal below. This effect is particularly well done where Maricha's left leg runs along the full length of the deer's long neck.

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A SPECIAL THANK YOU

A special thank you to the team at Borobudur-Prambanan, whose assistance proved invaluable in facilitating the update to this guidebook.

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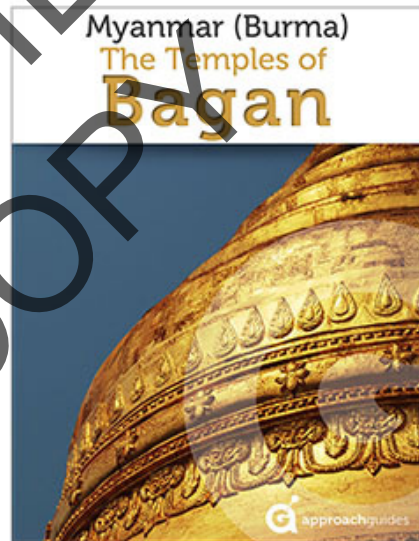
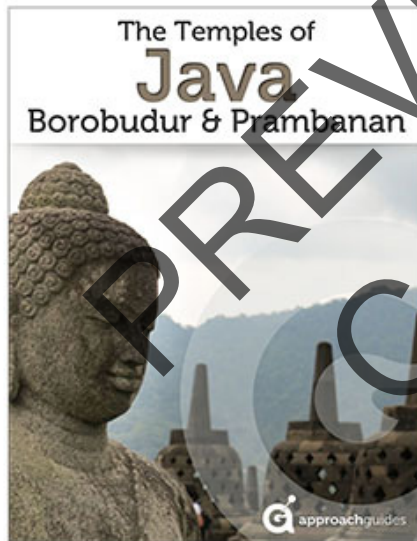
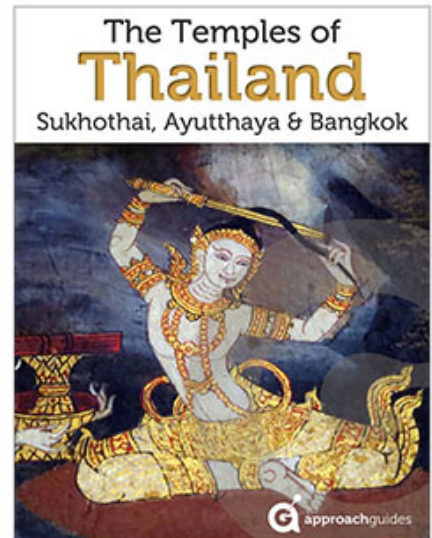
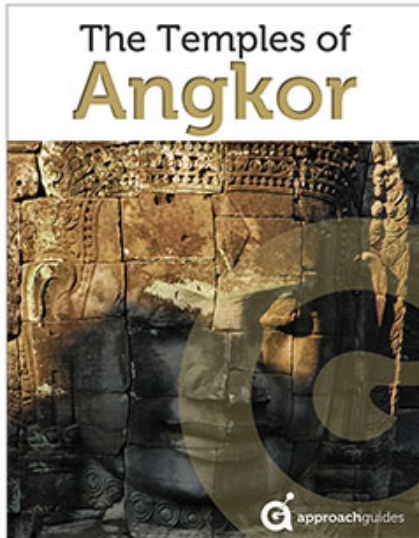
PT Taman Wisata Candi
Borobudur, Prambanan, & Ratu Boko

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Indonesia Reading List

We recently launched our newest service for curious travelers, Trip Reads. Think of it as the “reading list” reimagined for the digital age. For more than 100 locations throughout the world, Trip Reads offers a curated collection of books, ebooks, magazine articles, academic papers, websites, music and videos that help you appreciate the essence of your next travel destination.

Every item in the Trip Reads collection has been chosen because it offers a thoughtful perspective or valuable insight. Happy #tripreading!

Here are just a few of our Indonesia recommendations ([see the complete list](#)):

- **Indonesia, Etc.** Bewitched by Indonesia for twenty-five years, the author traveled 26,000 miles around the archipelago in search of the links that bind this impossibly disparate nation. *By Elizabeth Pisani.*
- **“Indonesian Batik: A Cultural Beauty”** A comprehensive review of Indonesian batik textiles, including history, manufacturing, materials and designs.
- **The Sounds of Indonesia: Gamelan** Listen to a playlist containing a personal collection of Indonesian gamelan tracks compiled by our founder Jennifer Raezer. The perfect pre-trip soundtrack.
- **Volcanoes!** Just for kids! National Geographic photos combined with vivid text helps children understand the since and impact of volcanoes. *By Anne Schreiber.*

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www.tripreads.com

What to Buy in Yogyakarta

Batik is a traditional textile art that uses a resist-wax process to create intricate patterns. While there are many types, the most artistic, difficult and time consuming is hand-made batik where wax is applied to the cloth by hand (rather than by stamping or machine). Here is a brief video where you can watch the process, from start to finish.

Batik is certainly something to seek out when in Yogyakarta, as it is one of the premier production centers — along with Solo — in Indonesia.



[Watch the video on YouTube.](#)

Packing List

PACKING LIST

for global voyagers

We're constantly on the road and, as you can imagine, have a pretty defined list of things that we never leave home without. Here's a peak at [what's in our luggage](#), from our favorite camera to portable wine glasses. It's the ultimate list for a seasoned traveler!

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David & Jennifer Raezer
Founders, Approach Guides

Reveal the Essence of Your Next Destination

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- **Exclusive focus on cultural sites.** Approach Guides are focused exclusively on providing deep insight into your destination's best cultural sites and experiences.
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- **More interactive and visually oriented.** High-resolution images — maps, photos, floor plans, and illustrations — are often marked up with text to ease identification of key architectural and artistic elements.
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- **Advice for getting the best cultural experience.** To help with planning, guidebooks offer logistical advice and provide links to online resources. Plus, we provide our personal tips for getting the most from your experience while on location.
- **Free updates.** All guidebooks are marked with version numbers; when we update a guidebook, existing customers can easily download the update for free.

Praise

Compulsive (and compulsively informed) travelers, the Raezers are the masterminds behind the downloadable Approach Guides, which are filled with a university course-worth of history and insights for 62 destinations worldwide. Why we love it. The Raezers share our desire for deep, well-researched information on the wonders of the world.

Travel + Leisure

What started as one couple's travel notes aimed at filling in the gaps in guidebooks has become Approach Guides — a menu of downloadable travel guides that cover cultural and historical topics of interest to thoughtful travelers. What's hot: Bite-sized travel guides that specialize in topics ranging from the foods of Italy to one that helps you explore the historical and architectural significance of Angkor's famous temple structures in Cambodia.

Los Angeles Times

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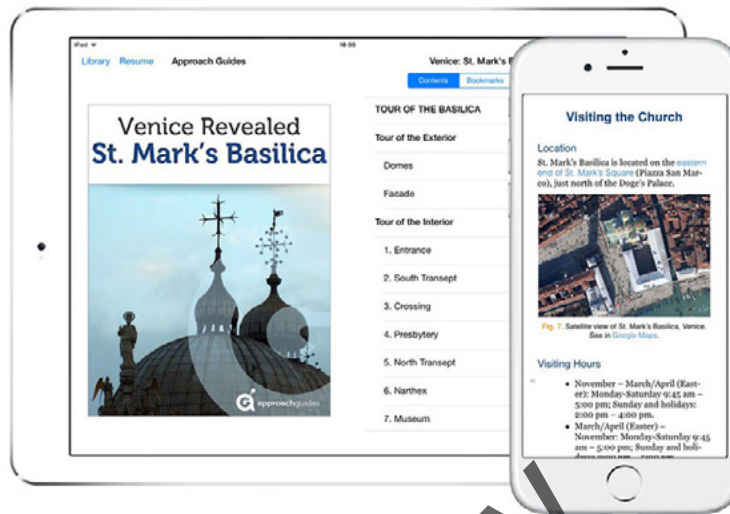
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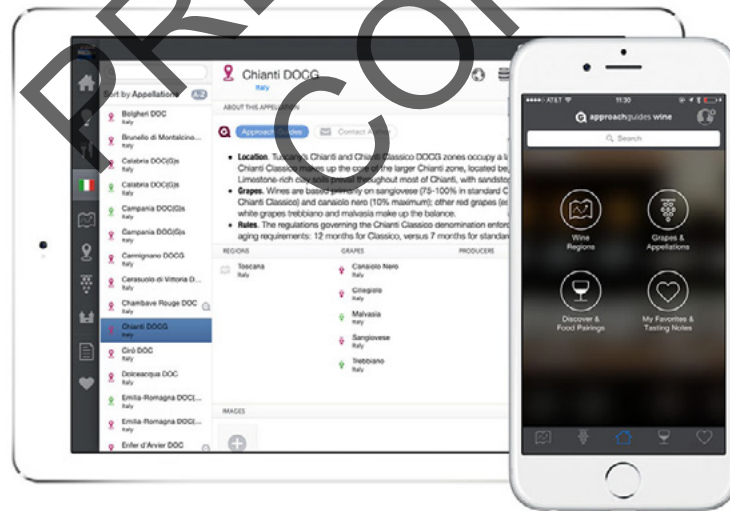
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