

# Bagan Temples



Bagan (Burmese: ဝုဂံ; MLCTS: pu.gam, IPA: [bəɡàũ]); formerly Pagan) is an ancient city and a UNESCO World Heritage Site in the Mandalay Region of Myanmar.[1] From the 9th to 13th centuries, the city was the capital of the Pagan Kingdom, the first kingdom that unified the regions that would later constitute Myanmar. During the kingdom's height between the 11th and 13th centuries, more than 10,000 Buddhist temples, pagodas and monasteries were constructed in the Bagan plains alone,[2] of which the remains of over 2200 temples and pagodas survive.

9TH TO 13TH CENTURIES

## History

According to the Burmese chronicles, Bagan was founded in the second century AD, and fortified in 849 AD by King Pyinbya, 34th successor of the founder of early Bagan.[6] Mainstream scholarship however holds that Bagan was founded in the mid-to-late 9th century by the Mranma (Burmans), who had recently entered the Irrawaddy valley from the Nanzhao Kingdom. It was among several competing Pyu city-states until the late 10th century when the Burman settlement grew in authority and grandeur.[7]

From 1044 to 1287, Bagan was the capital as well as the political, economic and cultural nerve center of the Bagan Empire. Over the course of 250 years, Bagan's rulers and their wealthy subjects constructed over 10,000 religious monuments (approximately 1000 stupas, 10,000

small temples and 3000 monasteries)[2] in an area of 104 km<sup>2</sup> (40 sq mi) in the Bagan plains. The prosperous city grew in size and grandeur, and became a cosmopolitan center for religious and secular studies, specializing in Pali scholarship in grammar and philosophical-psychological (abhidhamma) studies as well as works in a variety of languages on prosody, phonology, grammar, astrology, alchemy, medicine, and legal studies.[8] The city attracted monks and students from as far as India, Sri Lanka and the Khmer Empire.

## Etymology

Bagan is the present-day standard Burmese pronunciation of the Burmese word Pugan (ပုဂံ), derived from Old Burmese Pukam (ပုကမ်). Its classical Pali name is Arimaddanapura (အရိမဒ္ဒနာပူရ, lit. "the City that Tramples on Enemies"). Its other names in Pali are in reference to its extreme dry zone climate: Tattadesa (တတ္တဒေသ, "parched land"), and Tampadīpa (တမ္ပဒီပ, "bronzed country").[4] The Burmese chronicles also report other classical names of Thiri Pyissaya (သီရိပစ္စယာ; Pali: Siripaccaya) and Tampawaddy (တမ္ပဝတီ; Pali: Tampavatī).[5]

The culture of Bagan was dominated by religion. The religion of Bagan was fluid, syncretic and by later standards, unorthodox. It was largely a continuation of religious trends in the Pyu era where Theravada Buddhism co-existed with Mahayana Buddhism, Tantric Buddhism, various Hindu (Saivite, and Vaishana) schools as well as native animist (nat) traditions. While the royal patronage of Theravada Buddhism since the mid-11th century had enabled the Buddhist school to gradually gain primacy, other traditions continued to thrive throughout the Pagan period to degrees later unseen.[8]

Bagan's basic physical layout had already taken shape by the late 11th century, which was the first major period of monument building. A main strip extending for about 9 km along the east bank of the Irrawaddy emerged during this period, with the walled core (known as "Old Bagan") in the middle.

### ARCHITECTURE, STUPAS

## Architecture

Bagan stands out for not only the sheer number of religious edifices of Myanmar but also the magnificent architecture of the buildings, and their contribution to Burmese temple design. The artistry of the architecture of pagodas in Bagan proves the achievement of Myanmar craftsmen in handicrafts. The Bagan temple falls into one of two broad categories: the stupa-style solid temple and the gu-style (ဂူ) hollow temple.

A stupa, also called a pagoda or chedi, is a massive structure, typically with a relic chamber inside. The Bagan stupas or pagodas evolved from earlier Pyu designs, which in turn were based on the stupa designs of the Andhra region, particularly Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda in present-day south-eastern India, and to a smaller extent to Ceylon.[25] The Bagan-era stupas in turn were the prototypes for later Burmese stupas in terms of symbolism, form and design, building techniques and even materials.[26]

Originally, a Ceylonese stupa had a hemispheric body (Pali: anda "the egg"), on which a rectangular box surrounded by a stone balustrade (harmika) was set. Extending up from the top of the stupa was a shaft supporting several ceremonial umbrellas. The stupa Buddhist cosmos: its shape symbolizes Mount Meru while the umbrella mounted on the brickwork represents the world's axis.[27] The brickwork pediment was often covered in stucco and decorated in relief. Pairs or series of ogres as guardian figures ('bilu') were a favourite theme in the Bagan period.[28]

#### INNOVATIONS OF BAGAN TEMPLES

## Innovations

Although the Burmese temple designs evolved from Indic, Pyu (and possibly Mon) styles, the techniques of vaulting seem to have developed in Bagan itself. The earliest vaulted temples in Bagan date to the 11th century, while the vaulting did not become widespread in India until the late 12th century. The masonry of the buildings shows "an astonishing degree of perfection", where many of the immense structures survived the 1975 earthquake more or less intact.[27] (Unfortunately, the vaulting techniques of the Bagan era were lost in the later periods. Only much smaller gu style temples were built after Bagan. In the 18th century, for example, King Bodawpaya attempted to build the Mingun Pagoda, in the form of spacious vaulted chambered temple but failed as craftsmen and masons of the later era had lost the knowledge of vaulting and keystone arching to reproduce the spacious interior space of the Bagan hollow temples.[26])