

NANPHAYA: THE BRAHMA'S TEMPLE IN BAGAN PERIOD*

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Abstract

Nanphaya was built in late eleventh century or early twelfth century CE and traditionally known as the palace-temple. It is a one story building facing east and one of the five sandstone buildings in Bagan. The outer part of the temple is made up of sandstones and backed up by bricks. The four square pillars, also made up of sandstones, support the upper structure and *sikhara*. The four central pillars is the innovative idea of Bagan's architects and they are the only example so far found in Bagan. Most temples in Bagan are made up of the central core and the passage way. The upper structure of the temple, *sikhara*, is a bit different from the early *sikhara* of the Bagan temples. The *sikhara* is composed of five rows of five panels and set with full blown lotus: the main attribute of *Brahma*. The outer walls of the temple are completely made of sandstones and decorated with dado of *hamsa* bird, the vehicle of Brahma and there are total of 102 *heufamsa* birds. The eleven perforated sandstone windows are beautifully made and they are also decorated with the full-blown lotus. The eight seated *Brahmas*, holding the full-blown louts-the main attribute of the *Brahma*, are beautifully made of sandstones with lotus scrolls on the inner surface of the four pillars. The central place of the temple, among the four square columns, is the heart of the temple and there would be the important image of the temple, that might be the standing statue of *Brahma*.

Keywords: Nanphaya, Brahma, Bagan

Introduction

Ancestral worship, animism, Buddhism and Hinduism were the major religious beliefs for the people of Myanmar in the early days and trails and traces of these ancient beliefs can still be observed in the daily life of the people of present day Myanmar. A lot of religious buildings were built during the zenith of Bagan and its periphery and most of them are concerned with Buddhism and some are for Hinduism such as Nathlaung-kyaung and Nanphaya. There are a lot of research papers and articles for Bagan temples and most of them are dedicated to Buddhism. Only a few articles and books were published for religious diversity in Bagan. The aim of this research paper is to fulfill the archaeological gap of Bagan religious history with archaeological evidence.

Consensus holds that Hinduism might have appeared since the early Bagan period. However, there is a debate among the researchers whether Nanphaya was a Hindu temple or not. Therefore, there are four main research questions in this paper. These are as follows: Is Nanphaya a Buddhist temple?

What was the role of *Brahma* in the religious history of Bagan?

Why were the figures of *hamsa* birds decorated on the outer walls of the temple?

When was the Nanphaya built?

Data and Research Methodology

To answer the above research questions, this paper provides the necessary information, and the secondary data gathered from the archives, libraries and personal interviews. After collecting the secondary data, field trips were carried out several times. Moreover, it recorded the temple digitally and analyzed the detailed information of the temple such as the stucco works, the

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sandstone works and architecture. Visual analysis and archeological Descriptive Method are applied to demonstrate the detailed pictures of the art and architecture of Nanphaya.

The archaeological setting and historical background of the Nanphaya

Nanphaya is located in Myingaba village¹, two miles south of Old Bagan, Nyaung Oo Township, and Mandalay Division. There are a lot of temples, stupas, *simas*, libraries, and monasteries in and around the village: Manuha, Myazedi, Gubyaukgyi, Gubyaukge etc. It is said that Nanphaya was built by the great grandson of King Makuta or Manuha, on the palace site of the former King Makuta. The village Myingaba and the creek play an important role in the history of Bagan and traditionally said that the fight between King Anawrahta and Sukate took place on the bank of the creek Myingaba. The creek Myingaba, which runs across the village, might be the important water resource in the rainy season when the river Ayeyarwady floods the area.

The King Manuha built a palace for himself and later changed it to a temple and it is called Nanphaya-the palace temple. Dr Naing Pan Hla, Mon scholar, opines that the palace of the King Makuta might be situated south of the Nanphaya because he found the brick pavement a few feet below the surrounding level and remains of brick walls, each about over two feet with flight of steps coming up from the lower level, during the excavation.² The current village, Myingaba might be the old site of the Mon King Makuta and his followers. The village Myingaba is well-known for its religious buildings of early Bagan period and it was a village of Mons who were brought from Thahton by King Anirudda in CE 1057³.

The Spread of Hinduism to Myanmar

Animism and ancestral worship were the prehistoric beliefs that have been handed down to the people of Myanmar today as in other parts of the world. Such prehistoric faiths were practiced since the middle Paleolithic period and the burials of our forefathers testified to the belief in after life. In late Paleolithic period, the ancestral worship and animism developed greatly and our forefathers adopted these believes widely. Myanmar went through the three prehistoric ages successively: the Stone Age, Bronze Age and Iron Age. People of present day Myanmar are still influenced by the prehistoric faiths and handed down by people of early civilization. The early old cities of Pyu adopted the ancestral worship and animism and trail and traces of these beliefs can still be seen in the old cities. The close contact with China and India brought the new faiths to Myanmar: Buddhism and Hinduism. The old cites such as, Maimao, Wadi, Vishnu, Halin, Sriksetra, Thahton, Dhanyawadi, Vesali etc received the cultural and social contact form the outside worlds. The mingling of local beliefs and imported religions made new chapter in the religious history in Pyu period. After the fall of these old cities Bagan became the administrative, social and religious center. The people from Pyu, Mon and Myanmar, resettled in the area of current Bagan Old City and Bagan became the capital of first Myanmar Empire.

¹ See Map (1)

² Dr Naing Pan Hla, *Archaeological Aspects of Pyu, Mon, Myanmar*, Yangon, Thin Sapay, 2011, page-186. Hereafter cited as Dr Naing Pan Hla, *Archaeological Aspects of Pyu, Mon, Myanmar*.

³ Personal interview to the local villager, Ko Mya Khine, 2013 CE: most current villagers are the descendants of the Mon who lived there since the Bagan period and they were brought by King Anuriddha. Most of them cannot speak the Mon language but their accent is a bit strange to other local villagers.

Bagan, the capital of the first Myanmar Empire

Bagan, the heartland of Myanmar culture, is the archaeological and historical paradise for scholars. A lot of temples were built within 16 square miles and there are total 3822 temples today and most of them are for Buddhism and a few for Hinduism. Bagan is situated on the left bank of Ayeyarwady River, in Mandalay Division, Central Myanmar. The old city was founded by Pyu, Mon and Myanmar. The history of Bagan began with the accession of king Anirudha (1044 CE-1077 CE). The classical name of Bagan is “Arimadadanapura—the city that tramples the enemy.”¹ The thriving city, Bagan lasted for three centuries and collapsed only in 1287 CE. Myanmar chronicles claim that there were 55 kings in Bagan and the first King Thumondarit ruled the first Bagan in 108 CE. According to Myanmar chronicles, the city Bagan was founded and shifted four times and the present capital was founded by King Pyinbyar in 849 CE. The archaeological evidence shows that Bagan was founded by Pyu, Mon and Myanmar after the fall of Pyu city states.

Hinduism in Bagan

During the zenith of Bagan Empire, there was close contact with other countries, and Bagan became one of the richest regions in Southeast Asia. There were over 3822 religious buildings and some stand out in their original state, some are completely restored and some are in ruins. The religious monuments of Bagan can be divided into two main types: stupas and temples. The temples of Bagan, mostly, are Buddhist temples but some are dedicated to Hindu gods and goddesses. The trail and traces of Hinduism can be observed in wall paintings of the following temples: Apeyatana temple, Ananda temple, Gubyaukgyi temple etc. Nat-hlaung-kyaung, the Vishnu temple with ten incarnation images in the outer niches, is the only temple totally devoted to Hinduism. The findings of Hindu gods and goddesses, indicate that there were some Hindu temples in olden days: with at least three temples for the Hindu Triad, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. Images of Ganesh-the elephant-headed god, made of assorted materials, were also found in Bagan and they are displayed in the archaeological Museum of Bagan.

The Myths of Brahma

Brahma, the creator god, is one of the Hindu Pantheon and he was not known in *Vedic* period in India although his characters developed in later period and he became a very important god in the historical period. Originally Brahma possessed five heads but the fifth head above the four was chopped off by Shiva²: that is why Brahma is depicted with three heads in sculpture and four heads in paintings. The attributes of Brahma are slightly varied, region to region and time to time. The main attributes of Brahma are a lotus flower, the scepter, the bow Parivita, a string of beads, a bowl containing the holy water and the *Vedas*.³ The consort of Brahma is Saravati-the goddess of Knowledge and their vehicle is the *hamsa* bird or the *Brahmi* duck.

¹ Dr Khin Maung Nyunt, *Welcome to Myanmar*, Yangon, Gabharaye Press, 2003, p-7. (Hereafter cited as, Dr Khin Maung Nyunt, *Welcome to Myanmar*.)

² K N Seth and B K Chatuvede, *Gods and Goddesses of India*, Delhi, Diamond Pocket Books, 2003, p-24. Hereafter cited as K N Seth, *Gods and Goddesses of India*.

³ K N Seth *Gods and Goddesses of India*, Page- 23

Art and Architecture of Nanphaya-the Brahms's Temple

Nanphaya¹ is a one storey building and it is one of the five sandstone structures in Bagan.² The outer parts of the temple are made up of sandstones and backed by bricks inside. The plan of the temple is square in shape and that is one of the main characters of the Hindu temples. The vestibule, rectangular in plan, is attached to the main temple and it is rather wide with two perforated sandstone windows. The porch and its pediments are now lost although the remains of the masonry at the base points out that there was once such a porch with pediment. The main sanctum has nine sandstone windows with perforation and they are decorated with the low reliefs of the full-blown lotus petal. Each window is capped by a cinquefoil pediment carried on single pilasters.³ Between the lintel and cinquefoil is the “*kalasa* pot- *kalasa* for amrita, fertility, and prosperity,”⁴ and it is also called “*kyar-thut-oh- the pot of lotus*” that was also applied here in profile along the plinth of the temple.⁵ The *kalasa* pot-profile along the plinth on the outer wall is one of the best architectural innovations in early Bagan period and they provide the elegant and grandeur of the temple. In later periods, the *kalasa*-pot plinth base⁶ became popular and they can be observed almost in every temple, no matter how small.

The *kalasa* pot decoration in the tympana of the window pediment was very rare indeed, although the *kalasa* pots decorated the terraces of the temples and they can be seen on the roof of the Pathotharmyay Temple. The sandstone windows were perforated in thirty diamond patterns and decorated with lotus petals.⁷ The lotus petals can also be observed on the lintels of the sandstone windows.⁸ Above the window pediment is the goddess Sri and her arms are drooping and outspread, holding lotus stalks⁹.

The sanctum vault is masked by two simple crenellated terraces and over the shrine a third one runs beneath the “*sikhara*-the mountain top - the home for gods and goddesses”. At the base of the *sikhara* are the big light holes and each is framed with pediment. The main *sikhara* stands on the square three-tiered base and is curved, tapering to the top and decorated with panels of full-blown lotus. The panels on the *sikhara* are set with the full-blown louts - the main attribute of Brahma and they are indeed very rare in Bagan. According to U Mya's view, there was a Zedi originally over the *sikhara*,¹⁰ although the top part of the main *sikhara* is too small to surmount the zedi or the stupa. From the architectural point of view, there can be no other part the *sikhara* because it is too narrow to crown the upper structure or support the *kalasa* pot like the summit of a Heidu temple.

The ground plan of Nanphaya is composed of two units, one which is the main sanctum and the other is the vestibule. The *sikhara* and upper structure is supported by four massive square sandstone columns and they are joined by vault on which the remains of the stucco works of the pediment with the small tall structure that looks like the small miniature stupas¹¹ although they

¹ See figure (1)

² There are five sandstone structures in Bagan: Sakku-taik in Tuyin hill (completely damaged), Kyaukgu-umin, She Zigon Stupa, Nanpaya and small temple in Pywarsaw Village.

³ See Figure (3)

⁴ Dr Than Tun, *Buddhist Art and Architecture*, p-14.

⁵ See Figure (9)

⁶ See Figure (9)

⁷ See Figure (3)

⁸ See Figure (3)

⁹ See Figure (3)

¹⁰ U Mya, “Nanpaya”, *Archaeological Survey of India, 1934-35, p-101-6*. Hereafter cited as U Mya, “Nanpaya”,

¹¹ Ibid, p-185.

were repaired in 1900s and the shape of the upper part on the pediments cannot be clearly determined.¹

Nanphaya and the Assumptions of the Archaeologists

Due to the absence of the main statue among the four sandstone columns, some archaeologists opine that the temple is concerned with Hinduism. But some archaeologists assume that the main statue might be a standing Buddha image and therefore the temple is Buddhist. The absence of the central statue makes a lot of difficulties for scholars and the views are only conjectural. The first and only archaeologist who questioned the legitimacy of the Nanphaya as a Buddhist Temple was Taw Sein Kho. Taw Sein Kho questioned whether it was indeed a Buddhist temple, for there is no image enshrined and the stone reliefs of Brahmas on the piers were to him evidence of a Hindu connection.² Nanphaya is, according to U Mya, a Buddhist Temple³ with the references of the vestige structures at the corners of the terraces and stupa-like structure on the arch of the columns.⁴ G. H. Luce takes the view that Nanphaya is a Buddhist temple.⁵ Dr Naing Pan Hla is of the opinion that Nanphaya is also a Buddhist Temple following U Mya's view.⁶ Paul Strachan also believed that the temple Nanphaya is concerned with Buddhism.⁷

Hamsa Bird, the Vehicle of the God Brahma

The creative powers of Hindu gurus make attractive myths for Hindu gods and goddesses. Most Hindu gods and goddesses have their own vehicle and most of them are real animals and some are imaginary and their myths of the vehicle of gods and goddesses are very interesting. A large volume of books for the myths of Hindu gods and goddesses and their vehicles have been published and they attract a lot of readers. The vehicle of some Hindu gods and goddesses are lion, tiger, rat, buffalo, tortoise, bird, cow or bull, *hamsa* bird, *garuda*-half-man-half-bird, etc. and they can be observed on the walls of the main sanctum of the Abeyadana Temple.

At the base of the outer walls are the plinth moldings in the *kalasa*-pot profile. Above this, under the pilasters, runs a subtle dado freeze carved in low relief from the sandstone bricks. The dado consists of a band of tondos, each tondo framing the figure of a "*hamsa* bird or *Brahmi* duck"-the vehicle of the god Brahma⁸. The *hamsa* bird is a kind of duck with a crest on the head and colourful feathers. The total number of *hamsa* birds in the tondo is 102, and there might, have once been once, carved 108 *hamsa* birds the sacred number of Hindu. The decoration of *hamsa* bird relief along the outer wall points out the importance of the vehicle of the Hindu gods and goddesses, especially the creator god Brahma. The *hamsa* bird dado⁹ is the only example so far found in the temples of the Bagan period indicating the importance of vahanas of the Hindu gods and goddesses. Therefore, the reliefs of *hamsa* bird dado on the outer walls of Nanphaya are concerned with Brahma's vehicle.

¹ See Figure (10)

² Paul Strachan, *Bagan, Art and Architecture of Old Burma*, Singapore, Kiscadale Publications, 1989, p-48, quoting the Archaeological Survey of Indina, 1907-8, p-34, hereafter cited as Paul Strachan, *Bagan*

³ U Mya, "Nanphaya", p-101-6.

⁴ Ibid, p-101-6

⁵ Luce, *Old Burma, Early Bagan*, p-212

⁶ Dr Naing Pan Hla, *Archaeological Aspects of Pyu, Mon and Myanmar*, p-268

⁷ Paul Strachan, *Bagan*, p-46

⁸ See Figure (5)

⁹ See Figure (6)

The reliefs of Brahma in the Temple

The square central place of Hindu temple is called *Garbha-griha* or womb house or little cell in which the main image of the god or their emblem is usually placed. There is no room like a Hindu temple in Nanphaya because the central place, among the square columns, is a hollow structure. There is a pedestal among the four columns and there once stood the standing statue of Brahma like the Brahma's temple of Prambanan, 9th century CE, in Jogjakarta of Central Java, Indonesia. If there is an image on the pedestal there might be the standing three-headed Brahma statue holding full-blown lotus like the Brahmas on the columns.

The four square pillars¹, that support the *sikhara*, is the only kind of structure so far known in Bagan because most temples in Bagan period used the central core. The low reliefs of Brahma² are beautifully sculpted on the inner sides of the four columns and there are a total of eight seated Brahmas in the temple. Here, the image of Brahma possesses three heads and two arms. The standard depiction of Brahma is in a seated position with four arms and holding the usual attributes: the Vedas, the bull-blown lotus, a string of bead and a bowl containing the holy water.

The Brahmas in Nanphaya³ are totally different from other images of Brahma in India and Southeast Asia region. The two arms hold the full-blown lotus gracefully. Brahma is seated on the lotus cushion that extends sinuous stems to encompass his body with lush buds of louts. Set within a semi-circular arch, framed by curvaceous line carvings and surmounted by a richly-carved "*kirtimukha* frieze" The stalk of louts flank the seated Brahma and he is seated in "*rajalilasana* pose-royal ease, position with the right knee raised and left leg folded loosely"⁴ on the lotus cushion. The Brahma wears loin clothes and he also wears the scarf that hangs across the body: the end of the scarf is beautifully made. The upper torso is covered with very thin clothes with no ornaments such as necklace, armlets, and wrist-lets. The crown of Brahma is very beautiful and it is very different from the crown of the kings of Bagan and it is called "*jatamukuta* - the crown of the braided hair." The serene facial expression of the Brahma is very different from the Brahmas in paintings and images, most of which have serious facial expression.⁵ Behind the head is the halo that testifies that he is the supreme god. The whole image of Brahma is lined with scrolls of floral motif.

The scroll and full blown lotus flower of Brahma is beautifully carved on both left and right sides of each Brahma. The full blown lotus is one of the main attributes of the Brahma and he usually holds the full-blown lotus in both hands. Here in Nanphaya, the Brahma has two hands that are rather different to the images of Brahma in India and Southeast Asia. Brahma with two hands might be the innovative idea of the craftsmen of Bagan and most images of Brahma, either in painting or sculpture, have only two hands. The royal ease pose-"*rajalilasana*", the full blown lotus, the serene face, the *jatamakuta* crown, the halo behind the head,"the *hamsa* bird dado-the vehicle of the Brahma, is evidence that the relief figure in the Nanphaya is the Hindu creator god Brahma.

Brahmas in Paintings and Sculpture

The images of Brahma in sculptures and paintings in other temples are very different to the Brahma in Nanphaya. The sandstone Brahma⁶, displayed in the Archaeological Museum, is one of

¹ See Figure (2)

² See Figure (4)

³ See Figure (4)

⁴ Dr Than Tun, *Buddhist Art and Architecture*, p-24.

⁵ See Figure (7)

⁶ See Figure (7)

the masterpieces of Bagan sculptors: the Brahma is seated crossed-leg while two hands are in *namaskamudra*- prayer attitude with both hands joined. The three heads of the Brahma wear the *jatamakuta* top with the lotus bud. The face of the Brahma is serious with down cast-eyes, and sealed lips.

The images of a Brahma similar to the Brahma of the Archaeological Museum can be seen in the niches of the throne of Mye-bon-tha-pha-ya-hla Temple and they are very similar in facial expression, head dress, hand gesture, leg position to the sandstone Brahma in the Archaeological Museum.

The paintings of Brahma on the walls of Bagan temples differ to the Brahma of Nanphaya and they can be seen in most temples, such as, Myinghabha Gu-byauk-gyi, Apeyadana, Theinmase ect. The painting of Brahma in Apeyadana¹ is very different from the Brahma of Nanphaya. The Hindu gods and goddesses are beautifully and neatly drawn in the tondos on the upper part of the wall of the main sanctum and there are a total of 16 tondos. All the Hindu gods and goddesses are on their vehicles with mostly *namaskaramudra* and they are paying respect to the Buddha Statue in the temple. Here, the god Brahma is on his vehicle, the *hamsa* bird.² The god has four hands and the two hands are in the *namaskaramudra*. The three-headed Brahma along with other gods and goddesses are facing the main Buddha in the cell. Therefore, the Brahma on the wall of the main sanctum in Apeyadana Temple is in a subsidiary role.

Full-blown lotus in *Sikhara* of Nanphaya

Sikhara-the mountain top is the most important part of the Hindu temple and it is always made beautifully and elaborately with images. The simulation of the mountain top, the abode of gods and goddesses on the upper part of the temple became a standard norm and they are decorated with sculptures of various sizes and shapes. Hindus believe that the Himalayan Mountain is the home of gods and goddesses and in simulation that mountain top or *sikhara* is made up and placed above the upper part of the temple. The tradition of decoration of the *sikhara* was followed in the Bagan temples although the main idea and detailed procedure of decoration are different.

The *sikhara* of the Nanphaya³ is a bit different from other temples in Bagan. It stands on a square base with light holes: the light holes of the Nanphaya are big and beautiful and neatly edged with arched gateways. The *sikhara* with square base, curved and tapering, upwards with inward panels, something like the *jatamakuta* or crown ornament, used in contemporary north-east India.⁴ The five rows of three panels are placed on the *sikhara* and are decorated with the full blown lotus - the main attribute of Brahma. The full-blown lotus in the *sikhara* of Nanphaya⁵ is the only example so far discovered in Bagan. Most temples with *sikhara* in Bagan are decorated with the Buddha images.

Discussion

Among the thousand temples, there might be at least three temples for Hindu gods and goddesses in Bagan Period; the Nanphaya for Brahman, the Nathlaung Kyaung for Vishnu and the temple for Shiva, but there might be other ruined or destroyed. The three gods or Hindu Triad played an important role in the religious history of Bagan. The Nanphaya which was built in early Bagan period is dedicated to the god Brhama-the Creator. The eight seated Brahmas with their

¹ See Figure (8)

² See Figure (8)

³ See Figure (10)

⁴ Paul Strachan, *Bagan*, p-48

⁵ See Figure (10)

serene facial expression, the full-blown lotus in the hands of Brahmas, the full-blown lotus on the windows and lintels, the full-blown louts' panels on the *sikhara*, the vehicle of Brahma *hamsa* bird on the outer wall of the temple and the absence of evidence Buddhist icons point out that the Nanphaya was built for Brahma. In early Bagan period, Hinduism gained momentum with other religious beliefs. Among the Hindu gods and goddesses, the god of creator-Brahma was one of the main gods of Bagan and he was honored with the temple that is Nanphaya.

Conclusion

The presence of Hindu Temple-the Brahma's temple, in Bagan points out that there was the cult of Brahma. In Bagan the Hindu Triad was honored with the temples and traces of Hindu culture can still be seen there. Religious syncretism was practiced in early Bagan period and all religions thrived side by side peacefully. The religious tolerance of Bagan people was higher than the people of present day Myanmar.

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The Location of Nanphaya and Myin-ga-bha Village, Bagan, Mandalay Division (Basemap: Bing)



Figure1 Nanphaya, the Brahma's temple, south-east corner, sandstones backed by brick inside the temple, late 11th Century CE or early 12th Century CE, Bagan, Mandalay

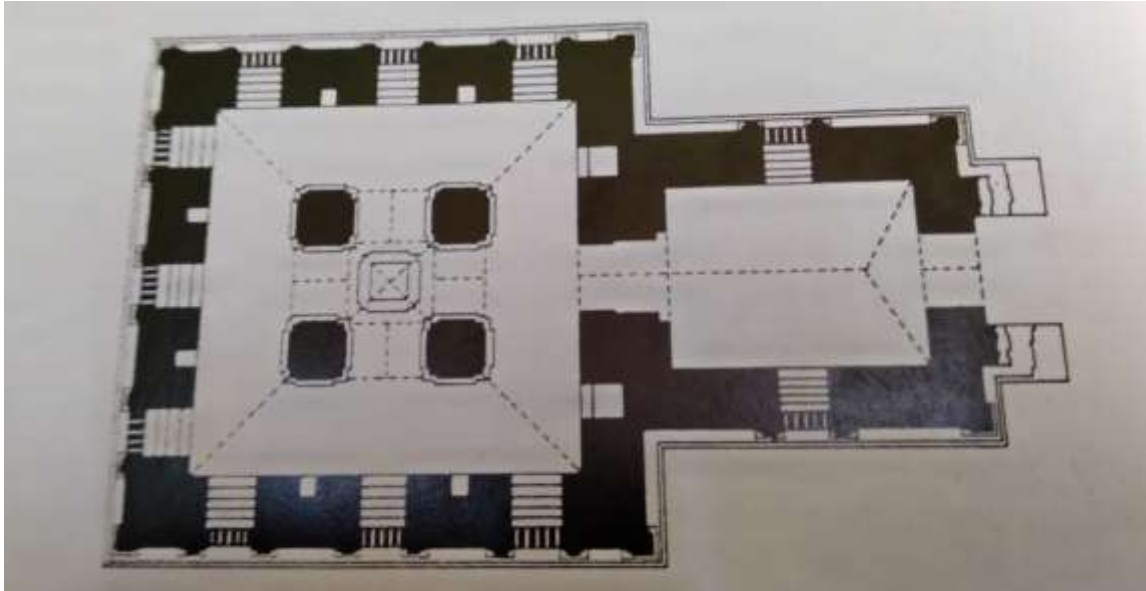


Figure 2 The ground plan of Nanphaya, the main sanctum, the four central pillars, the vestibule and perforated windows, Bagan (After U Aung Kyaing)



Figure 3 Sandstone window with lotus designs, the kalasa pot between the lintel and pediment, and goddess Sri at the apex of the pediment, Nanphaya



Figure 4 Brahma in low relief with full-blown lotus, sandstone, Nanphaya



Figure 5 Hamsa bird, H-7 inches, sandstone, the dado on the outer wall of the Nanphaya



Figure 6 Hamsa bird dado, sandstone, outer wall, Nanphaya,



Figure 7 Brahma in Namaskamudra, sandstone, Archaeological Museum, Bagan



Figure 8 Brahma on the vehicle-hamsa bird, painting, Apeyadana Temple, Bagan



Figure 9 Kalasa pot plinth, Nanphaya



Figure 10 Sikhara, set with full-blown lotus in the panels, sandstone, the eastern side, Nanphaya