

Iconographical Issues in the Archeology of Wat Phra Men, Nakhon Pathom

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Wat Phra Men, an important temple site at Nakhon Pathom in the central plains of Thailand from around the 7th to 8th centuries CE, is re-examined for the diverse conclusions that can be drawn from iconographical study of its Buddha images. Four or five colossal images, seated in the so-called “European fashion”, are reputed to have originated here although they are today displayed in different temples and museums. The history of the discoveries and restorations at the site is reviewed. While the precise nature and original appearance of the monument remain a mystery, the iconographical significance of the images lies in different possible interpretations according to the Buddhist traditions that were practiced here. The nature of Buddhism in the Dvāravatī period was evidently very heterogeneous; esoteric forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism may have evolved at Wat Phra Men in Theravāda guise. The results of this re-examination should hold implications for other Buddhist sites in Nakhon Pathom and neighboring provinces.

The importance of Nakhon Pathom in the early history of Thailand is well recognized because of the large number of archeological remains found there: ruins of *stūpa* or *caitya* foundations, stone and bronze sculptures, and clay and stucco artifacts, among other items (figure 1). How much is really known about the iconography of its art? While new archeological discoveries have been made¹ and excavations are being carried out in central Thailand, art historians still need to rely on earlier studies and museum collections, not only for reference material but also in reconsidering some of what has been found and has fallen, for the most part, into oblivion. Unfortunately a large number of Buddhist artifacts in museum collections in Thailand lack information about their archeological context that is necessary in building an understanding of their real place and function in a religious complex and culture. There are some rare exceptions, however, Wat Phra Men being a good example.

The emblematic site of Nakhon Pathom is essential for the study of the archeology of Dvāravatī because it has provided abundant material and is well

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¹ For a recent overview of Dvāravatī research and archeological discoveries, see Skilling (2003); Phasook (2004); also Baptiste and Zéphir (2009).

documented in Western languages and Thai (Dupont 1959; Tri 1939; Sen 2006; Revire 2008; Hennequin 2009a). Of significant value is the pioneering work by the French archeologist Pierre Dupont and his team. Some problems still linger with this site, however; uncertainty persists about the precise nature and appearance of the monument, as well as the exact provenance, dating and iconographic significance of the four or five colossal Buddha images said to have come from here.

In the spirit of reassessing existing scholarship, this article reviews extant knowledge about Wat Phra Men, re-evaluates the provenance and iconography of the fine Buddha images reputed to have come from here and, finally, attempts an analysis of their original arrangement—focusing on their iconography in relation with the larger religious and artistic contexts of Dvāravatī and its neighboring Buddhist cultures. The iconology of the material from Wat Phra Men could be, if not completely resolved or reconstituted, at least interpreted in a radically different way depending on which Buddhist traditions are considered. Beyond the common Theravāda conventions, the Mantrayāna or *mantranaya*² also deserves attention, since it grew significantly during the 7th and 8th centuries CE across South and Southeast Asia, including perhaps in what today constitutes central Thailand.

Study of the Site

Excavations by Pierre Dupont

Wat Phra Men in Nakhon Pathom was excavated for the first time by Pierre Dupont and his team during two missions in 1939 and 1940, before the Second World War put an end to those campaigns. He had aimed at constructing a picture of the architectural remains of Dvāravatī and developing a methodological framework for the study of the abundant Buddhist sculpture—which Dupont then labeled as “*indo-mône*”—already unearthed but deprived of any archeological context. Some Buddha fragments seated in the so-called “European fashion” (*bhadrāsana*)³ were reported to have been found and removed from the site prior to the excavations. In addition, the presence of a vast hillock at the site signaled the possibility of further discoveries.⁴

² Early Indian and Tibetan exegetes never mentioned the Vajrayāna or Mantrayāna but only spoke of the *mantranaya* modes of practices within Mahāyāna (Hodge 1994, 58).

³ What scholars once referred to as *pralambapādāsana*. See Lokesh Chandra’s objection to Cooramaswamy’s invention in his foreword to Kim’s *The Future Buddha Maitreya* (1997, vi); also Revire (2008, 6–7 and forthcoming).

⁴ Two *tumuli* at the site were pointed out to Dupont at the time of his investigation of the Nakhon Pathom area. The construction of a road in the vicinity had cut one of the two *tumuli* and had revealed fragments of Buddhas seated in “European fashion” (1937, 689).

The excavations of Wat Phra Men thus inaugurated the strictly archeological work of the École française d'Extrême-Orient in Thailand. In contrast with the repair work and anastylosis of the Khmer monuments, the excavations here were different because the monument was deeply buried. Dupont (1959, 27)⁵ describes the general composition of Wat Phra Men after his excavations as follows (figure 2):

The monument of Wat P'ra Men is built out of bricks and consists primarily of:

- A full square central core made of bricks;
- A square gallery surrounding the central core;
- An intermediate space located between the gallery and the external enclosure, corresponding to a part of the building perhaps occupied by a terrace;
- An external facing which comprises three successive stages, of square plan, supported by a broad plinth and one or two platforms.

Dupont noticed three different stages of construction or renovation at Wat Phra Men. Basically, state III, the most recent, was an enlarged and indented version of the original square basement (states I and II) that bore different moldings and two lateral secondary projections on each face (1959, 32–42; Piriya 1975, 285–286). From the ground plan it is not clear whether the circumambulating gallery and the 16 “cave-like niches” around the central structure—the functions of which remain to be elucidated—were later additions or part of the original plan. Moreover, Dupont thought that four colossal seated Buddha images had been installed against the central core at the four cardinal directions.

What was “Wat Phra Men”?

The first questions to address are of paramount importance before any iconographic conclusions can be drawn: what kind of monument was Wat Phra Men and what functions did it serve? While there may be no definitive answers, given the poor condition of the monument and since no dedicatory inscriptions have been found *in situ*,⁶ comparisons with a few architectural examples from the neighboring regions may be instructive.

⁵ All translations from the French are the present author's. For another English translation of Dupont, see Sen (2006, 19). Sen's publication has been reviewed by Woodward (2008).

⁶ A fragment of a slab with two faces inscribed in old Mon and dated paleographically to the 7th century CE was found at Wat Pho Rang, in the neighborhood, that records a donation to a Buddhist monastery (Coedès 1952, 30–31).

Sadly enough, almost nothing remains today of Wat Phra Men except a mass of bricks. As in the case of Chedi Chula Prathon, the superstructure has long collapsed and its original appearance is unknown. Consequently, the question of its original shape has raised much speculation and discussion among scholars, including Dupont and his Thai counterparts.⁷ Around the central core, which Dupont called the “*massif central*”, a gallery was probably added during state III which was undoubtedly used for the Buddhist rite of circumambulation (*pradakṣīna*). This gallery appears to have been intersected on the four sides by axial passages that were probably meant to lead ascending devotees from the external stairways to the central core against which presumably four colossal Buddhas seated with legs pendant were installed. On this ground Dupont attempted comparisons with the Ānanda temple in Pagān or with the central sanctuary of Pahārpur in what is today Bangladesh.⁸ However, according to Boisselier, those comparative studies are not very convincing and even doubtful (1968, 49–51).

An intermediate space between the surrounding gallery and the external stairways raises problems of interpretation regarding the access. Pichard wonders whether the lateral projections could not abut on “false doors”. Consequently he concludes: “if an analogy should be sought, it would rather be found with the angle pavilions in Angkorean architecture” (1999, 166). This comparison with Khmer architecture is interesting because Boisselier also discussed traces of later additions, or Khmer restorations, at Wat Phra Men, which he set in relation with the last stage (state III) of the monument. Of particular interest for Boisselier was the presence of an ogival step (“*en accolade*”) at each axial projection, hitherto unknown in the art of Dvāravatī but characteristic of Khmer architecture. “This addition may provide an explanation for the discovery of *P’ra Pim* [clay tablets] belonging to the ‘third group’ (standard Khmer, Mahāyānist tradition) during the excavation of the monument” (1965, 140). Because of this evidence, Boisselier thought that state III of the monument could date from the late 12th century during the reign of King Jayavarman VII in Angkor, which is questionable. Indeed, Boisselier seems to contradict himself here since a closer look at the type of the ogival steps from Wat Phra Men (Dupont’s fig. A) relates them more appropriately to the Prasat Prei

⁷ From the ground plan it is clear that the base of the central core was once a solid square block. It may well have supported a circular dome on top although that cannot be substantiated from any visual remains (Dupont 1959, 54). Tri Amatyakul, who collaborated with Dupont in 1939, seemed to have been more convinced of a circular superstructure; that remains pure hypothesis (Tri 1939; Hennequin 2009a, 50, 52, 79 n. 52, 82 n. 66). For the case of the Chedi Chula Prathon, see Piriya (1975, 84–88).

⁸ In a private communication, Pichard now sees greater affinities with the *stūpa* no. 1493 or Myin-pya-gu in Pagān (1995, vol. 6, 84–88). For a recent discussion on Pahārpur and similar structures in Bangladesh, see Samuel (2002).

Chek, a Prei-Kmeng-style monument in Cambodia, of circa 635 to 700 (1966, 195).⁹ In any case, the rather late archeological material found *in situ*—the clay tablets—also raises the question of longevity and occupation of such a site as Wat Phra Men and its subsequent phase of abandonment. However, is it really necessary to look to either Angkorean architecture or later edifices for any precedent at Wat Phra Men?¹⁰

Distinct features reported by Dupont at Wat Phra Men—a somewhat “cruciform”¹¹ aspect and an enclosed circumambulating gallery around the central core at state III (1959, 129, 135)—enable parallels to be drawn with neighboring structures.¹² Many “cruciform” temples—albeit different in size and shape—were constructed throughout the southern seas by the 6th to the 8th centuries. Jacq-Hergoualc'h's thorough study of the monuments in the Malay Peninsula has revealed a number of such structures (e. g., 2002, 171–173, 204; docs. 18, 23, 24; figs. 63, 87). Because of a similar presence of a gallery for circumambulation at BJ3 site near Yarang, Woodward recently suggested an analogy with Wat Phra Men¹³ (2003, 82 and 2008, 80). Stronger affiliations might be suggested for Blandongan temple, a monument recently excavated at Batujaya, western Java, which shows striking similarities not only with its ground plan but also with the archeological material found there (Manguin and Indrajaya 2006, 247–250; figs. 23.3, 23.6).¹⁴

⁹ Generally speaking, several “Dvāravatī” motifs and patterns in architecture and sculpture were also common in 7th century Cambodia. See Brown (1996, 157–158 and 169–174); also Hennequin (2009a, 204–215). Furthermore, the evidence of the free-standing lions at Wat Phra Men led Woodward to suggest a connection with Sambor C1 of the late 8th century (2008, 80).

¹⁰ The architect Pinna Indorf recently communicated to the present author privately that “the notions of form generation found at Wat Phra Men are fundamentally part of the Indian tradition as a whole [because of the] expansion of the four directions (radial symmetry based on four and multiples), the five-square order, use of *bhadra* (projections at mid-points), *karna* (projections at corners) and *pratibhadra* (projections at intermediate points) sometimes very pronounced sometimes not, and the rhythmic reticulation of form”.

¹¹ Both Pichard and Indorf agree that the term “cruciform” which is common in architectural description is rather misleading and exaggerated in this case. The base at Wat Phra Men is roughly square with lateral projections.

¹² The important question of how and when the “cruciform” plan developed in Asia goes far beyond the scope of this article. There is no absolute need to look “inside” such prototypes.

¹³ Erroneously labeled in one instance as “BJ 13” (Woodward 2003, 62).

¹⁴ Even though not a single statue has been found in Batujaya, other evidence points towards the practice of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Clay tablets, stylistically dated to circa the 7th century, and Buddhist *mantras* inscribed on terracotta and gold were found during the restoration program. The clay tablets found there follow the same iconography as a type found in Nakhon Pathom and elsewhere in the Peninsula. For Thailand see Coedès (1927, 7–11 pl. II), Patteratorn (1997, 22–23); for Burma see Moore (2007, 198); for Campā see Baptiste and Zéphir (2005, 69, fig. 4). They all seem to belong to a Southeast Asian “regional type” of the 7th century rather than just a Mon-Dvāravatī type (Skilling 2009, 112). The wide diffusion of such tablets can provide evidence of contacts between Nakhon Pathom and neighboring regions by land or sea routes.

This assertion, however, awaits further comparative analysis and detailed scientific reports.

These different parallels make it possible to propose a relative date for Wat Phra Men in the late 7th or early 8th century, or even earlier; the iconographic study of the statuary allegedly found there would seem to confirm that.¹⁵ Before this material is analyzed, the exact nature and role of the monument in ancient “Nakhon Pathom” should be examined. As is apparent from the modern names, the main distinction between Wat Phra Men and Chedi Chula Prathon, for instance, is that the former is not perceived today as having been a *caitya* (or a *chedi* in Thai), that is a “memorial” to the Buddha, a king or important saints or events, but as something else.¹⁶ So what else could it be? Most people and scholars, including Dupont, would assume that it must have been a *stūpa*.¹⁷ This is very likely but remains hypothetical given that its original appearance is unknown and that no relics were found during the excavations.¹⁸ Could it have rather been a shrine with a central sanctuary (*pratimagrha*) on its upper story dedicated to some important deity or Buddhist icon? A clear answer is difficult to divine from what remains *in situ* but this hypothesis should not be dismissed.¹⁹ Alternatively, as a compromise,

¹⁵ Thorough analysis of these Buddha images (Revire 2008) points toward a date close to the last decades of the 7th century or early in the 8th century. By extension, Wat Phra Men can be fairly dated. Pierre Baptiste recently proposed a 9th-century date or even later for these Buddhas; his argument is, however, not very convincing (2009, 223 and fig. 5 on p. 221).

¹⁶ See Santi (2009) for a recent study of *chedi* structures in the art of Dvāravatī. As could be expected from his rather arbitrary classification, the author does not discuss Wat Phra Men at all.

¹⁷ The term *stūpa* indicates any in-filled structure, like that at Wat Phra Men, which is supposed to contain collected material, textual or corporal relics of the Buddha or other high dignitaries. The distinction is clear between them and other structures generally called *caitya* or simply commemorative monuments having no relics. See Bareau (2005, 14); also Woodward (1993, 76–77).

¹⁸ Dupont reported that a pit, where some traces of gold remained, and some galleries had been dug at an unknown date by treasure seekers aiming at the main foundation deposit of what they believed was a *stūpa* (1959, 28). Moreover, many clay tablets, all broken, were found with the verse “*ye dhammā*” inscribed at the bottom in nearly correct Pāli (1959, 47–49 figs. 34–40). Note that these tablets show a central Buddha seated in meditation, not with legs pendant as Dupont has mislabeled it (1959, 28). Should these inscribed tablets be accepted as evidence of the empowering or consecrating ceremony of the *stūpa* (Skilling 2009, 108)? In the Indo-Tibetan tradition, such consecration rituals infusing the “*ye dhammā*” verse in a *stūpa* or a Buddha image is common practice (Bentor 1996).

¹⁹ Something comparable exists elsewhere in the Buddhist world. Samyé, Tibet’s first monastery (constructed and consecrated in 779), consists of a main three-story temple which reflects the central importance of Vairocana as a central deity on the second and third floor (Weinberger 2010, 140–141). The present author has spotted a similar arrangement in a pagoda, near Famen, China, with a Sarvavid Vairocana enshrined atop the shaft structure, surrounded by the four Jinas on the lower ground. Albeit later for the purpose, such a layout is also seen with the bronze “votive *stūpas*” of Nāgapatīnam (Ramachandran, 1965, 62, pl. XVI). Similarly, Kya-zin-hpaya, a story temple in Pagān (no. 1219), has four Buddhas seated back to back in its upper-shrine (Pichard 1995, vol. 5, 113–118).

Wat Phra Men could be considered as a kind of *stūpa*-shrine or a *stūpa-prāsāda* which served both purposes of venerating some relics and worshipping Buddha images insides niches or chapels. That might possibly be what Dupont had in mind when he used the term *stūpa* (1959, 133–134).

There could well be other possibilities and symbolic interpretations of the monument such as a “mountain-temple” or Mount Meru/Sumeru (“Phra Men” or “Phra Sumen” in Thai), the cosmic mountain and abode of the gods—and Vairocana according to certain Buddhist tantric traditions.²⁰ It could also have served a *mandala*-like symbolism which remains to be determined (see note, infra), as in the case of Borobudur or Pahārpur.²¹ In any case, these interpretations do not need to be perceived as mutually exclusive because the *stūpa* in fact may well imply all those symbolisms simultaneously and such could be the case for Wat Phra Men. So this article carries the conditional assumption that Wat Phra Men was remodeled in its final stage as a kind of *stūpa-prāsāda*, the *stūpa* being the core form, embellished with a gallery and articulations of stories with projections or *bhadra*, which in the *prāsāda* model are seen as doors and chambers.

As regards location, Wat Phra Men is, interestingly, rather remote compared to Phra Prathon Chedi at the center of the old city (figure 1). Piriya Krairiksh explains the fact by possible “decentralization” that might have occurred during the 7th century, Nakhon Pathom’s golden age, and migration of the population beyond the moats and the building of new monuments on the city periphery, with Wat Phra Men and Phra Pathom Chedi among them (1975, 173). Another interpretation could be some sort of ritual or religious shift. Perhaps there was a need at the time for a new type of complex or at least a new location for it outside the city. Wat Phra Men could well have sheltered monastic communities known as the “forest tradition” (*araññavāsī*) in search of relatively isolated places.²² The term *wat* in Thailand denotes a Buddhist monastery and temple within a complex. Hence Wat Phra Men could originally have occupied more extensive grounds than just the small area in

²⁰ The location of the awakening and teaching of Vairocana in various tantras is more specifically the abode of Akaṇiṣṭha, above Mount Meru.

²¹ Extensive literature and interpretations exist on the monument of Borobudur, seen by some as a *stūpa*, and by others as a mountain-temple and/or a *mandala*. For a recent literature survey and annotated bibliography on the topic, see the appended notice in Woodward (1999, 40–43). For the case of Pahārpur as seen as a “*mandala-form*” temple closely related to the development of Tantric Buddhism in Bengal, see Samuel (2002).

²² Some scholars are inclined to see in the activity of these communities of “forest” monks, who focus on the practice of meditation, the precursory signs of Mahāyāna in India (Ray 1994, 404 et sq.). At least one cave in Khao Ngu, Ratchaburi province, was inhabited by an ascetic (*rṣi*) as is testified by an inscription *in situ*, at the feet of a pendant-legged Buddha, dated paleographically to circa the 6th or 7th century CE. For the inscription, see Coedès (2504/1961, 19 pls. VII, VIII); for the cave-relief see Boisselier (1993a and 1993b).

which it is today delimited. Unfortunately, no monastic structures, such as *vihāra* or *kuti*,²³ remain in Wat Phra Men or elsewhere, confirming that all such buildings were built of perishable materials. Whatever the case, given the large size of the extant monument, its perfect symmetry and cardinal orientation with four access stairways, Wat Phra Men must have enjoyed great popularity and even “royal” patronage. Its prestige conceivably accrued from the fine stone Buddha images that were probably displayed in the main enclosure.

Four Buddha images

At least four colossal Buddha images (3.76 meters high), said to be in “quartzite stone”²⁴, are reported to have originated from Wat Phra Men (figures 6, 8, 9 and 11). These images are of a peculiar type, belonging to what Dupont has called group T2 (1959, 273–274). They are seated with their legs pendant (*bhadrāsana*), the right hand is raised in a teaching gesture (*vitarka mudrā*) and the left is resting upon the knee.²⁵

They are generally thought to have been seated originally with both legs pendant against the central structure. Sustaining this view, plinths and pedestals where the statues were supposed to have been installed were also found at the time of the excavations on the north and east sides of the central core (Dupont 1959, 29). Assuming symmetry, four such plinths could be conjectured to have existed, one in each of the cardinal directions. Moreover, big fragments (figures 3 and 4), evidently belonging to these colossal images, were also excavated in the intermediate space at the same time (Dupont 1959, 43).²⁶

²³ Woodward recently wrote that the “cave-like niches” found in the intermediate space of Wat Phra Men could be considered as monk’s cells or *kuti* around the central structure (2008, 80). These niches, however, could have been intended not for residence but for meditation practices instead or to shelter some statues. Note that the number of 16 niches may be symbolic and bear esoteric significance (see footnote 68).

²⁴ In Dhanit Yupo’s terminology (1967), which has been followed by most authors. Le May mentions “a light colored-quartz” (1977, 26). The stone needs to be scientifically analyzed, but that may prove difficult since all of the images have been heavily restored with plaster. The present author believes that the images are simply a kind of limestone.

²⁵ In figures 6, 8, 9 and 11, none of the hands is authentic. All were remodeled during the 1960s by the Fine Arts Department (see *infra*). For an exhaustive examination and references on this iconography in central Thailand in comparison with other models from India, China and Southeast Asia, see Revire (2008, 62–90).

²⁶ It is not very clear what Dupont meant by “intermediate space” here. Was it the square gallery? In the inventory list of excavated objects at Wat Phra Men, it says that these Buddha fragments were discovered near the central core (1959, 303).

In addition to these remains, other fragments and even a nearly complete statue that had been exhumed prior to the excavations were already in the enclosure of Phra Pathom Chedi.²⁷ Since then the nearly intact statue has been installed in the ordination hall (*ubosot*) where it is still worshipped (figures 5 and 6).²⁸ The discovery of all these fragments together led to the supposition of the existence of an original arrangement of four Buddhas in Wat Phra Men (state I) seated around the central structure (Dupont 1959, 45–46).²⁹

The Director-General of the Fine Arts Department in the 1960s, Dhanit Yupo, was able to trace additional fragments that belonged to the original set. In 1958, two stone Buddha heads were found at an antique dealer's shop, having apparently been unearthed under dubious conditions some time before in Wat Phaya Kong, near Ayutthaya. The heads were judged to belong to the series from Nakhon Pathom, and to have been taken there at an unknown date. Other fragments of colossal stone images were spotted in Ayutthaya (1967, 10–12, figs. 7, 9). The question was whether the scattered fragments matched those from Nakhon Pathom. If so, the images should be reassembled or reconstructed in their original state. Craftsmen of the Fine Arts Department who were assigned to the job blithely filled in missing parts with plaster, achieving the results on display today. Two of the Buddha images are found in the National Museum at Bangkok and at Ayutthaya (figures 8 and 9). The third welcomes visitors at the southern entrance of Phra Pathom Chedi (figure 11), while the fourth is enshrined in the *ubosot* (figure 6).³⁰

The question remains when were those colossal Buddhas transported from Nakhon Pathom to Wat Phaya Kong³¹ in Ayutthaya and by whom. That temple was located outside the city and was deserted after the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767. Dhanit believed that it dated from the first period of Ayutthaya and that at least two of the

²⁷ This image had been discovered in mid-19th century, buried under a large anthill standing in Wat Phra Men, by lay people and monks in search of bricks during the restoration of Phra Pathom Chedi. It was then transferred to Phra Pathom Chedi in 1861. The other fragments were installed in the gallery of Phra Pathom Chedi during the reign of Rāma V (Dhanit 1967, 1–6). Some of them were already known to French visitors in the early 20th century (e. g., Lunet de Lajonquière 2006, 181).

²⁸ This image (figure 5) was never installed in a *vihāra* as it has been commonly reported (e. g., Dupont 1959, 43). As observable from an old photograph, it had been slightly renovated, in particular on the upper-garment which had been shortened before being restored again later.

²⁹ Laurent Hennequin (2009a, 5–8) discusses in detail how this scheme of the four Buddhas at Wat Phra Men was already in vogue through the previous work of Seidenfaden (1929, 44) and Damrong (2512 [1969], 161–163), perhaps influencing Dupont in his interpretation.

³⁰ The third image is officially called “Phra Narachet”; the fourth one is often called “Luang Pho Sila Khao” by the local residents because of its presumably white color (Chatsuman 2008).

³¹ In Nakhon Pathom, the legendary King Phaya Kong is well known by locals because it is said that he was killed by his own son, King Phaya Phan. Consequently, according to the chronicles, the latter built Phra Pathom Chedi to expiate his sins (Usa 2009, 145).

colossal Buddhas were moved from Nakhon Pathom during the reign of either Rāmathibodi I (1350–1369) or Rāmathibodi II (1491–1529). The new capital saw the construction of many temples and monasteries during that period of development and prosperity, although no reference to Wat Phaya Kong has been found in the chronicles. The rest of Ayutthaya history was too troubled and, probably, not very favorable for the removal of images.³² According to Dhanit, such a transfer of images could be compared to that at the beginning of the Rattanakosin period when Rāma I had hundreds of statues removed from Sukhothai and the northern regions and installed in the temples of his new capital at Bangkok (1967, 14–15).

The Buddha from Wat Na Phra Men, Ayutthaya

This image of the Buddha seated with legs pendant (4.2 meters high) is unique in the art of Dvāravatī (figure 10). According to Dupont, it would be of “considerable interest” had it not undergone very important restorations. Indeed, the two forearms are certainly not genuine which may explain the abnormal gesture (*mudrā*) of the two hands resting on the knees.³³ Moreover, Dupont avers that the folds of the upper garment, such as they appear in front of the legs, are almost entirely unauthentic. The lotus base was remade and the feet—adjusted with the dress according to a system of tenons and mortises—seem to have come from a different image: could they possibly have belonged to another of those colossal images from Nakhon Pathom?

Despite these modifications, Dupont conceded nevertheless that the head was genuine with its large hair curls turning counterclockwise.³⁴ The nimbus also appeared genuine to Dupont, even though its shape is reminiscent of Chinese style. Most likely, the right hand, by comparison with similar images, had originally been raised in a teaching gesture (*vitarka-mudrā*) while the left hand would have undoubtedly rested on the left knee, palm upwards (1959, 276–277).

Dupont also noticed that the higher cross-piece of the throne was probably supporting stylized, hybrid aquatic creatures (*makara*) which are today missing. One fragment of a cross-piece with an open-mouthed *makara* turning outward from which a lion appears (figure 7) is currently kept at Phra Pathom Chedi National

³² Although images were brought in from Angkor, perhaps in 1431. Besides, King Narai is also supposed to have brought some famous images from Chiang Mai (Woodward 2005, 56–57).

³³ Another seated Buddha from Đòng-Du’o’ng in Campā (875 CE) reproduces the same attitude and hand gestures and clearly shows Chinese influences in terms of iconography and style of the drapery (Dupont 1951, 267–274). But Jacq-Hergoualc’h rather sees affinities in style and iconography with the cave-relief of Tham Kuha Sawan in the peninsular area, near Surat Thani (2002, 315–316).

³⁴ The canonical texts specify that the hair curls must turn “clockwise” which is not the case here.

Museum, Nakhon Pathom.³⁵ It is made in the same limestone and could have belonged originally to the throne of this Buddha image from Wat Na Phra Men (called “Phra Khandharat” by locals). French archeologist Claeys was the first to identify the two matching parts (1931, 396–397, pl. LI). Dupont adopted this view without wondering where exactly this fragment had come from. Prince Damrong, as Minister of Interior³⁶, heard or knew that this throne fragment had been taken from Wat Phra Men, Nakhon Pathom (Fine Arts Department 2009, 192–193, fig. 42). This assertion is debatable, however; quite possibly either (a) confusion arose about the provenance of this piece, between Wat Phra Men and Phra Pathom Chedi where it was noticed by Lunet de Lajonquière in 1908;³⁷ or (b) it was confused with other artifacts. The assertion could also have been based on oral traditions or distant memories—Damrong’s memoirs were written many years after his Interior service—in which case conjecture about the original provenance of this fragment remains moot.³⁸ The question is whether the colossal Buddha image that is today at Wat Na Phra Men, Ayutthaya, was originally located at Wat Phra Men, Nakhon Pathom, thus making the original group a set of five Buddhas.

Generally, there is no doubt that the Buddha in Ayutthaya came from Nakhon Pathom. It may have been transported to Ayutthaya, the new capital, along with other Buddhas, at an unknown time.³⁹ Its precise origin is difficult to determine. From its craftsmanship, size and material, this Buddha image must be categorically

³⁵ *Makbara* with heads turned outward appear frequently in Cambodian and Central Javanese art, although this feature is not totally absent in India when the *makara* decorate the back of a throne. See Fontein (1980, 8).

³⁶ Prince Damrong was appointed the first Minister of Interior in Thai history, under the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Rāma V), in 1887.

³⁷ Lunet de Lajonquière was actually the first to give a report on this *makara* throne fragment, which was then exhibited in the external gallery of Phra Pathom Chedi. He could not, however, identify the piece (1909, 36, fig. 14; also 2006, 177, fig. 7).

³⁸ See Damrong (2512 [1969], 161–163). Dhanit slightly altered the text in his translation into English quoted below and made no mention of Wat Phra Men, Nakhon Pathom, as the place of discovery (emphasis in bold by the present author): “When I was the Minister of Interior, the stone that used to be on top of the pediment-like image frame at Phramane [Wat Na Phra Men, Ayutthaya] **was found in an excavation**. It was, therefore, realized that the stone Buddha image housed in Wat Nā Phramane was originally located at **Phra Pathom Chedi** [...].” The translator also added in a footnote “**Prince Damrong was mistaken in believing the image now at Wat Nā Phramane, Ayudhya, originally came from one of the porches of the stupa at Wat Phramane, Nakhon Pathom**” (1967, 4).

³⁹ Before being moved to Wat Na Phra Men, Ayutthaya, this image had been installed in Wat Mahāthāt, that is to say in the center of the new capital city up to 1767. It was only during the reign of Rāma III that the governor of the province decided to move the Buddha to Wat Na Phra Men where it is still located at present. Restorations of the image were also undertaken at the time. For the whereabouts of this image, see Luang Boribal (2490 [1947], 41–52) and more recently Sakchai (2547 [2004], 196–199).

dissociated from the group of the four described above.⁴⁰ Moreover, the architectural complex of Wat Phra Men, from what remains in its central part, would not seem to have been able to accommodate such a colossal image on the ground. If Prince Damrong were correct about the ultimate provenance of this Buddha, it might have been sheltered in a separate building (*vihāra*) elsewhere that is lost to history, in the vicinity of the main monument. In the light of such speculations, the following discussion posits that the group of figures consisted only of four Buddhas, not five, excluding from consideration the Buddha from Wat Na Phra Men in Ayutthaya.

Iconological Investigation

A group of four Buddha images around a *stūpa* is iconographically very common and significant in Buddhist art. Presumably such an arrangement once existed at Wat Phra Men. The discussion below attempts to identify, first, the Buddha images as the manifestation of a unique Buddhist entity; and second, as a specific group of distinct Buddha images that composed a more complex iconographic program.

Śākyamuni or Maitreya

Both Śākyamuni and the future Buddha Maitreya, the latter especially in East Asia, are often represented in this attitude with legs pendant. But with no inscriptions at hand it is often hard to distinguish one from another. Bourda, the first scholar to have really tried to interpret this iconography in Buddhist art, warns against a certain number of *idées reçues* (1949, 302):

Nothing is more difficult, in archeology, than to get rid of, or modify, old assertions for which nobody sought to control the rationality. These assertions, repeated on several occasions by more or less famous personalities are considered, after a certain time, like acquired truths. And works follow one another, constantly taking again a pseudo-truth, which causes false interpretations. Such is the case for the iconographic study of Maitreya. For a long time, one assigned him the exclusiveness of this posture sitting in European fashion (*pralambapādāsana* [or *bhadrāsana*]) ... However, a more careful examination seriously questions this identification.

For example, in the Mahārāṣṭra caves, India, where there are many triad Buddhas in *bhadrāsana* flanked by two Bodhisattvas, Bourda could occasionally identify Maitreya among the latter because of the *stūpa* in reduction in the headdress (1949, 303; also Bhattacharya 1980, 100–111). On this ground, the central seated Buddha obviously should not be confused with Maitreya, no matter what was written

in the past.⁴¹ Besides, some Indian Gupta sculptures and low-reliefs represent the scenes of the life of the historical Buddha (Birth, Awakening, First Sermon, the Great Extinction). Frequently, the Buddha Śākyamuni preaching the First Sermon at Sārnāth sits with legs pendant as exemplified in the magnificent sculpture kept in the British Museum. As for the Pāla period, it is common to see the pendant-legged Buddha depicted for the First Sermon, the Great Miracle at Śrāvastī or even the monkey's offering of the honey (*madhu*) to the Buddha at Vaiśālī (Paul 1995, pl. 70).

In early narrative art from Thailand, this sitting posture is also combined with one of these preaching episodes. Such is the case for some low-reliefs from Nakhon Pathom. One such fragment belonged to an abacus intended to support a Wheel of the Law (*dharmačakra*), symbol *par excellence* of the First Sermon. The abacus was carved on its four faces in low-relief with apparently the same motif: a central pendant-legged Buddha seated on a throne and a Buddhist assembly around him including monks, hermits and celestial beings in the clouds (possibly Bodhisattvas or other divinities). This scene is commonly assumed to depict the First Sermon of the Buddha at Sārnāth (Woodward 2003, 71–74).⁴²

Another relief of interest where the Buddha Śākyamuni is most likely represented is the slab, kept today in Bangkok at Wat Suthat but originally from Nakhon Pathom.⁴³ The stone slab⁴⁴ is divided into two registers depicting successive episodes in the Buddha's life. The scene at the bottom represents the Great Miracle at Śrāvastī. On the top register, the Buddha is sitting on Indra's throne and is teaching the Dharma to his mother and the Gods of the Thirty-three (Trāyastriṁśa or Tāvamṛtisa).⁴⁵ In both cases, the Buddha is sitting in the same manner, with his two legs pendant and his right hand in an identical teaching gesture (*vitarka mudrā*), the left resting on the lap.

⁴⁰ Boisselier concludes that this Buddha at Wat Na Phra Men, Ayutthaya, "almost certainly does not come" from Wat Phra Men, Nakhon Pathom. He also noticed the step in ogival form under the feet which he could date to a later period compared with the four other Buddhas (1965, 140).

⁴¹ The old arguments for Maitreya are seen in Burgess (1972, 186), Foucher (1905, 49, n.1), Coomaraswamy (1926, 124) and Getty (1988, 21–24). For a more recent discussion on the iconography of Maitreya and the controversies over its identification in India, see Kim (1997, 231–235) and Jirassa (2001).

⁴² Interestingly enough, Lucien Fournereau, the first European to have seen one of these fragments, did not identify the scene as such but rather as "a King seated on a throne [and] speaking to an audience" (1895, 121); see also Hennequin (2009b, 138–139, figs. 2, 3).

⁴³ The exact provenance is unknown but it was found in Nakhon Pathom during the reign of King Rāma IV. It was installed in the *vihāra* of Wat Suthat during King Rāma V's reign, behind the pedestal of the fine presiding Buddha image "Śrī Śākyamuni" from Sukhothai. It was restored and gilded at an unknown date (Pandito 1997, 25).

⁴⁴ Not a "bronze slab" as incorrectly indicated by Sen (2006, front cover flap).

⁴⁵ According to the Theravāda tradition, the *Abhidhamma piṭaka* was preached to the gods by the Buddha on this occasion. The other schools evoke merely the teaching of the Dharma (Skilling 2008). Quaritch Wales wrongly identified the scene of the upper register with the First Sermon (1969, 42).

In short, if this sitting posture may be indifferently attributed to Śākyamuni or to Maitreya, no inscriptions unfortunately come to verify the name of the deity.⁴⁶ Taken individually and based on iconographic data only, identification remains difficult, especially as a third alternative is possible.

Vairocana?

Generally speaking, certain Buddha images affecting the “royal pose” with legs pendant in Mahārāṣṭra or elsewhere could also represent Vairocana, the fifth Jina of Esoteric Buddhism. How better to interpret such isolated images, placed as they are in narrow sanctuaries, as if they must be hidden from the eyes of the uninitiated? Similar, mysterious rooms that are scattered in many caves of the Western Deccan might be supposed to have been dedicated partly to the worship of Vairocana that comprised secret and initiatory practices. Huntington accordingly identified, in cave 6 at Aurangābād, a nearly perfect plastic representation of the Womb Realm *maṇḍala* (*garbhadhātu-maṇḍala*) as explained in the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra* and today still in use by the Shingon sect in Japan. The Esoteric Buddhist practice based on this *maṇḍala* seeks to express the great compassion (*mahākaruṇā*) of the central Buddha, Vairocana. Inside the shrine, a Buddha seated in *bhadrāsana*⁴⁷ is flanked by both Padmapāṇi and Vajrapāṇi, Bodhisattvas easily recognized by their attributes. The iconographic program of contiguous cave 7 would be, according to the same author, devoted to the Diamond Realm *maṇḍala* (*vajradhātu-maṇḍala*) as developed in the *Sarvatathāgatatattvasamgraha* (aka STTS) text whose virtue is to develop the wisdom (*prajñā*) of Vairocana Buddha. The latter is surrounded by Tārā and other female figures, in perfect agreement with iconographic conventions of this *maṇḍala* still in use. Both *maṇḍala* are complementary and it is their union which effects the ultimate Bodhi or Awakening. According to Huntington, other Buddha images could bear the same esoteric connotations at Ajanṭā, Ellorā or even Kanherī.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ In China, inscriptions sometimes indicate both Maitreya and Śākyamuni as well as other Buddhas in this posture. See Sasaguchi (1973); Chapin and Soper (1970a, b); also McNair (2007).

⁴⁷ Huntington contends that most *bhadrāsana* Buddha images in the western caves of Mahārāṣṭra reflect Vairocana and, at the same time, Maitreya who is the scion of this Buddha family in several iconographic systems (1981, 54, n. 21 and private communication).

⁴⁸ Huntington (1981, 52) and Huntington and Huntington (1985, 265–268); see also Huntington and Chandrasekhar (2000) and Berkson (1986). For the case of cave 12 at Ellorā being a *maṇḍala*, see Malandra (1996, 196–207); for the late Mahāyāna caves at Nāsik, see Bautze-Picron (2000). One very interesting low-relief from Kanherī, cave 90 (figure 12), on the left wall, is compared by the Huntingtons to a *maṇḍala* with the central pendant-legged Buddha representing the eternal principle (*dharmaśāya*) or Vairocana. This identification does not exclude it from being the historical Buddha Śākyamuni as well since the two are “identical in ultimate sense” (1985, 263–264).

Weiner estimates, albeit in different ways, that this peculiar iconography (Buddhas in *bhadrāsana* and *dharmačakra-mudrā*), so characteristic and so sudden in the caves of Ajantā, at the turn of the 6th century, could well mark an “evolution of religious concepts” in favor of Mahāyāna Buddhism (1977, 65–69). Whatever the case for Ajantā, this iconography was introduced to and adopted in different places in northern India, including the famous monastery at Nālandā. This is what Paul published on the art of Nālandā: “This new iconography, developed in Sārnāth in the fifth century AD, rapidly spread to western Indian Buddhist Caves. The sudden proliferation of the *pralambapādāsana* [*bhadrāsana*] Buddha in this period at Sārnāth and other places suggests a new conceptual infusion which might have been connected with some special sect. The discovery of a number of such images from our sites suggests that such a sect was also active here [at Nālandā]. There might have been a sectarian link that connected Nālandā with Sārnāth on one hand and the western Indian caves on the other.” (1995, 7)

Could this “evolution of religious concepts” or “new conceptual infusion” be related with the rapid emergence of Esoteric Buddhism across the Indian subcontinent and specifically at Nālandā? As for Southeast Asia, some scholars reached similar conclusions in central Java with the iconographic program of Candi Borobudur and Candi Mendut, circa the end of the 8th century. The latter sanctuary shelters in its concealed cella a Buddhist triad centered on a colossal pendant-legged preaching Buddha. Could it be Vairocana or Śākyamuni displayed in the “phenomenal body” (*nirmāṇakāya*)? The presence of the Wheel and the pair of deer at the feet level is undoubtedly intended to refer to the disciples (*śrāvaka*) and the episode of the First Sermon, but the presence of two Bodhisattvas contiguous, probably Padmapāni on the right and Vajrapāni⁴⁹ on the left of the central image, does not make it possible to doubt the Mahāyāna context, in its Esoteric form, in which they are located. The interior walls of the cella are flanked by several niches, now unoccupied, but which could have held small statues of the four Jinas (see discussion, infra). The external walls have representations of eight Bodhisattvas which are also found in the *Garbhadhātu-mandala*. If that was so, both Candi Mendut and Candi Borobudur, which are aligned with one another, could have been aimed to represent the twin *mandala* just mentioned above (Singhal 1991, 373–384).⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Bœles seeks to link the iconographic program of Candi Borobudur and Candi Mendut with the teaching of the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra* (*Lotus Sūtra*). He identifies this Bodhisattva with Mañjuśrī rather than Vajrapāni, while admitting: “Our main consideration is that the Bodhisattva Vajrapāni is not mentioned in the *Lotus Sūtra*. [...]” (1989, 55 n. 57). This argument does not seem convincing; the present author prefers the traditional identification.

⁵⁰ For a divergent opinion on the iconographic program of Candi Mendut, see Klokke (1993, 128–133) and Woodward (2004, 337–338).

At this stage of the analysis, it might be useful to recall that the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra* and the STTS in which all this iconography may have found its inspiration, were initially composed in India probably during the second half or the last quarter of the 7th century, and translated into Chinese during the 8th century (Huntington 1981, 47, 49, 53, n. 4; Hodge 1994, 66–72 and 2003, 14–24; Weinberger 2003, 28–35 and 2010, 134–136). There are good reasons to believe that these texts were also known in Southeast Asia, albeit perhaps in a variant form. In regard to the famous pendant-legged Buddha image from Đòng-Du'o'ng in Campā, the An Tháï stele, found nearby and dated 902, infers that it probably fitted in a Mahāyāna iconographic program of tantric inspiration and centered on a triad made up of Śākyamuni, Amitābha and Vairocana (Dupont 1951, 269–270; Nandana 2005, 80–81). Uncertainty remains, however, on the exact possible matching of these three names with the pendant-legged Buddha from Đòng-Du'o'ng. In addition, the worship of the Vairocana *mandala* seems to be attested in the Malay Peninsula where various clay tablets have been found, some with the eight Bodhisattvas⁵¹ around the central Buddha and others somewhat reflecting the relief of Kanherī, cave 90, discussed above under the heading “Vairocana” (Pattaratorn 2000, 188–191; Woodward 2004, 335–337).⁵²

As these examples from India and Southeast Asia attest, this peculiar posture was never reserved exclusively for one Buddha or another. Therefore positive identification of the pendant-legged Buddhas remains problematic unless backed by inscriptions. Indeed, Vairocana, like Maitreya, is iconographically identical to Śākyamuni Buddha in scenes of the First Sermon at Sārnāth or preaching the Dharma in the universe. But perhaps this confusion of genre, allowing for both exoteric and esoteric interpretations, is intentional.⁵³

Returning to Wat Phra Men, the possibility remains that the four Buddhas depicted around the so-called *stūpa* could represent either Śākyamuni, Maitreya or Vairocana. Intrinsically, the repetition of the quadruple Buddha images is often seen as a defining characteristic of the divinity. The Buddha Śākyamuni provides an example with the Great Miracle of multiplications at Śrāvastī, a cosmologic idea well

⁵¹ For the same type of clay tablet found in India, see Pal (1973, 71–73, fig. 151). Concerning the worship of the eight Bodhisattvas (*aṣṭamahābodhisattva*) in India, see Bautze-Picron (1997, 1–55).

⁵² It is not always very clear who is at the center of the *mandala*. Granoff's earlier article on the eight Bodhisattvas scheme says that both Śākyamuni and Vairocana are acknowledged at the center although the author prefers to support the identification of Śākyamuni (1969, 90, 92). Bautze-Picron article on the topic (1997) avoids, perhaps wisely, the Śākyamuni/Vairocana issue.

⁵³ In surveying the beginnings of Esoteric Buddhism, Snellgrove quotes the *Śūraṅgamasamādhi Sūtra* where Śākyamuni is reported as saying: “That Buddha (namely ‘Resplendent One [Vairocana], Adorned with Rays, Transformation-King’) is myself with a different name [...]” (2004, 78, n. 57, 96).

summarized by Paul Mus (1929, 61–62). Further, in historical Thailand, there are many niches around the *stūpa* or on the *prang* of four Śākyamuni Buddhas depicted in different attitudes. In regard to Maitreya, the three assemblies at which the Buddha of the Future is destined to deliver sermons after his Awakening are sometimes concentrated in a triadic composition. The long scroll from southern China provides a relevant example, where Maitreya appears thrice seated in *bhadrāsana*, performing three variants of the teaching gesture (Chapin and Soper 1970b, pl. 32). As for Vairocana, at least one Nepalese example exists of the “Resplendent One” appearing on each face of the *caitya* at Om-bahal, Patan, stylistically datable to about the 7th century. The figure, being a manifestation of an inner Vairocana, is repeated in four niches above the other Jinas (Slusser 1982, 272–273, figs. 282–284).

At Wat Phra Men, identification of the individual Buddhas may remain elusive and reflect the interests of those who sponsored the images, whether related to the Śrāvakayāna, the Mahāyāna or even the Vajrayāna. Furthermore, this arrangement of four Buddhas around the *stūpa* could denote more complex iconographical symbolism. The system of the five Jinas, of which Vairocana is part, may be a direct reflection of the five Buddhas of the present cosmic age among which are Śākyamuni and Maitreya.

The Five Buddhas of the “Good Eon”

The first logical interpretation to arise in a Theravāda context for such an arrangement is that of the Buddhas of the present eon. The enumeration of the Buddhas of the past is very old and may go back to the origins of Buddhism.⁵⁴ Even if the number of Buddhas can vary from one list to another depending on textual sources, what really matters in early Buddhism is the idea of “serialization”; i. e., the fact that the Buddhas follow each other at a different period of time but with no encounters.

Nattier published in her widely acclaimed book (1991, 21) on the Buddhist prophecy of decline that:

... at a point that is difficult to date with precision, the standard list of seven Buddhas was subjected to a far more significant and widely accepted alteration. The first three—Vipaśyin, Śikhin, and Viśvabhū—were removed from the list, and a future Buddha, Maitreya, was added. This new list, then, consisted of Krakucchanda, Kanakamuni, Kāśyapa, and Śākyamuni, together with the future

⁵⁴ The Pāli list for instance refers to the last seven Buddhas (*Mahāpadāna-sutta*, *Dīgha-nikāya*, II-2).

Buddha Maitreya. At the same time a new qualifier was added, for these five were now described as the Buddhas of the “good eon”, or *bhadrakalpa*.

While the historicity of this pattern change (from seven to five Buddhas) may be questionable, the fivefold series is well evidenced in the scriptures of all Buddhist schools; variants exist in the spelling of their names, however. As for Maitreya, he can appear either as a Buddha in monastic dress or as a Bodhisattva in princely garb. He can even disappear to make way for a fourfold system whereby the four past Buddhas would be depicted anthropomorphically around the *stūpa*, the symbolic place of gestation before his future rebirth.

Many plastic examples and architectural forms exist in South and Southeast Asia of the four Buddhas of the present *kalpa* arranged as a *mandala* around the *stūpa* (Snodgrass 1985, 131–134). Such an arrangement appears very early in Burma, circa the 6th century, in the small silver reliquary excavated at the Khin Ba mound, Śrīkṣetra, on which the names of the four past Buddhas are inscribed in Pāli (Stargardt 2000, 21–24; Moore 2007, 175–178). Of particular interest is a shift in Buddhist thought from a temporal to a spatial concept. The Buddhas are represented in sitting meditation posture at the four cardinal directions; hence the Khin Ba reliquary expresses both temporal and spatial considerations. From the same place, at least two slab stones represent in low-relief five Buddhas sitting in meditation at the base of a *stūpa* (Luce 1985, vol. II, fig. 27). They could also be considered as the five Buddhas of the present eon who are venerated to this day in Burma and neighboring countries (Martini 1969; Skilling and Evans 1998, 1999). The only new addition in iconography is the appearance of Maitreya as the fifth Buddha. This scheme seems to have been reproduced in architectural form in the 12th century with the so-called pentagonal monuments or with “five faces” (*leimyet-hna*) in Pagān (Pichard 1991). In Cambodia, Thompson has also suggested that *stūpa* of the middle period were connected with the cult of Maitreya and the four past Buddhas such as at Wat Nokor, Tralaeng Kaeng, Angkor Wat or Wat Phnom (2000 and 2006). Indeed, common Buddhist piety not only turned to the past, but also to the future with Maitreya as a savior figure.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Closer to the period under study, one Mon inscription from northeastern Thailand, paleographically dated circa the 7th to 8th centuries, mentions the wish to be reborn at the time of the Buddha Ārya Maitrīya; i. e., Maitreya (Uraisi 1995, 200–201). Moreover, the oldest reference in Pāli to Metteyya so far discovered in Thailand seems to come from an inscribed clay tablet found at *stūpa* no. 11 in U-Thong. The inscription reads “Metteyyako”; see Jirassa (2001, 261) and Skilling (2009, 111 figs. 5a, 5b).

This iconographic scheme of the five Buddhas of the present eon at Wat Phra Men would seem to accord with that of the Theravāda environment in which the monument is believed to have been established; Dupont has made this interpretation (1959, 64).⁵⁶ This common interpretation might, however, unintentionally mask another esoteric tradition that had evolved in response to the growing significance of Mahāyāna across the Malay Peninsula around the 7th and 8th centuries.

The Five Jinas⁵⁷

The basic tenet of Theravāda Buddhism is that different Buddhas cannot exist simultaneously. With the emergence of Mahāyāna, doctrinal evolution brought about “Buddha-fields” or “Buddha-lands” (*buddhakṣetra*).⁵⁸ Many early Mahāyāna-sūtras mention, for instance, the Buddhas of the ten directions (*daśadigbuddha*) such as the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* and the *Gaṇḍavyūha sūtra*. The Jinas development, which was examined by Mus in his monumental study of Borobudur (1934, 175–198), is complicated; details of their origins and worship are largely in dispute. This fivefold system (*pañcajina*) is usually composed with Vairocana at the center, Aksobhya to the East, Ratnasambhava to the South, Amitābha to the West and Amoghasiddhi to the North; with some variants in the names and the attribution of the directions.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ As indicated in footnote 18, clay tablets were found in Wat Phra Men with the “*ye dhammā*” verse in Pāli hence clearly attesting their production in a Theravāda community. However the complex iconography of the tablets is difficult to interpret. Similarly, another type of tablet found in Nakhon Pathom and elsewhere, also bearing the “*ye dhammā*” formula in Pāli on the back, is visibly inspired, however, by a Mahāyānist iconography with the presence of different Bodhisattvas (Thanakrit 2547 [2004]). This type of tablet has been recently reconsidered in a Sri Lankan context with special references to the Girikandaka Monastery (Woodward 2009).

⁵⁷ The present author prefers the term *jina* (“conqueror” or “victor”), largely attested in Buddhist literature, to *dhyāni-buddha* (“Buddha of meditation”) which is still used sometimes in publications. The latter denomination as well as *manusi-buddha* (“human Buddha”) were the scholarly inventions of Hodgson in the mid-19th century. For a recent reconsideration of these labels, see Gellner (1989, 7–19 and 1996, 252 n.1) and also Lopez (2005, 73, n. 28).

⁵⁸ See Williams (1989, 224–227). In the Great Miracle at Śrāvastī, the Buddha generates doubles of himself (*nirmāṇa*), an action that technically does not infringe the basic Buddhological rule mentioned here. However, some have wondered whether this “miracle” should not be seen as the first steps of a Mahāyānist concept, or, on the contrary, an attempt at finding some justification from the Pāli commentators around the 5th century (Rosenfield 1967, 236–238).

⁵⁹ Gellner asserts: “In early Mahāyāna Buddhism only two of the five [Jinas] had an independent existence: Aksobhya (...) and Amitābha (...). Three other Buddhas, Amoghasiddhi, Ratnasambhava and Vairocana, were added by the early Vajrayāna (...).” According to this author, the establishment of the five Jinas seems to have emerged roughly around the 7th century and played a significant role in the first stage of Vajrayāna at least in Newar Buddhism (1996, 252). See also Slusser (1982, 272–273). For an introduction to the notion of the five Jinas in Tantric Buddhism, see Snellgrove (2004, 195–198).

Perhaps the oldest textual reference to the four cardinal Jinas is to be found in some translation of the *Suvarṇaprabhāsa-sūtra* (*Golden Light Sūtra*) from the 7th century onwards. This Mahāyāna-sūtra seems to contain some elements of early Tantrā because, in many instances, it describes four directional Buddhas or Jinas and includes a few esoteric discussions as well as some spells and incantations (*mantra* or *dhāraṇī*) that are aimed at giving protection through mere recitation (Snellgrove 2004, 148–149). In the text, the Buddhas or Jinas dwell in the four cardinal directions and go by different names from the above list.⁶⁰ Historically, the *Golden Light Sūtra* won great esteem in East Asia for protecting the territory and was often read publicly to ward off threats. Its first reading as a court ceremony probably occurred around 660, when the Tang Dynasty of China and Silla Dynasty of Korea had defeated the Paekche kingdom and were threatening Japan.⁶¹ In the same vein, a set of eight volumes of the *Golden Light Sūtra* (*Konkōmyō-kyō* in Japanese) was given in 694 to the Hōryūji to be read when national security was threatened in Nara (Wong 2008, 15). Wong mentions various attempts by scholars to link the iconography of, for example, the Hōryūji Kondō walls to this text (2008, 154). This *sūtra* also possibly circulated in and left its imprint on Southeast Asian iconography. The *Golden Light Sūtra* was re-translated into Chinese by Yijing around 703 after he returned to his homeland (*Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, Vol. 16, No. 665; see Takakusu ref.). Since the Chinese pilgrim traveled extensively and resided for many years in Nālandā and the southern seas area, the text may in principle be believed to have been widely popular and circulated (in Sanskrit?) between India and China during his lifetime, although no such textual evidence remains in Southeast Asia.⁶²

Basically the same four directional Buddhas found in the *Golden Light Sūtra* also form the later Jinas as mental entities in Buddhist *maṇḍala*, such as in the *vajradhātu-maṇḍala* known in Shingon Buddhism.⁶³ Whether the early directional

⁶⁰ Akṣobhya of the East, Ratnaketu of the South, Amitāyus of the West, and Dundubhisvara of the North. The presiding Buddha is still the glorious Śākyamuni. See Emmerick (1996) and the version published online by the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Texts (FPMT): www.fpmt.org/teachers/zopa/advice/goldenlight.asp.

⁶¹ Personal communication by Dr. Kyeongmi Joo at the National University of Pukyong, Busan. The *Samguk Yusa* chronicle also mentions chanting the *Golden Light Sūtra* to alleviate drought during the Unified Silla kingdom (Ha and Mintz 1997, 326). Besides there were many commentaries written on this *sūtra* by the famed monks Wonhyo (616–686 CE) and Gyeonghueng (?–681).

⁶² See also Ludvik (2004, 707–709). Besides, Yijing's personal involvement with esoteric practices has been acknowledged in Davidson (2002, 18, n. 16); also Wang (forthcoming).

⁶³ The value of the *vajradhātu-maṇḍala* cannot be underestimated. It is the primary *maṇḍala* of the STTS and, with its five Buddha-family structure, it served as the prototype for the other *maṇḍala* of the Yoga Tantra class as a whole. In the STTS narrative, after his Awakening, Vairocana (aka “Vajradhātu”) leaves Akaṇiṣṭha and travels to the peak of Mount Meru where he seats himself on the lion-seat (*siṁhāsana*). He is then joined by the Jinas, at the heads of the four Buddha families, who are also seated in the four cardinal directions (Weinberger 2003, 59–60, 72, 77).

pure-land Buddhas ever left an impression in Indian art,⁶⁴ the later *mandala* concepts had tremendous impact in Asia on artistic and architectural planning, especially that of the *stūpa* which is, in a strict sense, the embodiment of Buddhahood (Snodgrass 1985, 135–140; Snellgrove 2004, 317).

Wat Phra Men probably once exhibited the common scheme of four Buddhas seated against what is presumably a *stūpa*, but the fifth Buddha supplementing the series—even though physically absent—would unquestionably have been included, at least symbolically, in the central structure. It remains to be acknowledged, according to the system described below, whether the central Buddha was meant to be Maitreya Buddha, following the first interpretation, or otherwise Vairocana Buddha, if the second esoteric understanding prevails. A double interpretation may possibly have been intended. Hence the four colossal Buddhas from Wat Phra Men could account, either separately or simultaneously, for the four past Buddhas or the four Jinas, each one being assigned a cardinal direction (figure 13):

- East—Kanakamuni; Akṣobhya
- South—Kāśyapa; Ratnasambhava
- West—Śākyamuni; Amitābha
- North—Krakucchanda; Amoghasiddhi.

Since the four statues at Wat Phra Men all seem to display the same teaching gesture (*vitarka-mudrā*) and since one Buddha is hardly distinguishable from another, this arrangement could have been an early or experimental attempt to represent the Jina series, not only in concordance with popular iconography at the time, but also before any iconographic standardization of gestures (*mudrā*) in question. Only gradually in Buddhist art, and with the major spread of Vajrayāna Buddhism in Asia towards the 8th to 12th centuries, did the *mudrā* seem to evolve iconographically (Saunders 1985, 10–16; also Huntington 1981, 52). The miniature *caitya* with Buddha-niches of the Pāla period in Magādha, in the Kathmandu Valley,⁶⁵ or even the Buddha statues from Borobudur, seem to be the earliest models for this complex evolution in iconography with different *mudrā*. Since the Buddha images

⁶⁴ For a recent exploration of the cult of the four directional Buddhas and its early artistic expression in Nepal, see Acharya (2008, 45–61).

⁶⁵ Gellner gives an example for the *caitya* at Om-bahal in Lalitpur [Patan] where the four Jinas are ascribed to a cardinal direction and Vairocana is found above each of the four. Subsequently, however, Vairocana was usually considered to be inside the *stūpa/caitya* itself since he was considered the “central and ultimate deity”. In a later period, Akṣobhya replaces Vairocana at the center of the *mandala* (1996, 252; also Slusser 1982, figs. 282–284).

from Wat Phra Men may pre-date these monuments, there is no reason to assign to them these later iconographic subtleties.⁶⁶

In comparison, Dupont observed at Chedi Chula Prathon a series of five Buddhas in stucco on the higher terraces. The images were standing in state I, then seated in state II or III, alternatively under the *nāga* or with legs pendant (1959, 69–75)⁶⁷. The Jinas are usually represented seated. Could these iconographic changes thus reflect new ideals or Buddhist concepts in Nakhon Pathom? The present author hypothesizes that the pendant-legged Buddhas from Wat Phra Men may have represented the four Jinas who, together with the central Buddha, either plastically or in meditation, comprise the five Jinas *mandala*.⁶⁸ This tentative iconographical interpretation echoes that discussed in footnote 48 by the Huntingtons in a low-relief from Kanheri, cave 90, with the central pendant-legged Buddha being Vairocana and surrounded by four identical Jinas, in the four corners of the composition (figure 12). The eight standing Buddhas on each side could be identified as the so-called “human” Buddhas (Huntington and Huntington 1985, 263–264, fig. 12.25).

If this interpretation is accepted for Wat Phra Men, many other Dvāravatī artifacts, sculptures and Buddha images that are usually labeled as “Theravāda” must be reconsidered in the light of the emergent Esoteric Buddhism and its significant spread across the region circa the 7th and 8th centuries.

The Rise of Esoteric Buddhism in Theravāda Guise?

Some basic iconographical and architectural aspects of Wat Phra Men in Nakhon Pathom and its Buddha images are discussed in the foregoing pages. The conventional understanding is that four Buddha images, not five, were originally seated against the central core of the monument. The present author has, however,

⁶⁶ The monks at Wat Phra Men might possibly have subscribed to the efficacy of a simple arrangement of Jinas, in the form of an esoteric *maṇḍala* (technically the *caturmudrā maṇḍala*, found in the STTS) and adapted it in their own way, making use of the pendant-legged Buddhas known to them. In *caturmudrā*, the hand gestures differ—they are performed by the practitioner, to achieve identity with the deity—but this would have been secret knowledge (Giebel 1995, 138–139). Besides, as Huntington has pointed out elsewhere, the iconographic rigidity usually associated with the Jinas does not always hold true even for relatively late images (1981, 55, n. 33).

⁶⁷ Coedès gave good reasons in suggesting that the two types of seated Buddhas belonged to a different stage of construction or renovation (1960, 236).

⁶⁸ Could this arrangement perhaps allude to a simple *maṇḍala* form such as the *vajradhātu-mandala* as described in the STTS with 16 Bodhisattvas, arranged in groups of 4 and associated with the 4 Jinas? See Snellgrove (2004, figs., 211–212). The 16 niches at Wat Phra Men (see footnote 23) were wide enough to have been able to shelter such Bodhisattva images—even though no archeological evidence remains—or meditating monks. If such were the case, it would have served the role of a sacred enclosure—a *maṇḍala*? Perhaps reminiscent of an earlier scheme, chapter 6 of the Nepalese *Kriyāsamgraha* text, composed around the 13th century, mentions 16 Bodhisattvas seated in *bhadrāsana* (Skorupski 2002, 97).

drawn on different Buddhist traditions for the hypothesis that actually the original scheme included five Buddhas; the fifth necessarily embedded symbolically in the central structure, hence forming a Buddha or Jina *mandala*. A double interpretation is also possible, reflecting both exoteric and esoteric practices, and was perhaps intended. Other scholars will hopefully further consider the nature of Buddhism(s) practiced at Nakhon Pathom and nearby sites, even though the Dvāravatī religious context remains too obscure at this time to permit definitive conclusions.

All that can be said is that Dvāravatī Buddhism was undoubtedly very heterogeneous and not monolithic as it is sometimes characterized.⁶⁹ Although Pāli inscriptions are commonly found in central Thailand as early as the 6th or 7th century (Skilling 1997, 94), that is not sufficient proof that Theravādins provided the only available monastic lineage (*nikāya*). The presence of certain *nikāya* such as the (Mūla)Sarvāstivādins in Nakhon Pathom (Piriya 1974, 1975) or even Dharmaguptakas in Ratchaburi (Boisselier 1993a, 14 and 1993b, 134, n. 11) has been posited, but such assertions are often speculative and somewhat tenuous (Revire 2009, 120–123; see also Nandana 1978). In any case, the presence of the Theravāda school in a given place by no means precludes the existence of Mahāyāna practices—sometimes with esoteric overtones—even within its own lineage and stronghold such as with the adepts of the Abhayagirivihāra, in contrast with the Mahāvihāra of Sri Lanka (Bureau 1955, 241–243; Deegalle 1999). This Theravāda subgroup appears to have been represented in Central Java around the 8th century and might have played an important role in diffusing esoteric concepts, rituals and texts as far as China (De Casparis 1961; Sundberg 2004).

Although written sources regarding Mahāyāna and Esoteric Buddhism in the early history of Thailand are scarce,⁷⁰ there are presumptions that some tantric or

⁶⁹ For a recent discussion of Dvāravatī Buddhism almost exclusively in line with the Theravāda tradition that acknowledges some “limited Mahāyānist influences”, see Nandana (2009, 59–60).

⁷⁰ One inscription from Lopburi (apparently dated 1022–1025 and therefore later than the period under present discussion) mentions the presence of “Mahāyāna-Sthavira” monks, very reminiscent of what Xuanzang described in many monasteries from 7th century India (Cœdès 2504/1961, 10–12; Beal 1981, II, 133, 229, 260, 269). Could these monks have been disciples of the Abhayagirivihāra? Additionally, the last portion of the inscription K. 1158 (dated 1066) from Sab Bāk, found in Nakhon Ratchasima area, also refers to an “Abhayagiri” but the reference is not very clear about whether it refers to the Sri Lankan monastery or just to a local toponym (Skilling 1997, 100). Whatever the case might be, there is no doubt that this inscription comes from a Vajrayānist environment, hence attesting to the growing importance of Esoteric Buddhism in this area at least around the middle of the 11th century. In the same inscription appears the epithet *śrīghana* as well as the term *pañcasugata*, as a synonym for *pañcajina* in reference to the five Jinas (Chirapat 1990, 11–14; Jacques 2006, 71–77). Earlier inscriptions in the region carry the same epithet of *śrīghana* in referring to *the* or *a* Buddha, particularly K. 1000 coming from Phimai and paleographically datable from the 8th century (Jacques 1969, 58–61). Jacques wonders if the use of this epithet does not coincide with the beginning of an esoteric tendency that would influence Mon–Khmer Buddhism in central Thailand (2006). However, Skilling has written an article refuting this interpretation of the epithet *śrīghana* (2004).

“proto-Tantric” literature and *dhāraṇī* texts, often inscribed on clay tablets, were in wide circulation at least in peninsular and insular Southeast Asia as early as the 7th and 8th centuries (Woodward 2004, 335–339; Skilling 2009, 109).⁷¹ Archeological evidence is also abundant and may prove more fruitful in this quest. The worship of Bodhisattvas Avalokiteśvara and Vajrapāni, the “Vajra bearer”, clearly existed in Khu Bua (site 40), Thung Setthi and other places in central Thailand, perhaps as early as the latter half of the 7th century (Boisselier 1965, 149, figs. 13–14; Nandana 1984, 221, 256–257; Fine Arts Department 2000, 111–114; Zaleski 2009, 173, 176, fig. 8). These Bodhisattvas possibly formed a triad together with a central Buddha image whose identity remains uncertain.⁷² Generally, the influence or presence of Mahāyāna in Dvāravatī is not contested by scholars; to what extent, however, it reached Nakhon Pathom and can be considered tantric or esoteric is not very clear.⁷³ In summary, the study of Dvāravatī iconography could prove difficult in some instances because, in part, Mahāyāna and esoteric practices might have emerged in the guise of the preexisting Theravāda artistic, monastic and scriptural tradition. Conversely, later Theravādins may have reinterpreted or assimilated some older esoteric forms of Buddhist practice that had been performed in Dvāravatī culture.⁷⁴

⁷¹ The origins and spread of Esoteric Buddhism are still in dispute among scholars, especially with regard to dates; the present author tends to assign a conventional “7th to 8th” century date for its development outside India.

⁷² Remarkably, the preaching Buddha fragments in terracotta found at Khu Bua, site 40, were all seated with legs pendant (Baptiste and Zéphir 2009, 212, figs. 107–109). According to Brown, Avalokiteśvara and Vajrapāni could be also associated with the seated Buddha in low-relief from Khao Thamorat cave, near Si Thep (1996, 88).

⁷³ See Brown (1996, 40 n. 115) for a short review of the proponents of Mahāyāna influence in Dvāravatī.

⁷⁴ The present author tends to concur with the conclusions of Bizot, who was the first scholar to speak of quasi-Tantric Theravāda practices, perhaps related to the old Abhayagirivihāra, in the early history of Buddhism in Thailand (e. g., 1993, 25–27). Most of Bizot’s publications, in French, have been summarized and reviewed in English by Crosby (2000).

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Abbreviations

AA: Artibus Asiae

AAA: Archives of Asian Art

Arts As.: Arts Asiatiques

BCAI: Bulletin de la Commission archéologique de l'Indochine

BEFEO: Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient

JAOS: Journal of the American Oriental Society

JIABS: Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies

JSEAS: Journal of Southeast Asian Studies

JSS: Journal of the Siam Society

PEFEO: Publications de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient

RMN: Réunion des Musées nationaux

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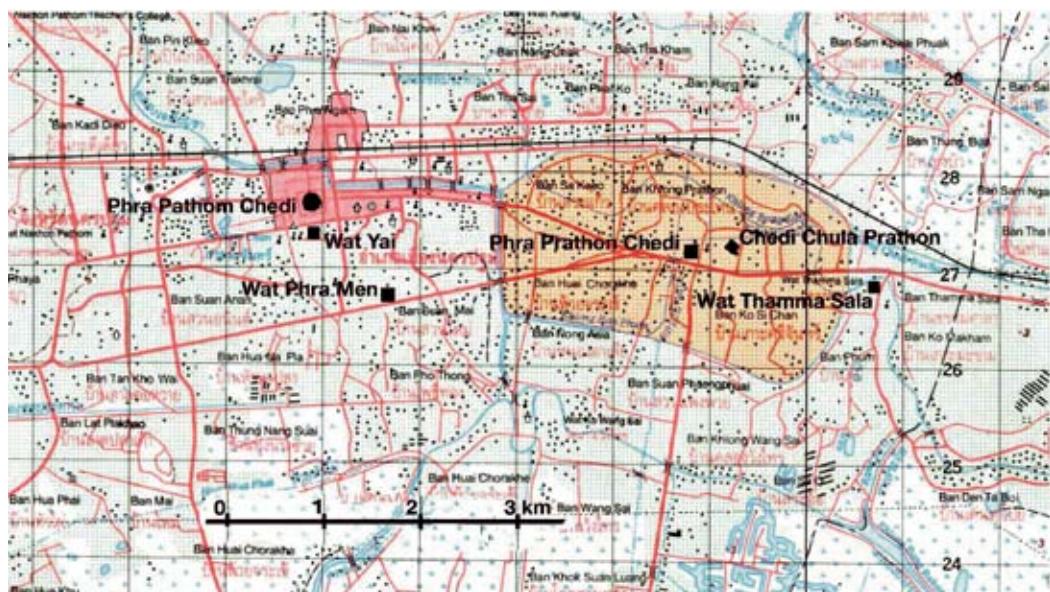


Figure 1. Map of main archeological sites in Nakhon Pathom. (Courtesy of Pierre Pichard.)

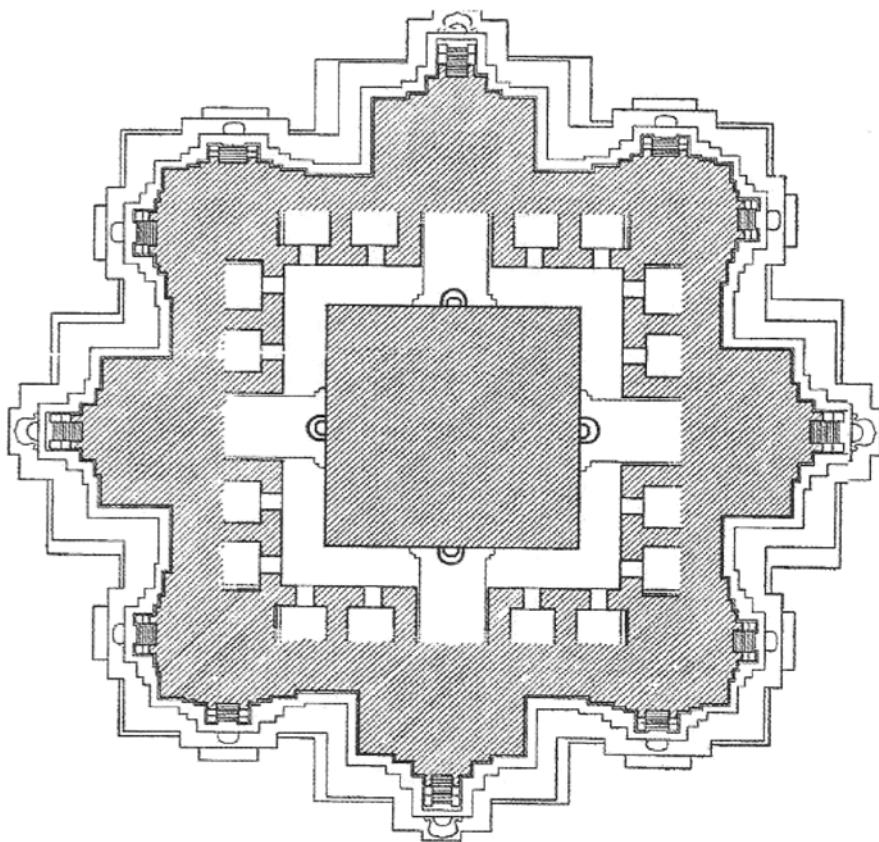


Figure 2. Reconstruction of the ground plan, Wat Phra Men, Nakhon Pathom. (After Dupont 1959, pl. 4.)



Figure 3. Lower portion of a colossal seated Buddha image from Wat Phra Men. (Photograph by Pierre Dupont, courtesy of EFEO photographic archives, Paris.)



Figure 4. Fragment of a pendant leg from a colossal seated Buddha image, found during excavations at Wat Phra Men, 1939–40. (Fonds Thaïlande, ref: THA24102, courtesy of EFEO photographic archives, Paris.)



Figures 5 and 6. Colossal Buddha image in the *ubosot* of Phra Pathom Chedi (5, left: photograph by Pierre Dupont, courtesy of EFEO photographic archives, Paris; 6, right: recent photograph by Nicolas Revire).



Figure 7. Fragmentary cross-piece of a throne, showing a *makara* with a lion issuing from its mouth; Phra Pathom Chedi Museum. (Photograph by Nicolas Revire.)



Figure 8. Colossal Buddha image, National Museum, Bangkok. (Photograph by Nicolas Revire.)



Figure 9. Colossal Buddha image, Chao Sam Phraya Museum, Ayutthaya. (Photograph by Nicolas Revire.)



Figure 10. Unique, colossal Buddha image installed at Wat Na Phra Men, Ayutthaya; originally from Nakhon Pathom. (Photograph by Nicolas Revire.)



Figure 11. Colossal Buddha image, Phra Pathom Chedi, Nakhon Pathom. (Photograph by Nicolas Revire.)



Figure 12. Buddha *mandala* in bas-relief, Cave 90, Kanheri, India. (Photograph by Joachim Bautze.)

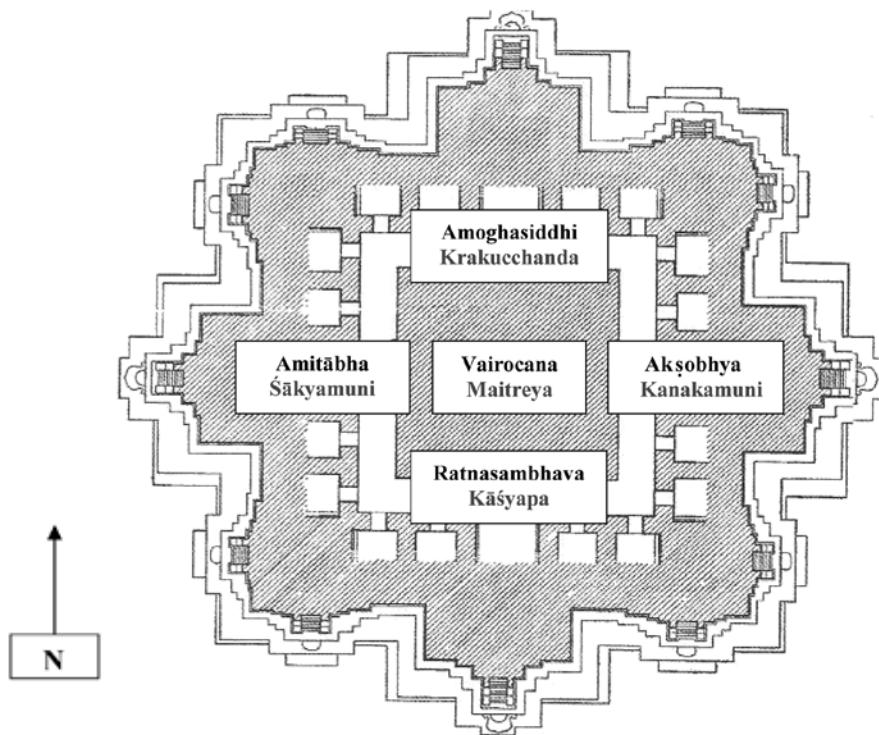


Figure 13. Wat Phra Men as a *mandala*? (Diagram by Nicolas Revire, after Dupont 1959, pl. 4.)