

TWO ASPECTS OF BUDDHIST ICONOGRAPHY IN THAILAND

by

J.J. Bocles

Descent from the Tuṣita heaven. Aspect of the *ratnavyūha*.

The life story of the Buddha Śākyamuni contains a number of major episodes or miracles (*prātihārya*), which traditionally are closely connected with the places in Northern India where most of these miracles were performed more than 2500 years ago. These episodes, together with the birth stories or *jātakas*, form the basis of Buddhist pictorial art throughout Asia. The first great miracle was performed in the Lumbinī park near Kapilavastu where the Buddha was born as a Bodhisattva.¹ The nativity is preceded, however, by another miracle: the miracle of the descent of the Bodhisattva from his abode in the Tuṣita heaven to this world of suffering, in order to enter the womb of his chosen mother, Mahāmāyā, first Queen of King Śuddhodana. Buddhist texts like the Lalitavistara relate that in her dream Queen Māyā had seen a splendid elephant—with six defenses—entering her womb. Commanded by King Śuddhodana to make an interpretation of this, the court Brahmans proclaimed that to Queen Māyā a son would be born, and that he would become

1. The eight miracles are:

- (a) The Birth in Lumbinī park near Kapilavastu (In the Nepalese Terai).
- (b) Enlightenment under the Bodhi tree at Bodhgayā.
- (c) First sermon in the deerpark near Benares.
- (d) Great miracle at Śrāvastī.
- (e) Descent from the Heaven of the 33 Gods at Saṅkāśya (Sankissa).
- (f) Taming of the elephant Nālāgiri at Rājagṛha.
- (g) Offering by the monkey at Vaiśālī.
- (h) Death or Parinirvāna at Kuśinara.

Miracles mentioned under a, b, c, and h, are the great miracles, constituting the main episodes in the Life of the Buddha.

The National Museum possesses a stone sculpture in Pāla style from Bengal representing the eight miracles. Cf. *Display of the Buddha images at the National Museum in Bangkok* (1958), plate 5.

a Buddha, honoured by the three worlds. In Buddhist paintings and sculpture the episode of the dream may be recognized usually by the presence of the elephant approaching the sleeping Queen Māyā. Her couch is often supported by the four Guardian Kings of the Universe.² On Borobudur (c. 8th century A.D.) in Central Java, the Bodhisattva is seen in divine form in the stone relief representing this particular descent (Fig. 1). This divine aspect is in accordance with the Lalitavistara, and it has been established that the example of this great *mahāyāna sūtra* was followed by the sculptors of the Borobudur reliefs when they depicted the life of the Buddha.

The meditating Bodhisattva of Fig. 1 is seated with folded legs (in *vajrāsana*) within a double, jewelled pavilion. This airborne structure is specifically described as *ratnaryūtha*—arrangement of jewels—and as “personal property of the Bodhisattva.”³

This scene from Borobudur shows a striking similarity in conception with a “primitive” unidentified stone relief in Dvāravatī style (6th-11th century A.D.) from Ayudhya and now in the National Museum in Bangkok (Fig. 2). This stone relief is not clearly executed; it appears as if it were only partly finished. The simplicity of this sculpture however is more moving than the elaborately detailed relief of Borobudur. In Dvāravatī art as a rule *theravada* traditions of the *hīnayāna* school of Buddhism have been followed. Nevertheless, in depicting the life of the Buddha in his historical aspect, it seems only natural that *mahāyāna* and *theravada* sculptors have used the

2. *The Life of the Buddha According to Thai Temple Paintings*, United States Information Service, B.E. 2500 (1957) p. 24, episode 4. This publication is indispensable for the study of Buddhist iconography in Thailand.

The Way of the Buddha, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India (B.E. 2500), II, fig. 14 from Bhārhut (2nd cent. B.C.), p. 290.

3. Ph. Ed. Foucaux, *Le Lalita Vistara*, Translation in *Annales du Musée Guimet*, Vol. VI. (Paris 1884), pp. 62, 63, 64.

N.J. Krom, *The Life of the Buddha on the stūpa of Barabudur according to the Lalitavistara text* (The Hague, 1926), pp. 13/14, 19. figs. 12, 14.

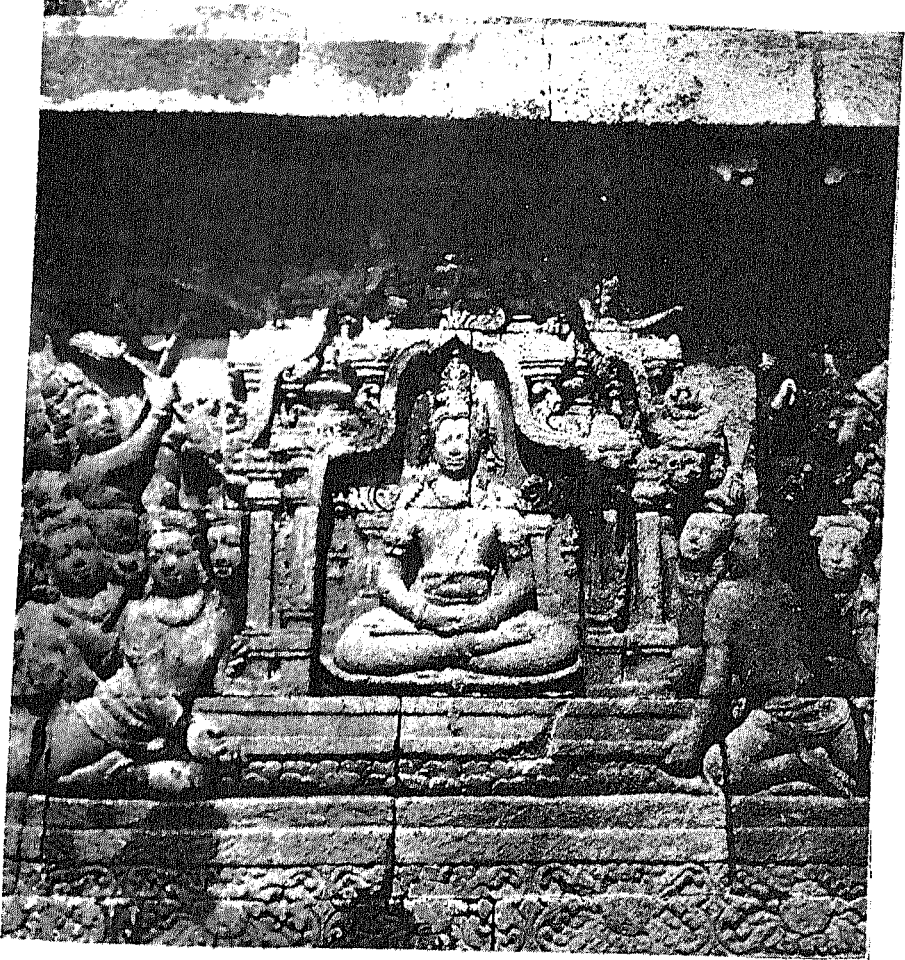


Fig. 1. Borobudur. Part of relief with Descent from the Tuṣita Heaven.
Photo by J.J. Boeles



Fig. 2. Dvāravatī relief with Descent from the Tuṣita Heaven.
National Museum, Bangkok

Photo by R. Bunnag

same story—though not the same text—for the major events. The similarity in pictorial conception therefore is understandable, and comparison is often admissable. Moreover, it seems that the styles of the reliefs of Borobudur and in Dvāravatī art find a common origin in the Gupta traditions from India (c. 300-600 A.D.).

Examination of this relief reveals the following picture:

In the stone relief of Fig. 2 there is a Buddha in meditation, seated with folded legs and placed within a shrine or pavilion, vaguely outlined. The shape of this structure is similar to that in Fig. 1 from Borobudur and which, in the Lalitavistara, is described as a *ratnavyūha*, "arrangement of jewels," or "jewelled pavilion." The construction of the base of this pavilion is clearly executed and shows a double profile. An incised semicircular piece of drapery is hanging down, apparently a part of the cover of the Buddha's seat, and it is mentioned as such in the Lalitavistara. The top of this pavilion has been badly weathered or it was left unfinished; it is not even certain that it was a finial. The head of the Buddha shows the first characteristic or *lakṣaṇa* of the Buddha, the protuberance or *uṣṇīṣa*. The treatment of the hair, which is left in a knoblike state, seems rather crude; this is a treatment often seen in Dvāravatī art and unlike that of the Borobudur it implies rather than demonstrates by intricate detail. The Buddha's face has a soft, smiling expression and, again in accordance with Dvāravatī tradition, presents a face rather broad in shape with arched eyebrows above opened eyes. The nose is partly damaged. The mouth is rather small. The ear lobes, as prescribed, are elongated. The Buddha wears monastic garb, leaving the right shoulder uncovered. It can no longer be determined whether a shoulder flap was hanging down from the left shoulder. The hands are resting in meditation in the lap. The legs are folded but are neither superimposed nor interlocked, and no specific *āsana* can be assigned. The sole of one foot is visible. The whole figure could be placed in a square. The total conception of the image of the Buddha is one of serenity.

The pavilion shows no jewelled decoration. This personal property of the Bodhisattva is airborne, as is clearly indicated by waves of clouds on both sides of the pavilion and above it. The line of clouds to the right of the pavilion is clearest and it is fringed in a typical Gupta fashion very well known from the Buddhist art in the Ajantā caves in India. This pavilion or shrine is surrounded by hosts of heavenly beings that are "half visible."⁴ Some are holding a flywhisk or *cāmara* in one hand, while resting

4. Foucaux, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

the end of the handle of this royal attribute on the palm of the other hand; this is another Gupta feature. Some of the Gods have their hands folded in veneration. The Gods are wearing turbans and those closest to the pavilion seem to support the structure in the clouds with their bodies and their shoulders. The text relates:

“ A hundred thousand ten thousand of koti's of gods, bore the great pavilion on their hands, their shoulders and heads. (51: 4; 52 : 16) ⁵

One part to the right of the relief is broken. Clouds are vaguely outlined on this stone fragment. Above these clouds are at least two unclearly defined heavenly beings floating in the sky. They seem to belong to the class of vidyadharas, bearers of knowledge, judging from the position of their folded legs; this again is a Gupta tradition. The hands of the figure to the right are folded in veneration at the display of this miracle in the skies. The next or central figure on the fragmented part holds a garland in extended hands; he is also of the vidyadhara class. One leg is folded in the “plough” position. The edges of the relief are broken, or cut to size.

The attention of all the figures is directed toward the meditating Buddha seated in his airborne pavilion.

When comparing this Dvāravātī relief with the Borobudur one in Fig. 1, it would appear that identification with the episode of the descent from the Tūṣita heaven is acceptable. The main objection to this identification, however, is that the central figure in the Dvāravātī relief is a Buddha and not a Bodhisattva as stated in the text. Moreover, the Borobudur relief clearly shows a Bodhisattva in his heavenly attire.

There is a plausible explanation for this deviation from the text. The sculptor may have deliberately intended to reveal clearly that it was the Buddha who came to this world by portraying the infant Bodhisattva as a Buddha. In Buddhism of the *theravada* school, the aspect of the Bodhisattva is scarcely developed. There are only two recognized Bodhisattvas. These are the Bodhisattva Maitreya, and the Bodhisattva Siddhārtha who became the Buddha. The presence of a Bodhisattva, therefore, might have caused confusion unless he was presented as an infant of six

5. Krom, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

months. This would have been in accordance with the text. The same text states that the Bodhisattva was sitting in his *ratnavahita* within the womb of his mother not as an embryo but as a completely developed child provided with the marks of the Great Man (*mahāpuruṣa*).⁶ These marks are the thirty-two major characteristics of the Buddha. The first one, the *uṣṇīṣa* represents ultimate enlightenment. Moreover, the Lalitavistara relates that before leaving the Tuṣita heaven the Bodhisattva, in a ceremony, transfers his crown to the Bodhisattva Maitreya, who is now residing in the Tuṣita Heaven and who is to become the Buddha of the future.⁷

For this reason the sculptor of the relief in Fig. 2 might have wanted to depict the Buddha, thus anticipating events that would come later. This attempt to explain an important deviation from a sacred text is not considered to be conclusive and it does not seem to be supported by analogous representations in Buddhist iconography elsewhere. However, notwithstanding this pictorial discrepancy with the text, we offer here the conclusion that the Dvāravatī relief in Fig. 2 represents the descent of the Bodhisattva—as a Buddha—from the Tuṣita heaven. This conclusion is based upon a comparison with the relief in Fig. 1 from Borobudur, where the identification of this particular episode is firmly supported by the Lalitavistara. The fact that the Bodhisattva in this Dvāravatī relief is portrayed in divine form—as a Buddha—may present an interesting indication that the sculptor of the Dvāravatī school of art might have been familiar with a Sanskrit text of the class of the Lalitavistara.⁸

6. Foucaux, *op. cit.*, pp. 64, 95, 96.

7. Foucaux, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

8. Krom observes that at Amarāvati the Bodhisattva has already assumed the form of a white elephant on leaving heaven, while at Barabudur according to the Lalitavistara text he still retains his divine shape (Krom, *op. cit.*, p. 14). In the Dvāravatī relief the Bodhisattva—as a Buddha—is also seen in divine shape. Therefore the Amarāvati tradition is not followed in this Dvāravatī sculpture. This feature does not tend to support Dupont's theory on the origin of the Dvāravatī art. Cf. Pierre Dupont, *L'Archéologie mène de Dvāravatī* (Paris, 1959), Texte, p. 289.

The birth of the Buddha at Khao Panom Rung and Phnumai.
The *kūṭāgāra* aspect.

The Lalitavistara relates that during the ten months of gestation the Bodhisattva in his divine form was seated within his *ratnavyūha*, placed in the womb of Queen Māyā, on the right side. Both episodes, the descent from the Tuṣita Heaven and the period of gestation, were therefore miracles. The purpose of the jewelled pavilion was to prevent the Buddha from being defiled by the womb of his mother. The conception was immaculate.⁹

It is remarkable to note that the Lalitavistara in Chapter VI describes this jewelled pavilion as *ratnavyūha*. However, promptly after the miracle of the birth, this same pavilion is called *kūṭāgāra* (*palais d'étages*) in the next chapter, VII, describing the birth.¹⁰ This *kūṭāgāra* is not to be found on the reliefs of the Borobudur, nor on those in Ivāravatī art, though it is portrayed on Tibetan scrolls.¹¹ In Chapter VII the Lalitavistara relates that after the birth of the Bodhisattva the "palace" (*kūṭāgāra*), in which the Bodhisattva had been residing in the womb of his mother, was lifted by Brahmā and by the sons of the Brahmākāyika Gods and taken to the world of Brahmā in order that a Caitya might be made for it and so that it could be worshipped.¹² The Bodhisattva was not touched by any human being; he was originally received in this world by the Gods.¹³

The representation of the Birth of the Buddha in Lumbini as seen in Figure 3 is conventional. This figure shows a well-known stone relief from Angkor Vat, now in the National Museum in Bangkok.¹⁴ A stone stele from Khao Panom Rung in Northeast

9. A. Foucher, *La Vie du Bouddha* (Paris, 1949), pp. 39, ff.

10. Foucaux, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

11. *The Way of the Buddha*, *op. cit.*, II, fig. 27, pp. 41 and 291.

12. Foucaux, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

13. *Idem*, p. 78.

14. Cf. A. Foucher, *l'Art Gréco-Bouddhique du Gandhāra*, Tome I (Paris 1905), pl. 153. There is a small inscription in Khmer at the back of the relief, the reading of which is not yet quite clear.



Fig. 3. Birth of the Buddha; Khmer style. National Museum, Bangkok
Photo by R. Bunnag



Fig. 4. Birth of the Buddha; Panom Rung style. National Museum, Bangkok
Photo by R. Bunney

Thailand, as seen in Figures 4 and 5, represents the birth of the Buddha in a unique way; the person of the Bodhisattva is not present.¹⁵ Queen Māyā is holding either the *plakṣa*, or *sāla* tree with her left hand. Her right hand rests on an object which is held upwards by a smiling, kneeling woman with both hands. This woman is apparently Māyā's sister, Prajāpatī. Her position is traditionally to the left of the Queen, whilst the Gods are placed on the other side. Brahmā, with a high conical headdress and a long, pointed beard supports Queen Māyā with his left hand; his right hand is holding an indistinct, damaged attribute. Coedès has suggested that this is a conch, but the damaged attribute does not permit accurate identification.¹⁶ It seems that once again the Lalitavistara leads the way. The text allows us to understand that the oblong object upheld by Prajāpatī could be the *kūṭāgāra*, in which the Bodhisattva was sitting at his birth from the right side of Queen Māyā. In the representation of the birth episode the mother is not permitted to touch the Bodhisattva. In this case, however, Queen Māyā could be allowed to touch the *kūṭāgāra*, which palace was then taken up to the Brahmā heaven by Brahmā himself and sons of the Brahmākāyika Gods.¹⁷ This Khmer relief from Khao Panom Rung probably dates from the 12th century A.D.¹⁸ The sculpture expresses simplicity of movement and composition. It is inspired with devotion, and it presents the rare creation of the atmosphere of a sacred and ancient miracle, which makes it a very moving work of art for all times. The style is Khmer with an Angkor Vat affinity in the treatment of the garments, but it is not readily comparable with one of the classified Khmer styles. Because the mature sculptures of Khao Panom Rung have their own Khmer characteristics we would designate

15. Cf. Reg. le May, *A Concise History of Buddhist Art in Siam* (Cambridge, 1938), Fig. 68, pp. 70-71.

Cf. Jean Boisselier, *La Statuaire Khmère et son Évolution*. E. F. E. O. (Saigon, 1955), Texte p. 297, note 46.

16. G. Coedès in J.S.S., Vol. XXXI, pt. 2, p. 200.

17. Foucaux, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

18. L.P. Briggs, *The Ancient Khmer Empire* (Philadelphia, 1951), p. 182.

this particular style as Panom Rung style. The reliefs from Khao Panom Rung, as far as they can be seen today, represent episodes from Hindu mythology. The sculpture of Figure 4 is the only Buddhistic one.

The *kūṭāgāra* aspect at Phimai

The story of the *kūṭāgāra* aspect does not end here. Following again the Lalitavistara we feel on sure ground when proposing to identify the *prāsāda* of the relief of Figure 6 from Phimai as the *kūṭāgāra* seen in the process of being taken up to the Brahmā heaven by Brahmā himself, together with the sons of the Gods of the Brahmā heaven.¹⁹ Each of these sons is seated on his particular winged Brahmā vehicle, the hamsa bird. The small frieze of flying hamsas with outspread wings designate the Brahmā aspect of the *kūṭāgāra*. The identification of Brahmā, visible with three (damaged) heads which support and lift the *kūṭāgāra*, is certain. A *kūṭāgāra* is described elsewhere as a "palais" à étages and this is exactly what the roof construction of the *prāsāda* on the Phimai relief shows.²⁰

Conclusion

The purpose of this research has been to present some of the aspects of the "jewelled pavilion" or the "palais à étages," the personal property of the Bodhisattva in connection with the beginning of his great career in this world. It seems that in accordance with the Lalitavistara this structure was called

19. Foucaux, *op. cit.*, p. 77-78.

20. A. Foucher, *La Vie du Bouddha*, p. 377, note 290. T.W. Rhys Davids and William Stede, *Pāli-English Dictionary*: *kūṭāgāra*, "a building with a peaked roof or pinnacles, possibly gabled; or with upper storey, etc."



Fig. 5. Birth of the Buddha; Panom Rung style. Detail with *kūtāgāra*.
National Museum, Bangkok

Photo by R. Bunnag



Fig. 6. After the Birth of the Buddha; the *Kūṣṭhāra* is brought to the Brahṃā heaven. Phimai, *in situ*.

Photo by J. J. Boeles

ratnavyūha prior to the birth and after the birth *kūṭāgāra*. One cannot be too sure however whether this rather rigid distinction would be tenable in view of further research. The above views are therefore expressed only for the purpose of providing a working basis for the understanding of the nature of this temporary abode of the Bodhisattva.²¹ We believe that we have demonstrated, in any event, that both type of "palaces" have been represented on stone reliefs found in Thailand.

A Siam Society Research Center Study.

Completed March 11, 1960.

21. The *ratnavyūha* episode in the Lalitavistara is an interpolation in chapter VI. This interpolation (Foucaux says "interruption" p. 60, n.1.) is apparently of a much later date than the time when those events happened, because it is the Buddha who relates the story of the *ratnavyūha* to Ānanda (Foucaux, *op. cit.*, pp. 60-70).

Notes on the Illustrations

- Figure 1. Borobudur. Descent of the Bodhisattva from the Tuṣita heaven. See text, note 3. The relief is to be found in the top row of reliefs on the main wall of the first gallery. In Krom's monograph *Barabudur* it is Series I, a. Plate VI, No. 12. For his description in the Dutch monograph; Vol. I, 1920; p. 140. Fig. 1 shows only the central part of the relief.
- Figure 2. Descent from the Tuṣita heaven. Dvāravatī style (6th-11th Century A.D.) from Vat Phra Srisampet Ayudhya, now in the National Museum, Bangkok. Cat. No. T.W. 8. Height 114 cm. Chistose claystone, local fine sandy. Unpublished.
- Figure 3. Birth of the Buddha. See note 14. From Angkor Vat now in National Museum, Bangkok. Cat. No. L.B. 5. Height 77 cm. About 13th Cent. A.D. Sandstone. Brahmā is receiving the Bodhisattva. Queen Māyū is holding the tree with her right hand. Prajāpatī is supporting her from the left of the Queen.
- Figures 4,5. Birth of the Buddha. Panom Rung style, c. 12th Cent. A.D. From Khao Panom Rung, Changvat Buriram, now in the National Museum, Bangkok. Cat. No. L.B. 108. Sandstone. Stele. Height: 53 × wide 30 × deep 36 cm. Cf. E. Seidenfaden, *The temple of Khao Panom Rung*, J.S.S., Vol. XXV, pt. 1 (1932), pp. 83-106, with excellent illustration of this relief, then *in situ*.
- Figure 6. After the Birth of the Buddha; the *kūṭāgāra* is brought to the Brahmā heaven. Phimai, *in situ*. This relief is not from the main *prāsāda*, but probably fallen from the Eastern inside gopura. Height: 51 × wide 66 × deep 144 cm. The *prāsāda* itself is 41 cm. high. Sandstone. Possibly early 12th Cent. A.D. Unpublished.

Cf. E. Seidentaden, *An Excursion to Phimai J.S.S.*, Vol. XVII (1) (1932). Also in *J.S.S.*, Vol. XXV (1) (1932), *Cf.* L.P. Briggs, *The Ancient Khmer Empire*, Philadelphia (1951), pp. 178, ff.

Cf. the official guide book, in Thai, of the Fine Arts Department on Phimai: นำเที่ยวพิมายและโบราณสถาน ในจังหวัด นครราชสีมา โดยนายมานิต วัลลิโภดม The drawing of the *prāsāda* on page 65 is very much like our Figure 6. It is often considered a stone replica in miniature of the main *prāsāda* of Phimai.

