

Sacred  
**KAWGUN  
CAVE**

Historical Mon Buddhist Monument

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NAN HLAING



Ü:chokpan: book

# **Sacred Kawgun Cave**

**(A Historical Mon Buddhist Monument)**

Compiled By

**Nan Hlaing**

**B.A., (Honors.), M.A., Ph.D., History, Yangon University**

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Terracotta votive tablets of the Buddha on the limestone scarp before Kawgun Cave

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15.1cm x 20.8cm

I. Mon Buddhist Sculptures: seated, standing, reclining ones

II. Stone Plaques: sleeping Vishnu, and

III, Decay and Vandalism, 1. Title

# Sacred Kawgun Cave



**In pious memory of my revered teacher**

*U Tun Aung Chai,*

**Professor (retired), Department of History,**

**University of Yangon**

# **FORWORD**

**by Professor U Tun Aung Chain**

Perhaps the best known cave in Myanmar is Badalin Cave, located near Ywangan in Shan State. It derived its fame from its wall paintings, fairly primitive sketches done in red ochre. Also found in the cave were implements belonging to the Hoabinian culture which was spread fairly extensively in mainland Southeast Asia and was associated with caves and rock shelters. The associated finds indicated the antiquity of the Badalin wall paintings and perhaps we can say that it was the earliest Myanmar art.

Cave art elsewhere in the world suggest that the paintings were not done primarily for aesthetic reasons. Although the Badalin Cave is a shallow cave and its paintings are easily accessible, many of the paintings elsewhere were done in the deep recesses of caves where there was little or no light at all. Scholars are therefore of the opinion that this early cave art had a religious or magical purpose and may have been associated with rituals for the benefit of the groups or community.

The association of caves with religion and art which started in prehistoric times continued into the historical period. Perhaps one of most prominent examples of cave art in the historical period is the art of the Ajanta Caves in Maharashtra State in western India. The paintings, which stretch from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC to the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD and depict the life of the Buddha as a well as his previous lives as told in the Jātakas, attain to a high level of art and are part of the world's cultural heritage.

Where there were no convenient natural caves, men also created caves for their religion and art. The story of the Ananda temple in Bagan, as told in the chronicles, relates that eight *arahats* came to Bagan from Mount Gandhamādana and, welcomed by King Kyansittha, created for him with their supernatural powers a vision of Nandamula Cave on which the King modeled the Ananda temple. But it is not the Ananda alone which re-creates a cave, the inscriptions of Bagan, beginning with the Rājakumār Inscription; generally refer to temples as cave (*gū*).

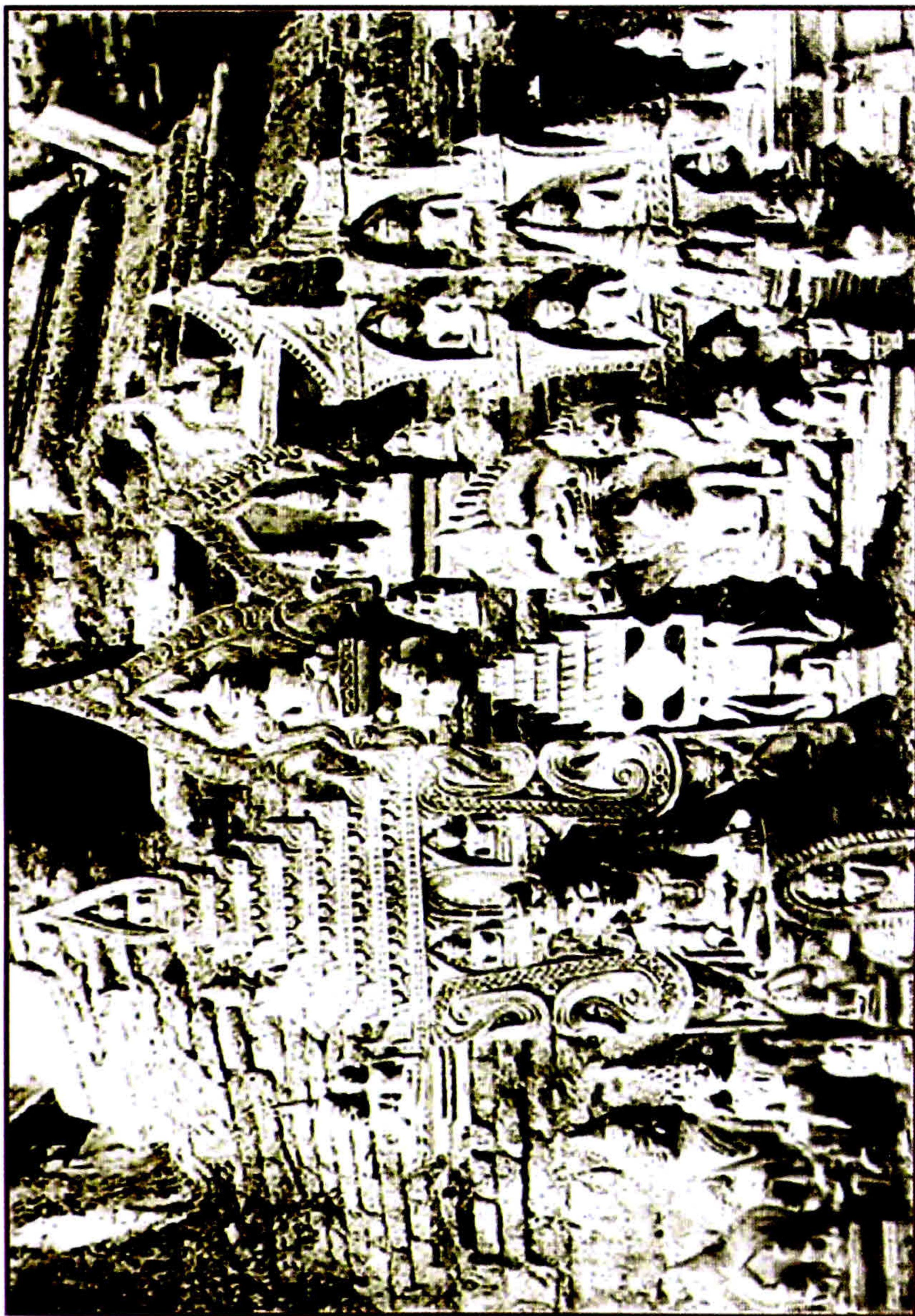
Badalin Cave is at the western edge of the Shan Highlands stretch down south to the Taninthayi Range and there, too, limestone caves occur. Kawgun Cave is one of those caves. Situated not too far away from Hpa-an, the Capital of Kayin State, it is in an area which, historically was a Mon cultural area and is not too distant from Thaton and Mottama, two early centers of civilization. The center of attention and devotion for devotees through the ages, it was first brought to the attention of scholars by Taw Sein Ko and Richard Temple in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Since the weather is generally unkind to the preservation of antiquities and historical artifacts in the Mon area, the caves in which a wealth of cultural artifacts are collected and preserved provide a valuable field of study for scholars. Dr. Nan Hlaing has attempted a study of the art of the Kawgun Cave in relation to art elsewhere. This is a noteworthy step in the study of Mon art of the historical period and the belief's underlying that art. Perhaps other efforts will be made in the study of this subject to fully reveal the wealth of Myanmar culture



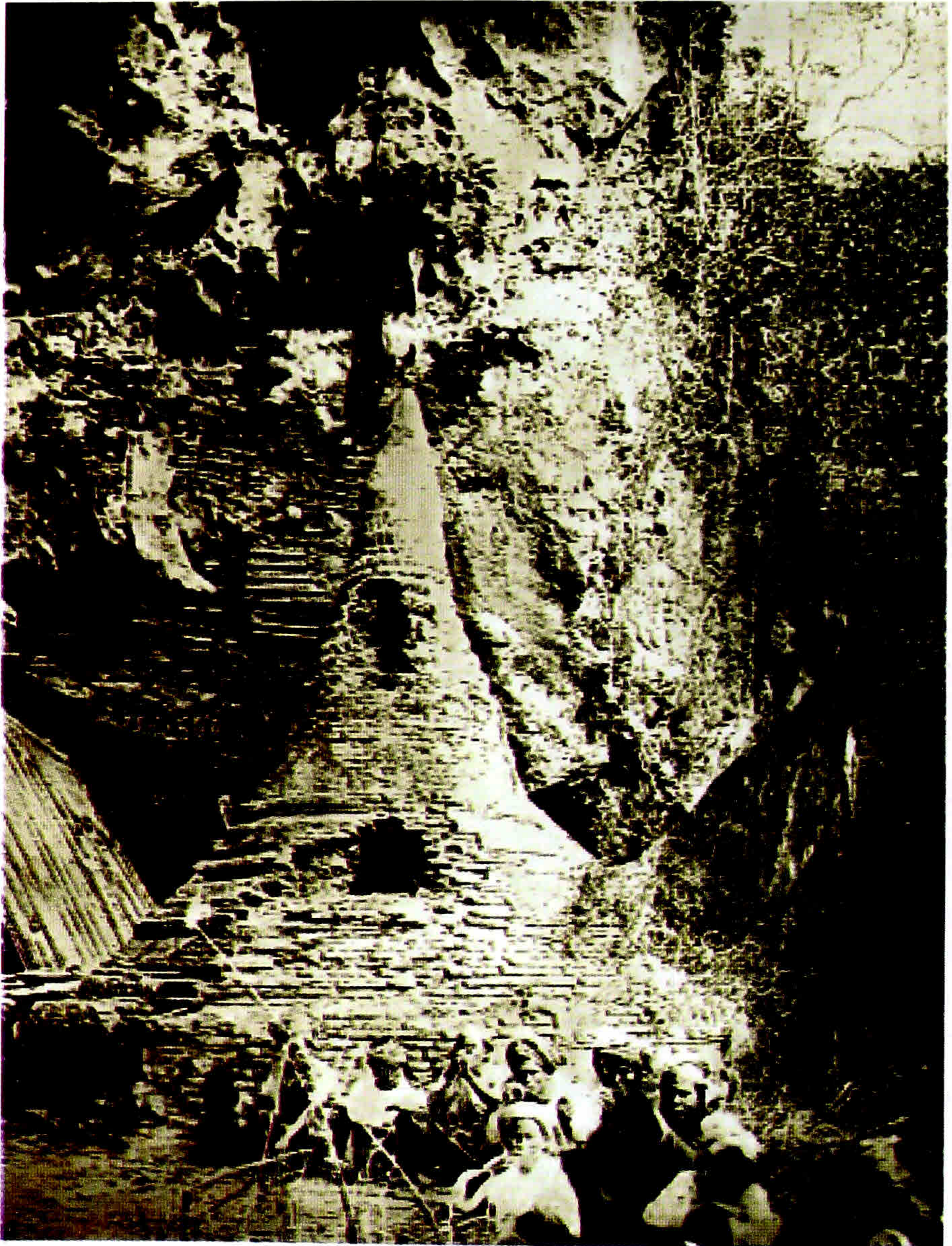
**Votive tablets on the scarp ,Kawgun in 1894**

R.C.Temple,*Ramannadesa*



The Buddha Images at the Entrance of Main Hall of Kawgun Cave in 1894.

R.C.Temple,*Ramannadesa*



***A Stūpa at the Entrance of Main Hall of Kawgun Cave in 1894***

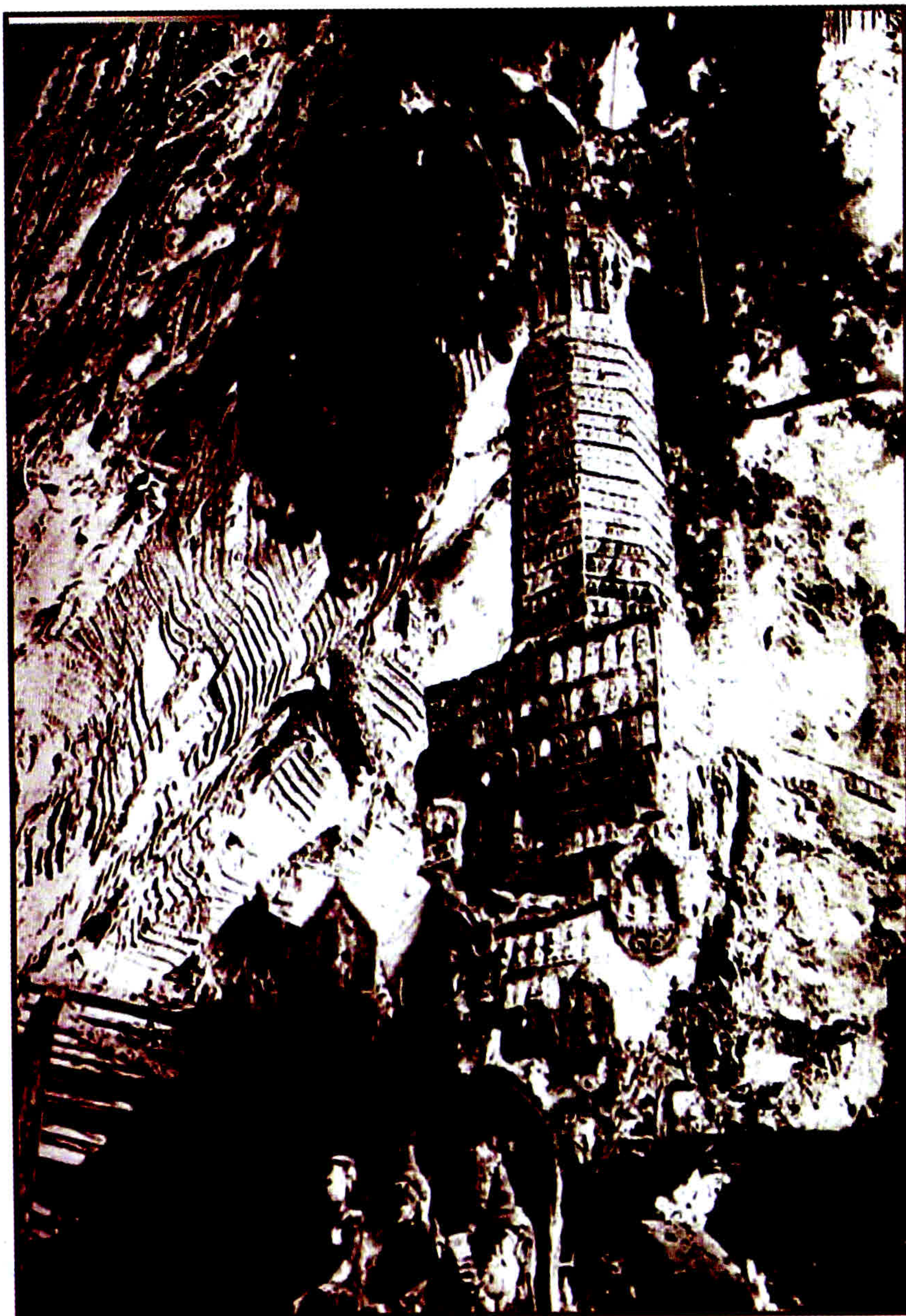
R.C.Temple, *Ramannadesa*



The Buddha Images at the Entrance of Main Hall of Kawgun Cave in 1894.

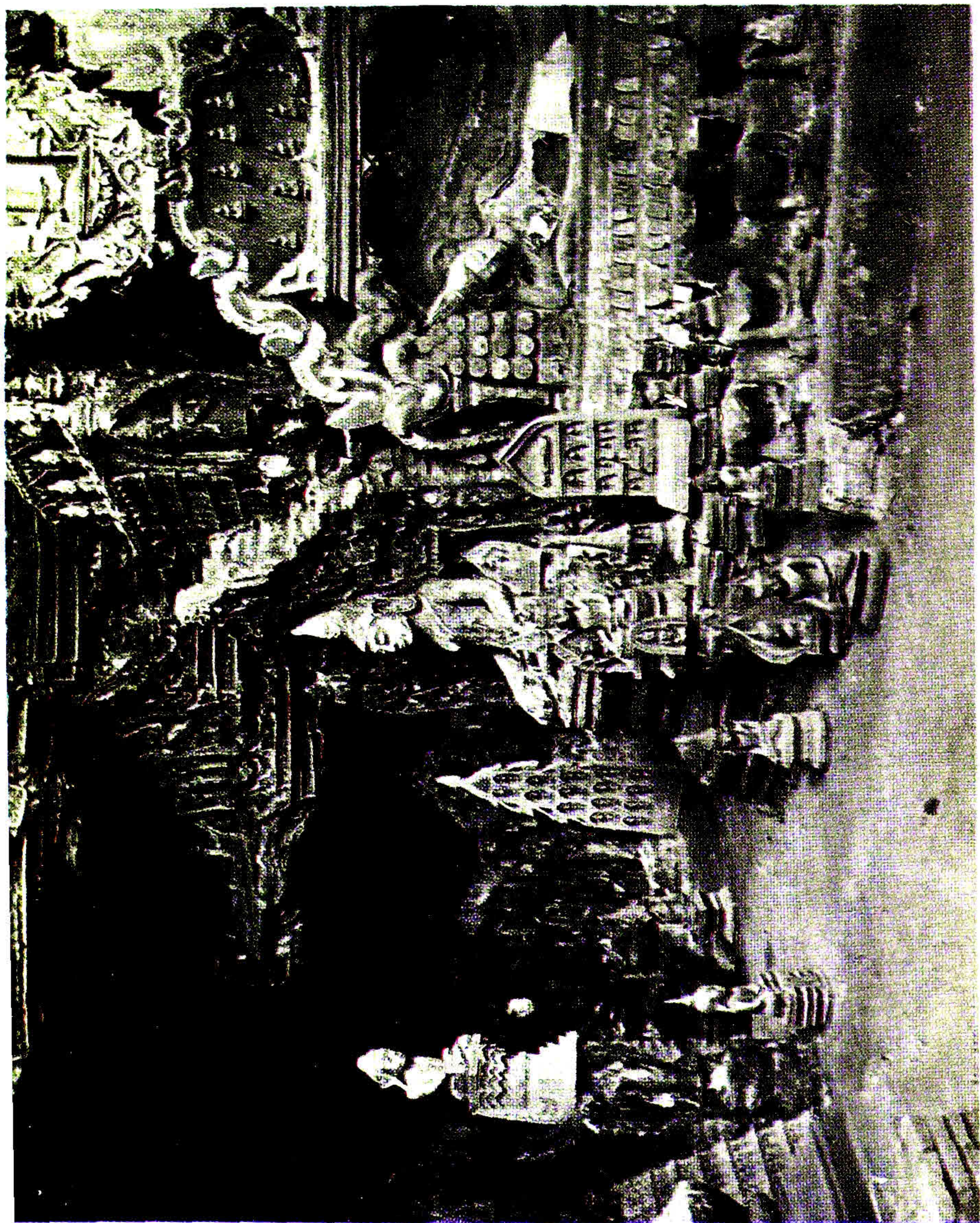
R.C.Temple,*Ramannadesa*



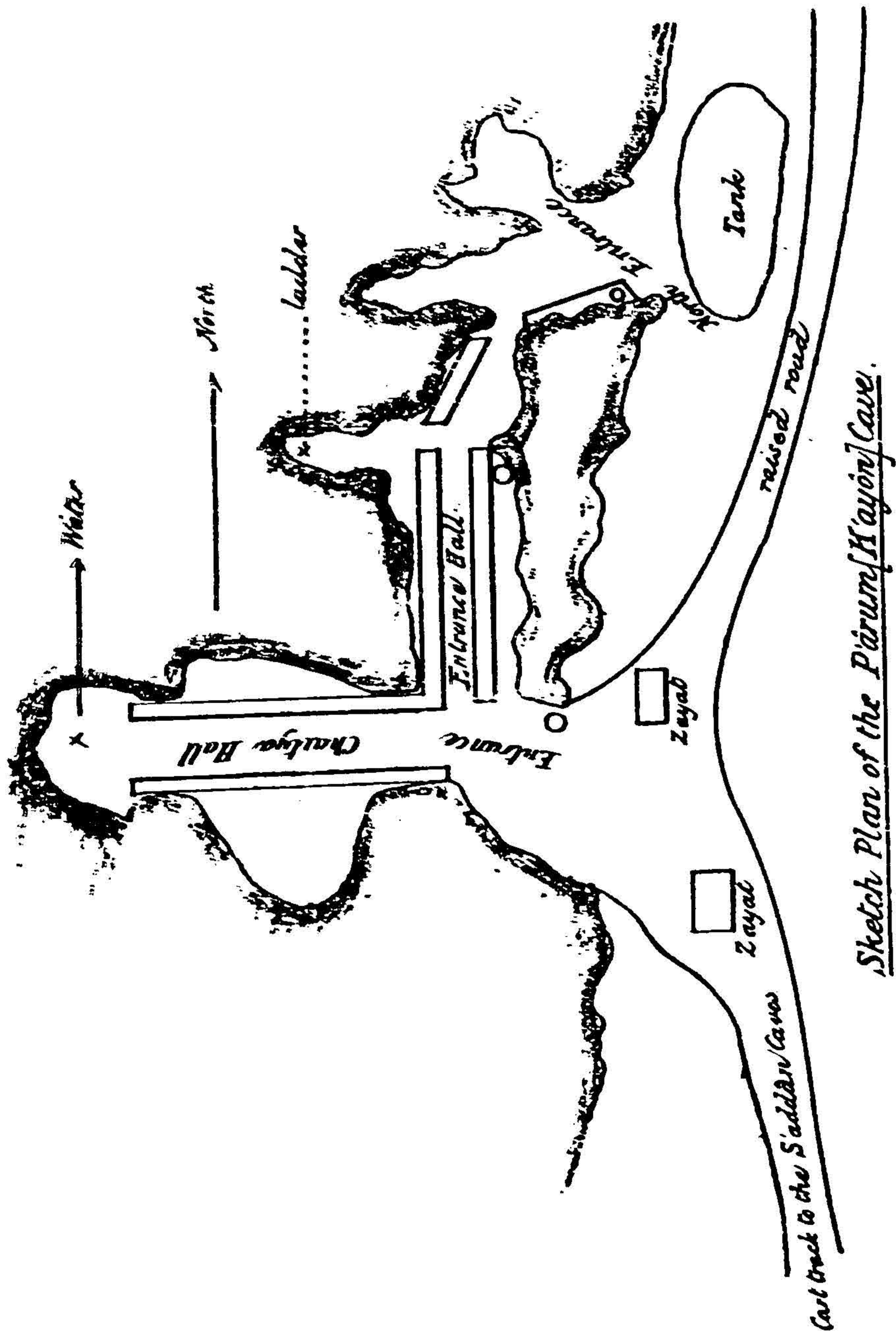


*A Stupa befober the Cave in 1894*

*R.C.Temple, Ramannadesa*



Kawgun Cave Temple in Hpa-an , Kayah State (1892)



## Abstract

The art of Kawgun Cave belongs to Buddhism. A large number of tablets, dedication to the BuddhTas before the time of Gautama Buddha, are adorned on the scarp before the cave and wall on the inside of the cave. Iconographic classification is made into six parts: European fashion, seated Buddha, standing Buddha and reclining Buddha, terracotta votive tablets and stone plaques. Finger-marked bricks of Kawgun Cave belong to the early Christian centuries and also, the Môn inscription on the stone plaques in the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries. The image of Buddha bearing on the votive tablets was dedicated by the Môn in the 15<sup>th</sup>-- 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Although the art of the Kawgun Cave is in the Môn tradition it is not closely related to the Buddhist art in Thailand where there was Môn cultural influence. It is an image of the Môn whose deep devotion to the Buddha and their note wealthy at fine art.

**Keywords:** Buddhist Sculptures, Seated Buddha, Standing Buddha, *Pallambanāsana*, Bodhisattva, Viṣṇu, Môn and Thai Schools, *Kinnarā*, *Kītimukha*, *Vasundarī*, Finger-marked bricks, decay and vandalism

## Introduction

Natural caves had been used by early men in prehistory as dwellings and holy places in the Paleolithic Period (30,000-10,000 BP) such as Badalin Cave on the Shan Plateau, Weponla Cave in northeast Hpa-an, Shapur Cave in Iran , 1,000 Buddha Images Cave in Hangchow, China , etc. Basing on geographical complexion in Myanmar, she possesses natural cave art very few because Myanmar civilization developed along the Ayeyarwady river valley. Nevertheless, early indigenous peoples who founded city-states--Pyu, Mon, Bamar - built their Buddhist monuments as the form of *stūpa* (solid pagoda) and *gū* (artificial-cave) in Upper Myanmar. Their architecture indicates that Myanmar was very much influenced by Indian Buddhist caves i.e. Ajanta, Ellora, Visva-karma, and Aurangābād, all within Hyderābād State, and Bāgh in Madhya Bhārat. Most of these caves belong to the Buddhist faith, although Brahmanical and Jain establishments of this type are not rare. The rock-cut architecture of the Buddhists in the earlier period of India consists of the shrine proper, and the

*sangharāma* or the *vihāra*, i.e. the monastery<sup>1</sup>. Likewise, many Buddhist sanctuaries were created in the karst<sup>2</sup> of southeast Myanmar, the Mon cultural zone and Buddhist monuments built in the caves. In 1894 R.C.Temple in his *Notes on Antiquities in Ramannadesa* mentions that four groups of the cave-shrines in the neighborhood of Mawlamyine and Thatôn, i.e.

- the Khayon Caves, about 28 miles from Mawlamyine on the Attaran River,
- the Dhammathat Cave, 18 miles from Mawlamyine on the Gyaing River,
- the Kawgun Caves, near Hpa-kap, 28 miles from Mawlamyine,
- the Bayinnyi(B'inji) Caves, on the Donthami River, 51 miles from Mawlamyine and 15 miles from Thatôn, and,
- the Hpa-kap Caves on the Thanlwin River, 26 miles from Mawlamyine,

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1 S.K. Saraswati, "Cave Architecture", *The Classical Age*, ed., R.C. Majumder, Bombay, Bhavan, 1954, pp.466,467

2 *Geol.* Limestone region

The Kawgun Cave, *kókuh/kógun* in Mon word for cave on the hill<sup>3</sup>, is a Buddhist sanctuary, located in the heart of Hpa-an district and has beautiful Buddhist sculpture and many remains of cultural heritage. According to the Mon inscription at the Cave, a Mon (?) queen of Mottama, made her dedication to the Buddha by creating terracotta votive tablets and stone statues of the Blessed one. It has attracted scholars and, both Myanmar and foreign experts have visited it and some prominent scholars have made a general survey of the Cave. Scholars who have visited it include the British officer John Crawford on 27 January 1827 who draws a map of the Kawgun, the American Baptist missionary Rev. Howard Malcom with Dr. Adoniram Judson (1788-1850), lexicographer of the first Myanmar-English Dictionary, who had had intimate experience of conditions at the Myanmar capital, then at Mawlamyine in 1835<sup>4</sup>, Mr. Taw Sein Ko (1864-1930) and Sir Richard Carnac Temple<sup>5</sup> (1826-1902) in 1892 and U Lu Pe Win (1900-1982) and Prof. G.H. Luce in 1941-42<sup>6</sup>, Prof. Takashi Koezuka from

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<sup>3</sup> R Hallidy, *A Mon-English Dictionary*, 1922, Bangkok, pp.492, 498.

<sup>4</sup> D.G.E Hall, *Europe and Burma*, Oxford University Press, 1945, p.128.

<sup>5</sup> An early champion of the embryonic discipline of anthropology, founder of Indian Antiquity Co. Ltd., author of *The Thirty-seven Nats* 5(b).A *Collection of Mon Inscriptions*, Chit Thein(ed.), Yangon, Archaeology Department, 1965, p6.

<sup>6</sup> *Report of the Director, Archaeological Survey, Burma, (1957-1958)*, Yangon, Govt. Printing, 1958, pp.14-15.

Osaka University and San Win, an expert on Môn culture, in December, 2011. Among them, Malcom, the first European who travelled there and wrote the *Account on the Caves near Moulmein* in 1837, says that not only is the space within the wall filled with images of Gautama of every size, but the whole face of the mountain, to the height of 80 or 90(?) feet, is covered with them. The smooth surfaces are covered by small flat tiles they have fallen off with the plaster. Nowhere in the country have I seen such a display of wealth, ingenuity, and industry. Everywhere on the floor, overhead, in the jutting point, and on the stalactite festoons on the roof, are crowded together images of Gautama, the offering of successive ages. Some are perfectly gilded, some fallen, yet sound, others moldered. A ship of 500 tons could not carry away the half of them.<sup>7</sup>

The French caver Eduard Alfred Martel (1859-1938) started the study of caves and it developed as Speleology with four categories: explorative, scientific, social and documentary branches. In Myanmar, the earliest description of the caves in the neighborhood of Mawlamyine appears to be that of Captain W. Foley in his "Notes on Geology" in 1836. He mentions the caves of Mount Zwegabin (2,973 ft.) as being among the principal caverns of the district. In this regard, Dr. H. L. Chhibber, Head of the Department of Geology, University of Rangoon (now Yangon) in his *The Geology of Burma* in 1934 wrote about the caves in Myanmar as follows:

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<sup>7</sup> Major R C Temple, *Notes on Antiquities in Ramannadesa*, Bombay, Education Society Steam Press, 1894, p.40.7(b) Rev. Howard Malcom, *Travels in South-Eastern Asia*, Vol. I, Boston, Gould, Kendall, and Lincoln, 1839, pp.61, 143, 144.

... Great interest generally attaches to the caves on account of their scenery, highly specialized fauna and remains of bones of their old inhabitants. In Burma [Myanmar], unfortunately, these have not received as much attention as they deserve<sup>8</sup>.

At the international level, UIS (Union of International Speleology) is cooperating with UNESCO in order to increase the number of karst and cave sites listed of World Heritage sites

This work deals with cultural speleology in Myanmar. . Based on this, an attempt is made to study the art of Kawgun Cave in relation to the Buddhist art in Thailand where there are large remains of Mon's art. The intention is also to fulfill community needs in the vicinity of Hpa-an University, a policy of the Department of Higher Education in Myanmar.<sup>9</sup>

### **Location and Size**

Cultural heritages remain in twenty one caves in Kyaikkhami District of which fourteenth are limestone solution caves. The caves are often separated from one another by long distances, and yet in many respects are remarkably uniform. They are formed by overhanging cliffs, and rise abruptly from the plain that is bounded by the Gyaing on the north, the Thanlwin on the west and the Attaran on the south. The colour of the rock varies from whitish light gray to almost black.

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8 H.L. Chhibber, et.al., *The Geology of Burma*, London, Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1934, p. 93.

Paolo Forti, "Speleology in the Third Millennium, *Theoretical and Applied Karstology*, Vol.XV, Italy, University of Bologna, 2002, pp.8-13.

9 24 Points Policy of Universities adopted by the Conference for Uplift of Education held on 23 April 2011-25 April 2011 at Nay Pyi Daw, Myanmar.

Culturally, the most famous one is Kawgun Cave that lies between 16° 49' 22.2" North and 97° 35' 38.4" East, two miles from Hpa-kap village, Hpa-an township of Kayin State on the east bank of the Thanlwin River<sup>10</sup> and in an isolated limestone rock about a quarter of a mile to the west of the village of rock for about a hundred feet from South to North and then dip. It geologically forms a part of the karstified massive Mawlamyine limestone outcrops<sup>11</sup>, and the solvent action of carbonated water on joint limestone percolating through the joints and dissolving the rock that leaves the hollow chamber. It rises to a height of 1000 ft., runs the length of 6000 ft., starts from the northwest, and extends in a northerly direction. It runs under an overhanging ledge of rock for about 100 ft. from South to North and then dips westwards into this rock for about the same distance at North end. The scarp before the cave turns through

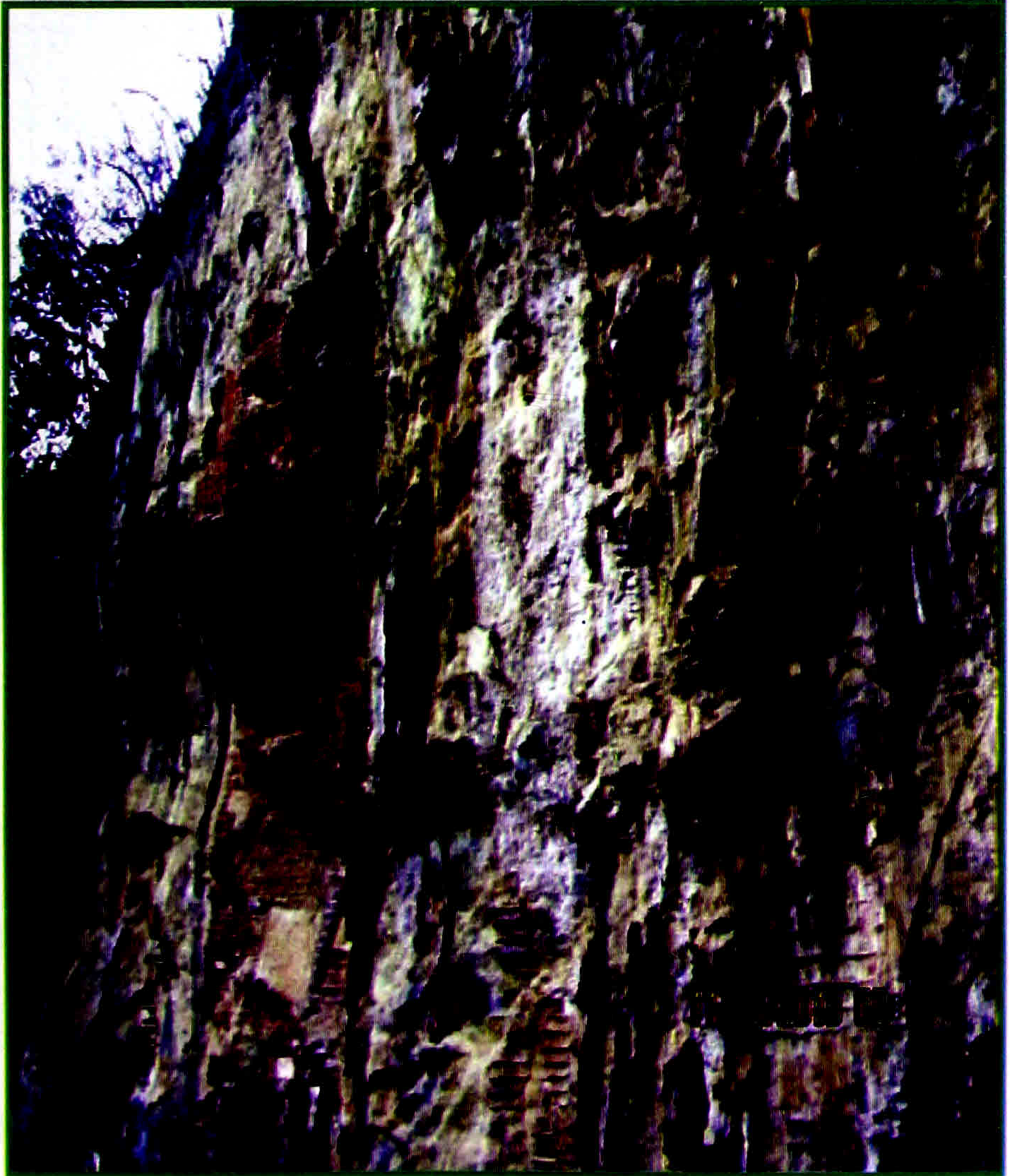


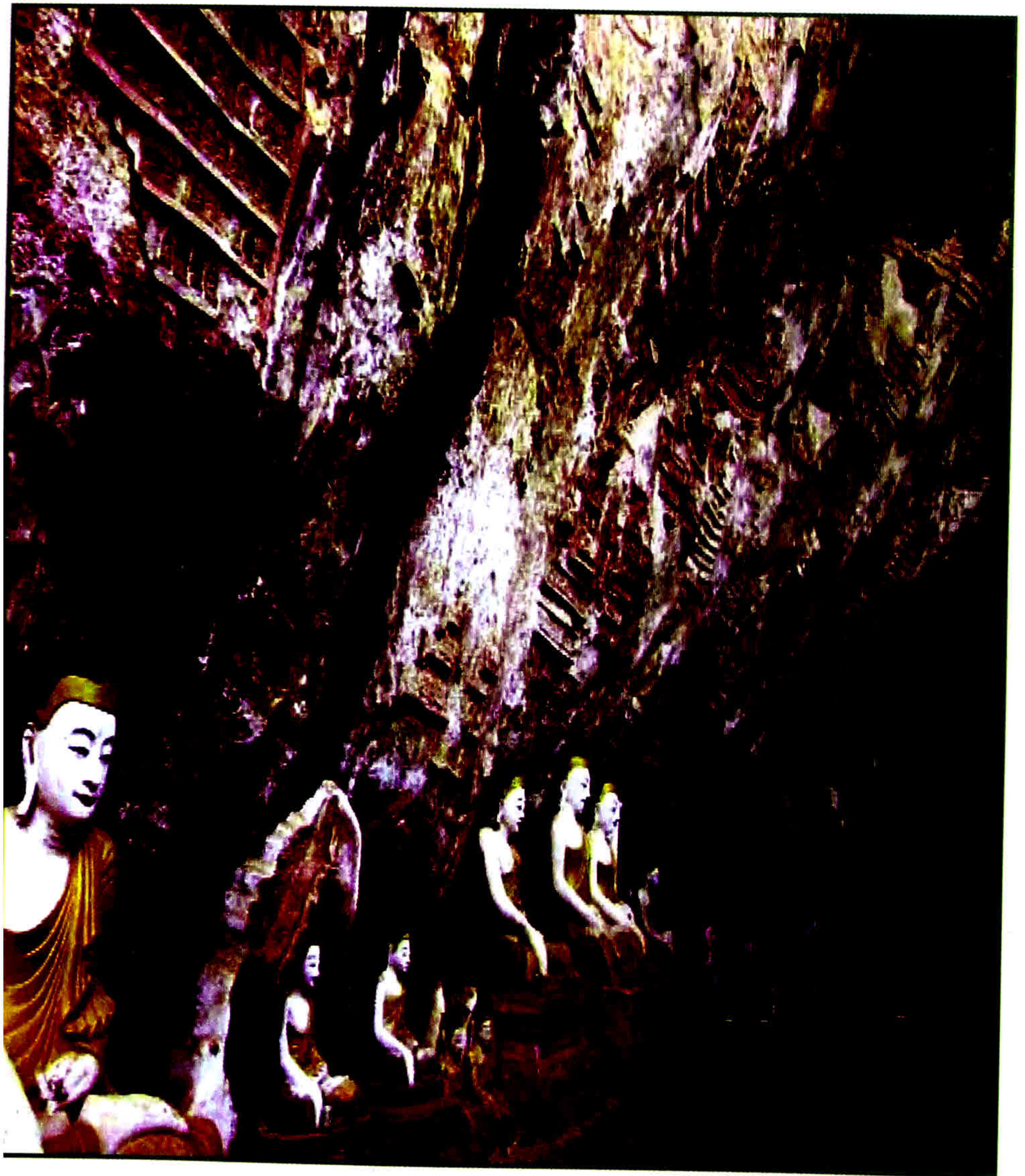
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10 Paleozoic or Achaean rock

11 Permo-Carboniferous Period of Epoch: the Permian Period (2900-245 million years BP) and the Carboniferous Period (363-290 million BP); the Upper Carboniferous stratum of the Taungnyo Series.

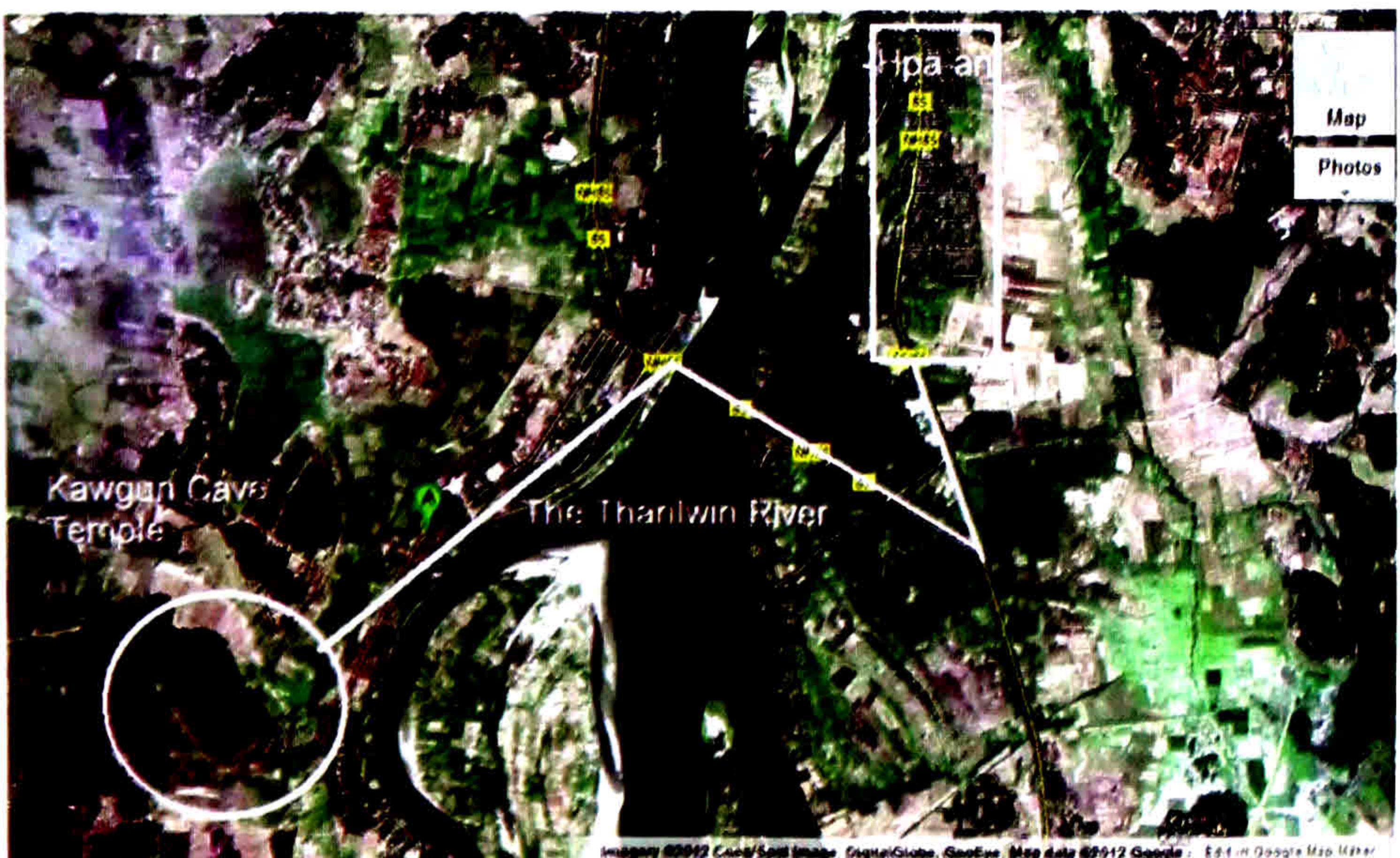
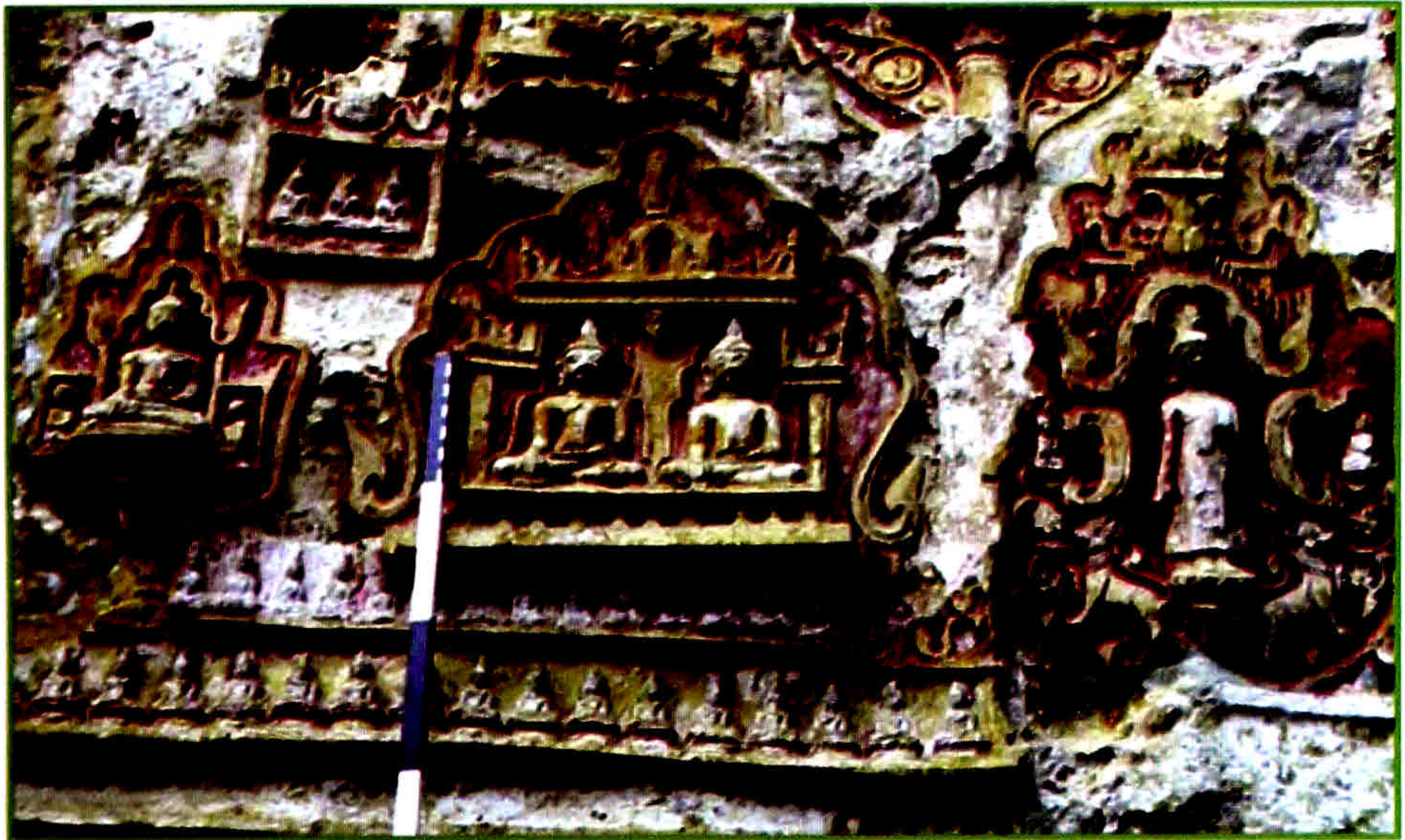
40 degrees. Accordingly, it is naturally shielded against southwest monsoon rain and helps to protect the objects of cultural heritage in the cave and the solution scarp before the cave.













A Kirtimukha at the top of reredos which is ruined through repair

## Decay and Vandalism

On the solution scarp of Kawgun Cave there are many decorations with profusion of terra cotta votive tablets of the Buddha stuck on the wall of the cave inside and on the scarp. The images of the Buddha look good against the vermillion<sup>12</sup> background. *Report of the Director, Archaeology Department, 1957-1958* mentions that there is no blank space on the scarp of the cave where the votive tablets are stuck. Also, the surviving remains brought in 1980, the year U San Win visited there. These seals of the Buddha on the scarp are still in 2000. Unfortunately, a large number of the artifacts have been lost through theft, as these are priced high on the black market in Mae Tao on the east bank of Thaung Yin, Thailand. Thohanbwa (r.1527-1542) despoiled pagodas because Myanmar deposited their gold and silver in them for concealing<sup>13</sup>. Also, the belly of some images of the Buddha and

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<sup>12</sup> *Hansāpadā*: in Myanmar (*mercuric sulphate*)

<sup>13</sup> U Kala, *the Great Chronicle*, Vol. I, 1960, p.135.

bell and terrace-shaped structure of *stūpa* at the Cave had been dug. F. O. Oertel in his photograph of the Cave mentions a *stūpa*, measuring about 12 ft. height, before the entrance of the main hall that belongs to the Middle Mon Period but now it had been vandalized. In the old photograph, the two holes on the *stūpa* which had been delved shows the early vandalism in the cave. Some Buddhists brought them to their houses since they believe in magic against burns in fire-fight and fire-hazard. Another concern is the vibration produced daily by the exploration mines of the two cement factories in Myinekalay about two miles north of the Cave. The mouth and the interior of the cave have various Buddhist monuments: a hexagonal *stūpa* (15 ft. high) that is possibly made from a stalagmite rising up from the floor to near the brow of the overhanging cliff; a colossal statue of the standing Buddha, numerous seated Buddhas and three reclining Buddhas above the ground level which are new, the result of recent Buddhist merit-innovating. In my interview with U San Win, retired Deputy Director of Myanmar Historical Research Department, the Cave was

obliterated by U Thein Nyant and Shwe Win who came from Mandalay in 1980-81.







## Sculpture

In the art of Kawgun Cave, the depiction of Gautama Buddha (c.563BC-483BC) can be divided into two main types: statue in the round and relief. The first type is large in size, made of brick and stucco and a large number are placed on the ground before the cave and on the wall inside the cave. Historically, during the reign of Smim Htaw(r.AD 1551-1740),the king of Hanthawaddy kingdom, Paññātikka, a Buddhist monk, in his ink-inscription of 1057 *sakkarāj*(AD1695) describes his meritorious deeds,i.e.107 *sabbaññuta* [?statue of the seated Buddha],11 *phare* [?standing Buddha],1 *rājādhirāj*[?a crowned Buddha],1 *nibbān*[?a reclining Buddha],120 in total and his *patti dāna*(giving of merits).Accordingly, the Buddhist art at Kawgun Cave appeared in the 6<sup>th</sup> -7<sup>th</sup> century AD but some Buddhists dedicated new votive tablets at the Cave<sup>14</sup>. The statuary of the

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<sup>14</sup> Its capital was Mottama till 1363 and Donwun (now Hpa-an) till 1369 when the palace was moved to Bago. Binnya U (r.1355-85) had to repel a formidable raid of several thousand men from Chiengmai who destroyed Taikkala, Sittaung and Donwun[ *Du'wop*,tributary to Thatôn] in Thatôn district before they were driven out in 1356. The Sukōthai Kingdom ,founded in 1356,included in its of Tanintharyi ,Mawlamyine and Mottama.(G.E. Harvey ,*History of Burma*(1967),pp.110-112).It is hard to accept as both of the Chronicle of the Mons and Chiang Mai Chronicle do not mention about the invasion over the territories of Myanmar.

Blessed one is in different styles and sizes, i.e. standing, seated and reclining Buddha. The largest one is a standing Buddha (32 ft. High) , his left hand raised in the gesture of Dispelling Fears ,also called “Buddha forbidding his relations”, usually mentioned in the scene of the Twin Miracles ; it is also known as *abhaya mudrā*. The Buddha is flanked by his two Great Apostles--Sāriputtrā and Mahāmoggalāna--who stand and pay homage to him. Another type of the Buddha statuary is the reclining Buddha which can be seen at the entrance to the cave and the left side of the mouth. The first reclining image has 5 feet high and 15 feet in length, the head of the Buddha is on the



right hand and his elbow rests on the base. It retains its original its features although renovation, which had been encased in

concrete work, has been carried out. A second large Buddha Image is in the form of seated Buddha before the mouth of the cave made of brick and stucco. One of the Buddha statues faces the mouth and, rises to about 13 feet high and has a plain *takai* (reredos). The right hand is in the *bhūmispar śa*<sup>15</sup> gesture (touching earth after the Enlightenment) and the feet in the *paryakāsana*<sup>16</sup> (position cross legged with the left leg above the right).

## Terracotta Votive Tablet

Terracotta votive tablets have been recovered from Pyu, Mon and Rakhine historical sites. Some of these have been dated paleographically through the inscriptions that are on bear reverse side or on the underrim of the Buddha or the form of the *stūpa*. The 19 places seals of Aniruddha, maker of myanmar and champion of Buddhism, are widespreadly found in Myanmar also contain Kawgun Cave<sup>17</sup>. Possibly, the king gave the native people tradition of terracotta votive tablets.

A large quantity of votive tablets adorns on the scarp and the walls of the Kawgun Cave possibly showing the great dedication to *Sambuddha*, 512,028 Buddhas who had attained Buddhahood before the time of Gautama Buddha. The votive tablets are

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<sup>15</sup> Lotus position: sitting with one's legs crossed , used especially in *Yoga*

<sup>16</sup> The feet-position represents Victory of the Buddha over five kinds of Māra evil and Sinitic the attainment of Omniscient Buddhahood

<sup>17</sup> Dr. Kyaw Win, အဓိပတိတရားစင်္ကြံ: (Anawrahtaminsaw@Aniruddha), Nay Pyi Daw, Historical Research Department, 2012, p90.

mostly small and equal in size. In the tablet, the Buddha is depicted in relief with the *bhūsmispaśra mudrā*, gesture *parlakāsana* position and high *uññā* (exuberant of hair) like a flame. On the scarp before the cave many Buddhas are placed rectangular boxes of four or five levels with a reclining Buddha above them. They are shielded by three tiers of *culac*<sup>18</sup> roof creating the form of a *vihāra* (monastery). Another type of the Buddha on the votive tablets is crowned Buddha seated on a lotus throne with hand in *bhūmispaśra mudrā* gesture and feet in *parlymkāsana* position. Still another type is the Buddha standing with the right hand *abhaya mudrā* gesture. These images have ornaments of royal insignia: sash, ear-plug, tight-cuff on the body. The Myanmar term *Jambupati* (Lord of World), derived from the *Tathāgata Udānadīpanī* (Biographical of the Buddha) and it is a popular type in Myanmar Buddhist iconography. It is, however, believed by some scholar that it may not represent the historical Buddha but possibly depict a Bodhisattva of the Mahayanist School in originally. Later, the form of the Buddha, one of the 38 supernatural forms of Bodhisattva, became implicitly syncretized with Theravāda tradition in Myanmar Buddhist culture.

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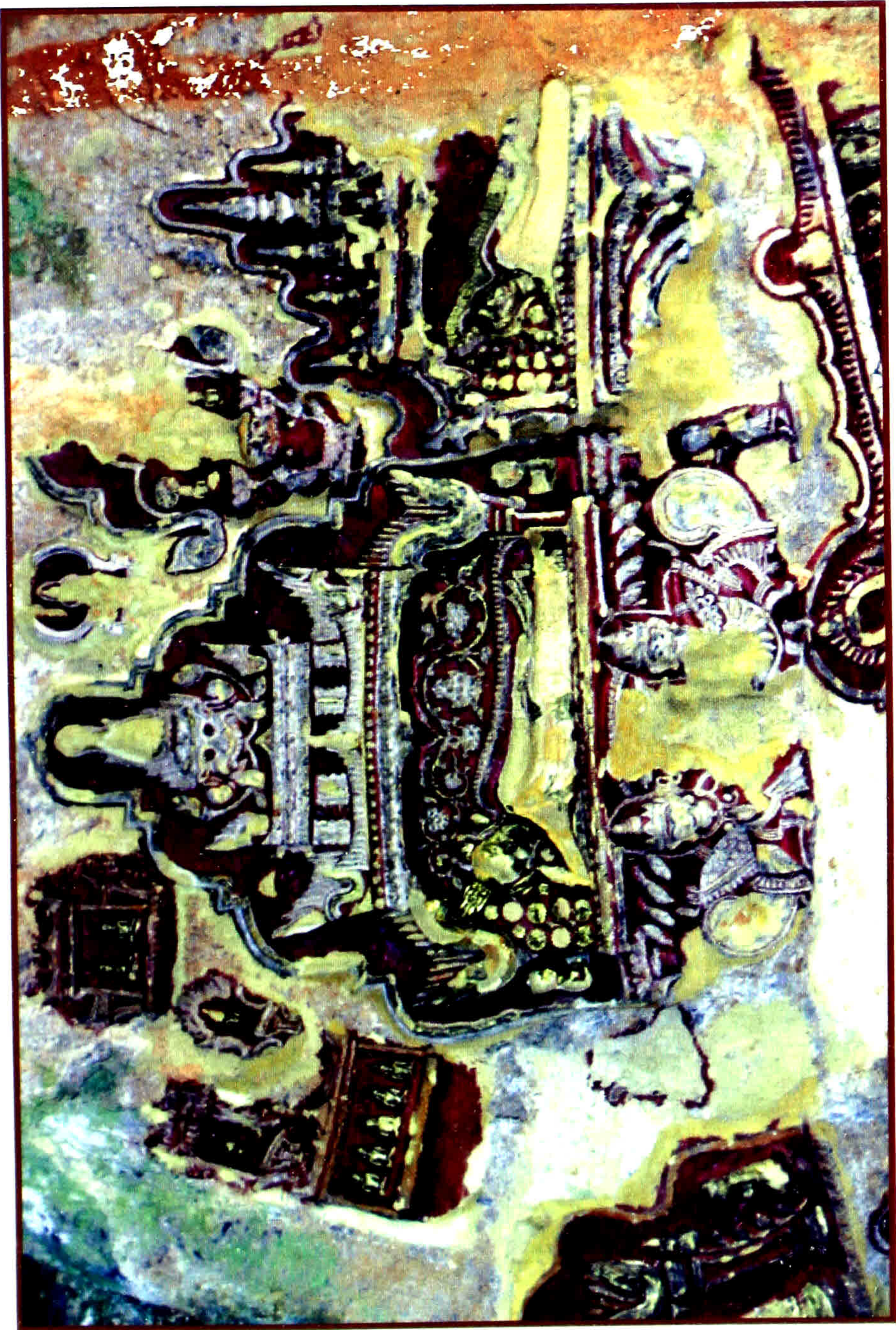
18 Pinnacle on roofs, arches, thrones etc.

### The Reclining Buddha

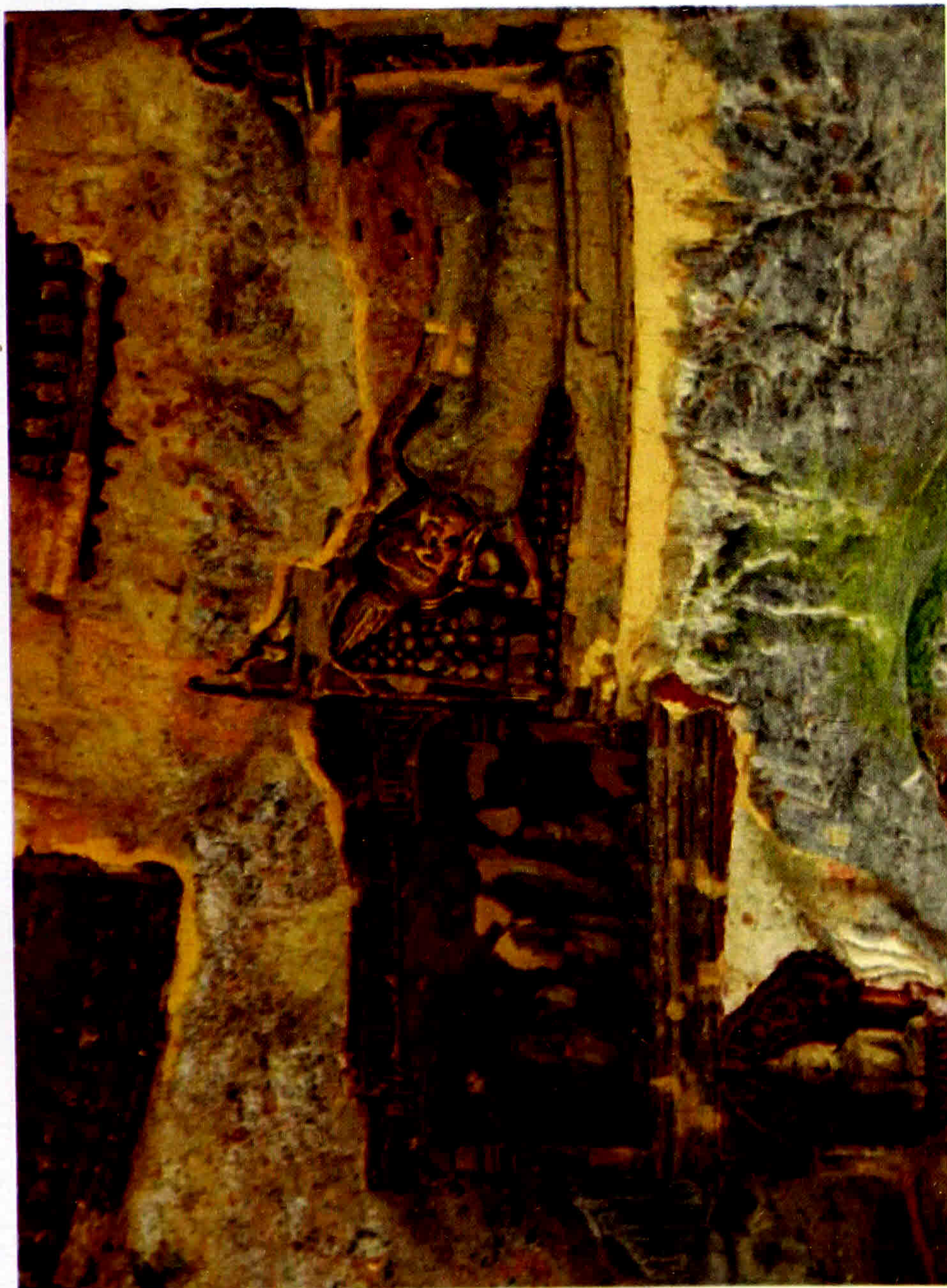
The most venerated form of the Buddha image is a reclining Buddha which is a popular tradition in the Buddhist art of the Mons. They can be found in high relief on the scarp before the cave and the wall of the cave. They are well- proportioned, sheltered by the roof of a fine *culac* monastery and flanked by the two Great Apostles--Sāriputtra and Mahāmoggalāna who pay homage to him on the floor of the *vihāra*. The Buddha is almost surrounded by *bindu* (dots) and has a high. *Uṣṇīṣa* at the center of head which is clean shaven. There is no diadem, a feature of modern Buddha statuary, on the forehead of the Buddha.



The face is oval in shape, and has arched eye-brows, delicate nose,









small mouth and long ear-lobes touching the shoulder on both sides. A half robe is worn and a long fringe of the upper robe is formed on the right shoulder down to the waist. An *antharavāsaka* or *thinbaing* (lower garment robe) covers the lower body down to the ankle. There is a spiral curl of drapery on both sides of the fringe of the *ekacika* or *uttarāsaṅga* (upper garment robe) which is like an “S”, in shape. The left hand of the Buddha lies relaxed on the upper thigh.

### ***Pralambanāsana***

The *pralambanāsana* posture, a seated position with both legs pendent, sometimes referred to as the “European” position, was introduced in northern India in the Gupta Period (AD 320-600). From the first diffusion of Buddhism the posture was significant in Buddha statues in the art of early Southeast Asia, i.e. Ankor Borei (9<sup>th</sup> -15<sup>th</sup> centuries AD) in Cambodia, Chandi

Mendoet in Java, Pra P’athom in Dvāravatī (approx. 457-1057 AD), Wat Naphrameru in Ayuthaya, Viṅṅu (a Pyu city-state<sup>19</sup>) in Central Myanmar, Bagan (AD 11<sup>th</sup> -13<sup>th</sup> centuries) and Kyaikmayaw Image of the Buddha in Mawlamyine dedicated by Queen Shin Sawpu (AD 1453-1472). The

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19 Elizabeth H. Moore, *Early Landscapes of Myanmar*, Tran. U Nyunt Han, Bangkok, Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts, 2010, p.159.



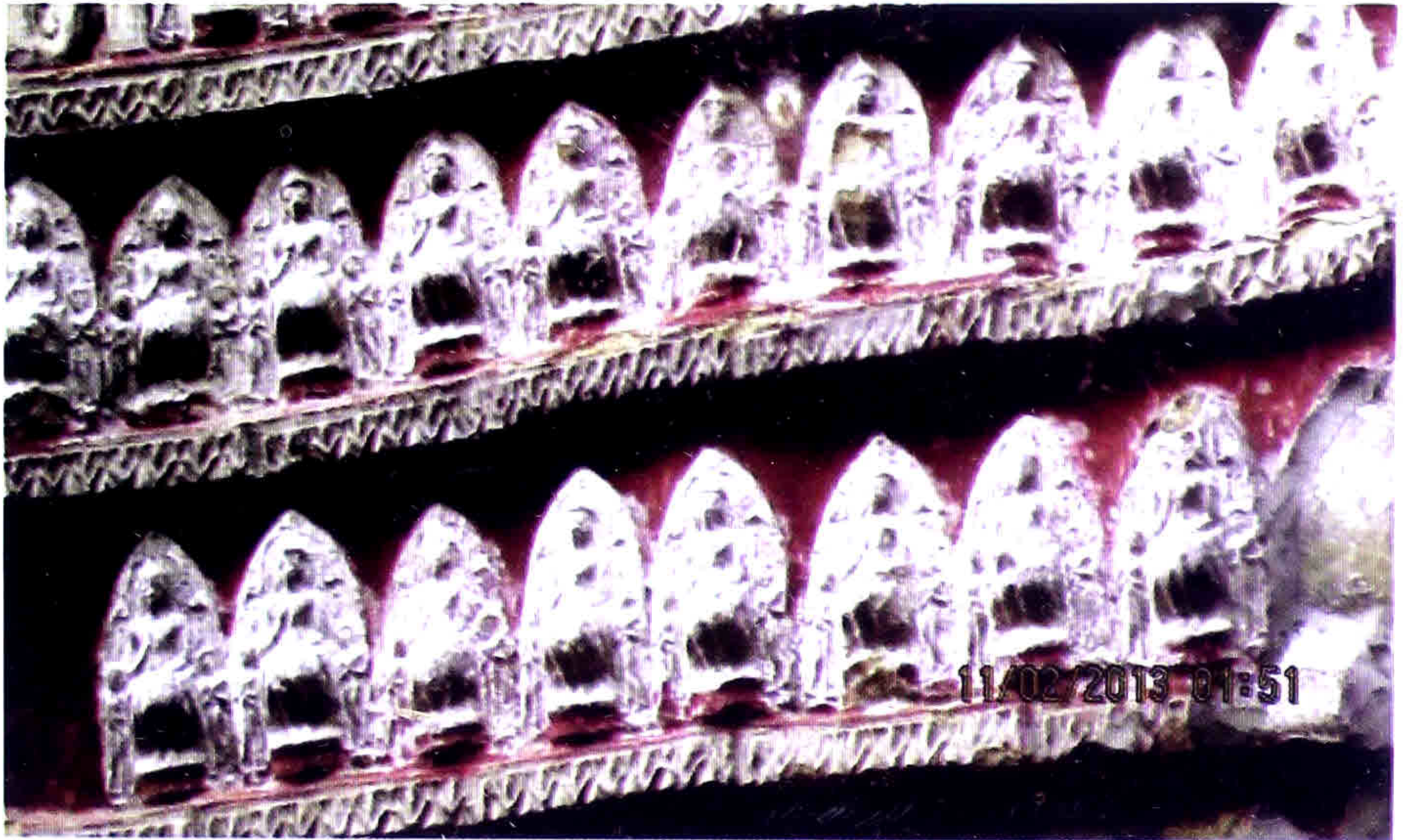
*pralambanāsana* is an early *āsana* type in the history of Buddhist art and prominent in Indian art especially Gupta art,

had an influence in the Môn State of Dvāravatī in particular although the position is very rare in Khmer iconography<sup>20</sup>. There is a pair of reliefs of the Buddha on the scarp in which he is portrayed in the *pralanbanāsana* position with *abhaya mudrā* hand gesture and a crowned head.

Each is reflected by two small standing figures of the Apostles Sāriputtra and Moggalāna *thera*. The Buddha has to be downcast eyes, flattened nose, thick half-smiling lips and a round face, crown is attached with large *naga* : (ornamental ear-flaps) , clearly a Middle Môn type. The workmanship is, very peculiar and rare and the type and style has no equivalent elsewhere in Myanmar.

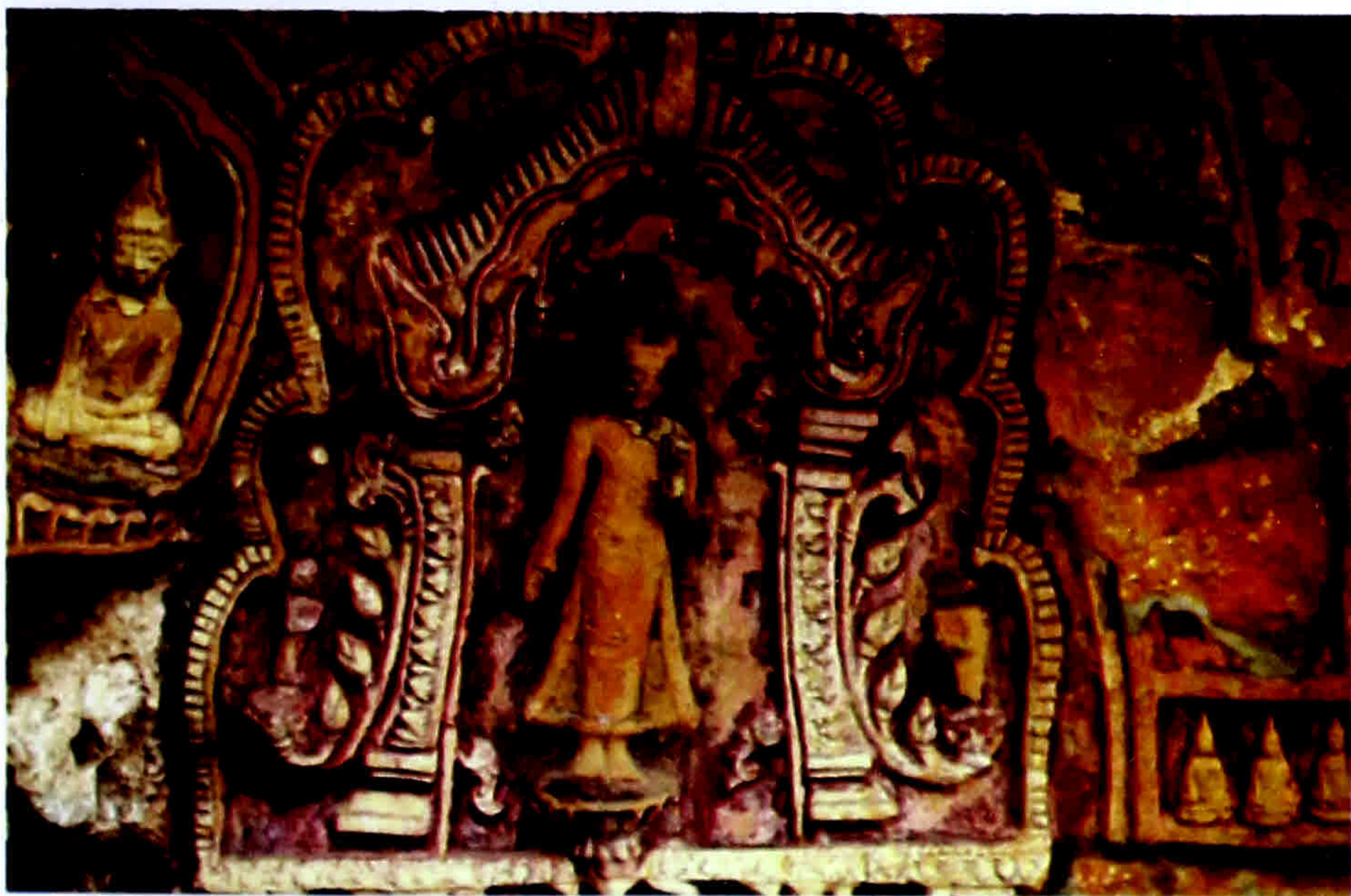
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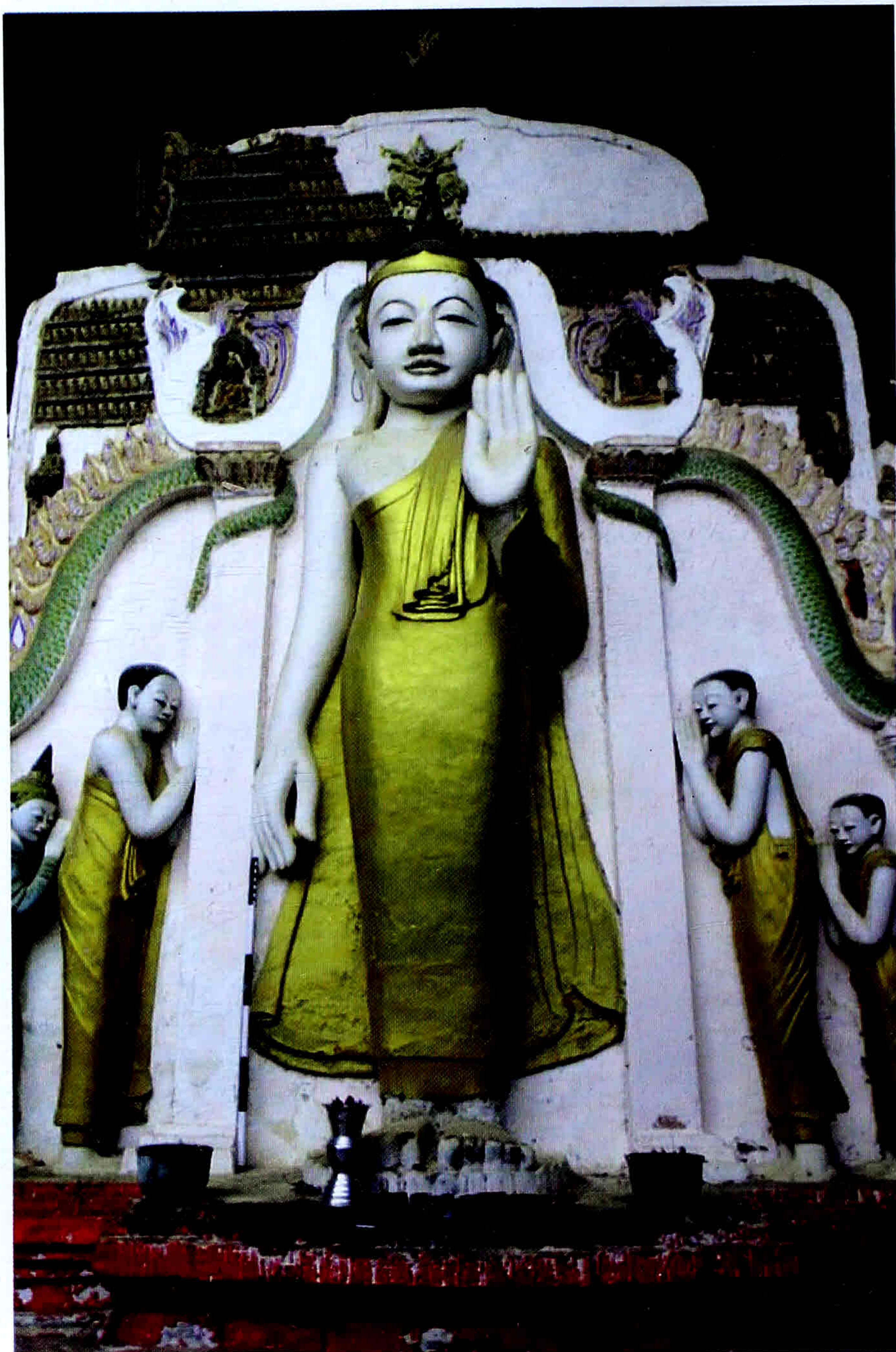
20 M.C. Subhadradis Diskul, *Phra Pathom Chedi*, Thailand, Prayurawong Co., Ltd., p.p.12, 13. (Hereafter cited as *Phra Pathom*)  
(b) Luce, *OBEP*, Vol.1, p-137













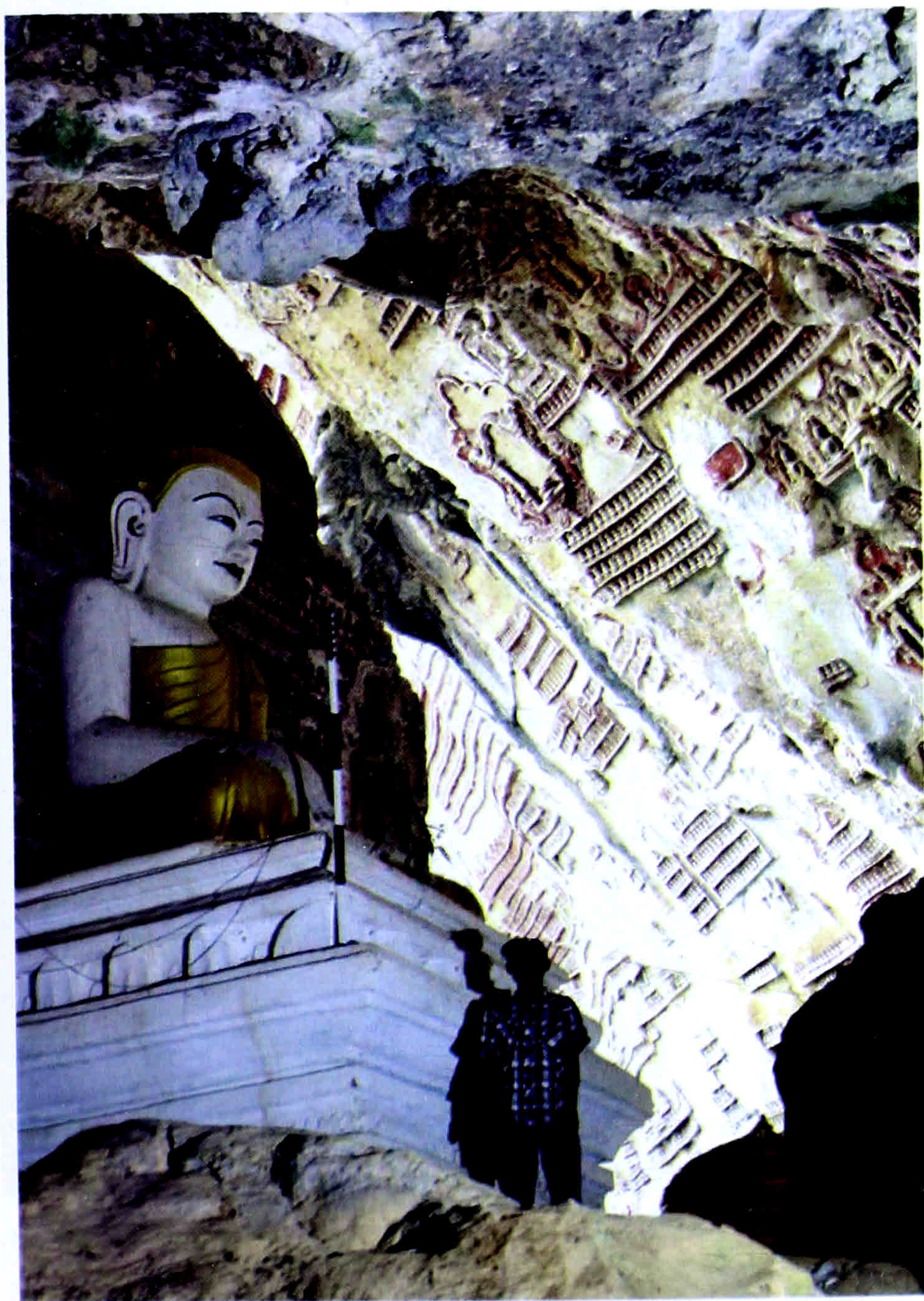




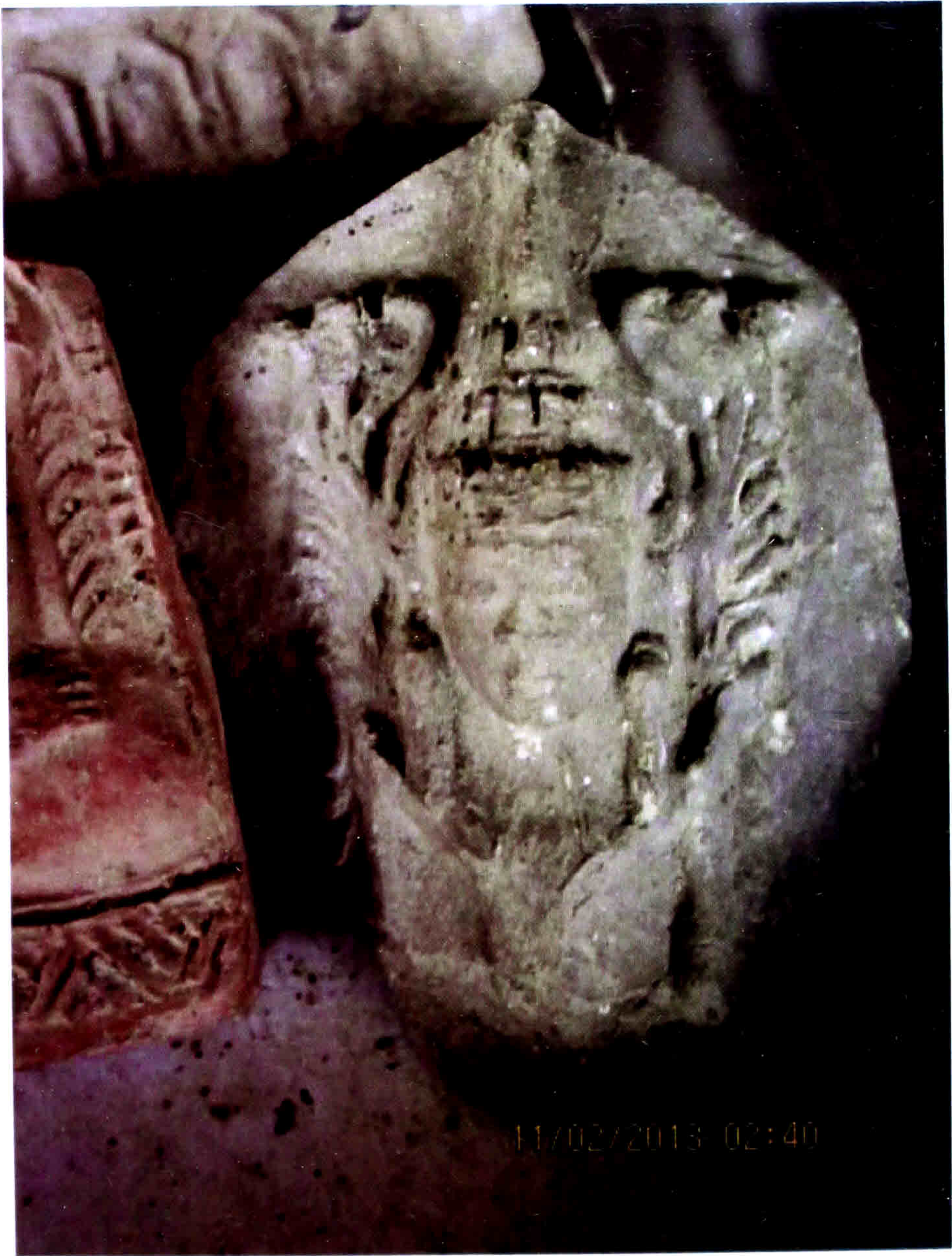
### **The Standing Buddha**

The style of the Buddha in the standing position is in two distinct forms: *samabhaṅga* (straight torso) and Walking

Buddha which is popular in the School of Suk'hōt'hai (13<sup>th</sup> century AD). There are no Buddha statues of the walking type in the Kawgun Cave. The significant features of the standing Buddhas in the Kawgun Cave are the high *uṇṇīṇa*, downcast eyes, thin lips, shaved, fingers all of equal length, right hand in *abhaya mudrā* gesture, long ear-lobes, narrow forehead, and a thick robe. These features are not the same as those of the Suk'hōt'hai School although the artists of the Kawgun Cave were influenced and followed the Môn School of sculpture of 13<sup>th</sup> century. The Standing Buddhas in the Kawgun Cave are mostly on the scarp before the cave; the largest image is 15 feet above the ground at the entrance to the cave. On the scarp there is numerous standing Buddhas placed in oblong delicate *culac* monasteries. These are possibly dedicated to the previous Buddhas who had attained *parinibbāna* before the time of Gautama Buddha. There is no example of the standing Buddha with both hands raised, known in Thailand as “the Buddha Calming the Ocean”. Two crowned standing Buddha can be seen on the scarp of the Kawgun Cave; it is, the most peculiar style in the Buddhist art of Myanmar (Luce, *OBEF*, Vol. I, p-140)









## The Seated Buddha

Most of images on the scarp before the Kawgun Cave and on its walls are seated Buddhas of two types: Crowned Buddha and Buddhas without a crown types are modeled in



The Images of Crowned Buddha, at the top of mouth, Kawgun Cave

*bhūmisparśa mudrā* hand gesture and *pallāṇikāsana* position. Thus Blessed ones reside in *vihāras* with a *culac* roof. One of the

Buddha is seated on a Lotus Seat <sup>21</sup> with a long stalk under the flower and, with the two Disciples flanking him also on lotuses are also flanked. It closely resembles the depiction of the Buddha on the wall-painting of the Abeyadana<sup>22</sup> temple of Bagan. Another can be found a short distance away. There is slightly different from the first one; it is, a form of the crowned



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21 Seat decorated with lotus leaves, buds and blossoms or a yogic posture in deep meditation, the emblem of the Buddha and Buddha and Buddhism, embellishment of the religious edifices.

22 (1202/540) Brahmanic, Tantric and canonical temple in AD 1090

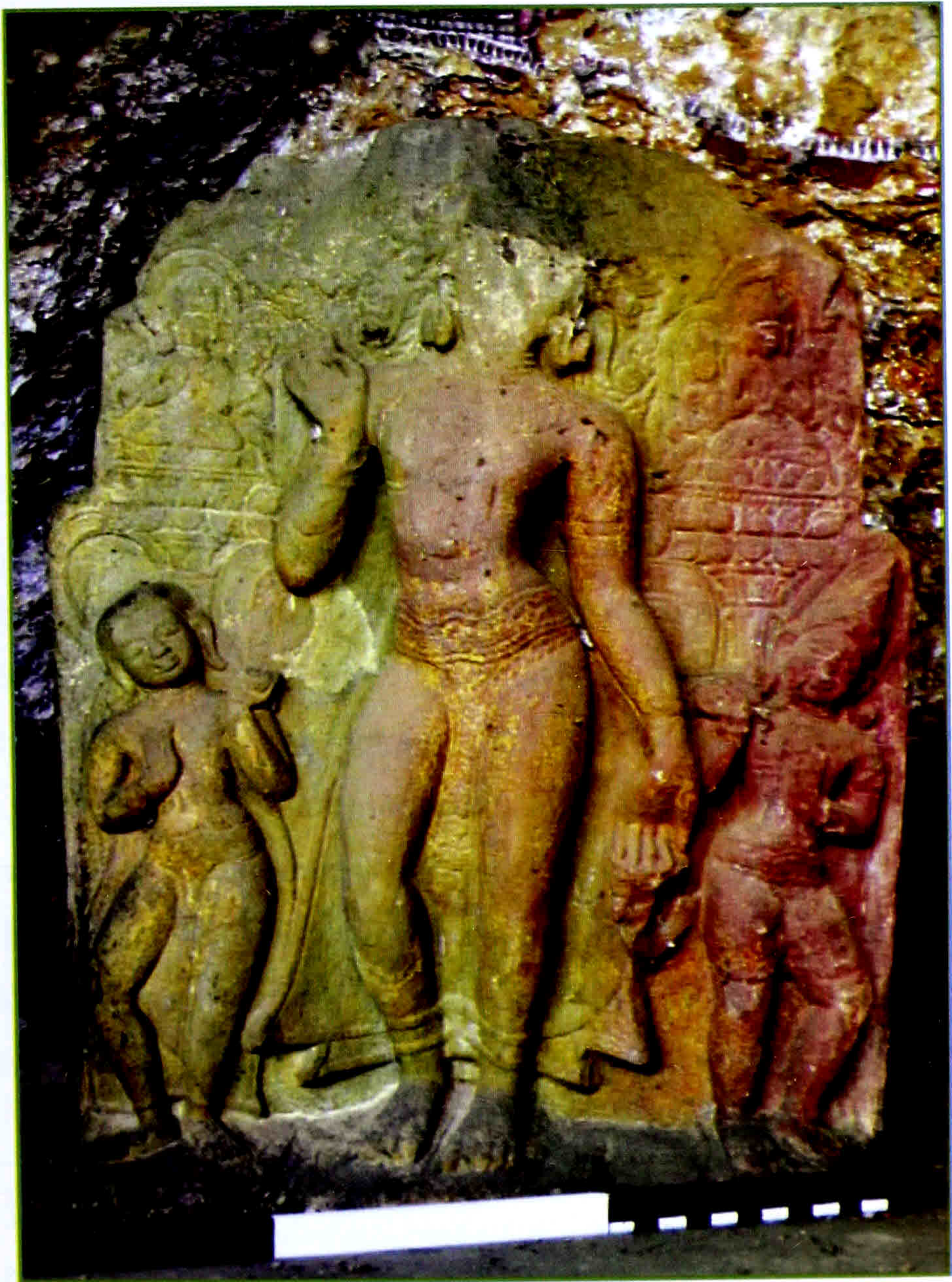


Buddha, very possible the Heavenly Buddha or Dhyāni-Buddha of Northern Buddhism. The flattened nose on the face of the Buddha clearly shows the Mon tradition. The seated Buddha of the Kawgun Cave belongs to the 13<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> centuries with the exception of the ones that have been repaired.









In this regard, G.H. Luce gives his opinion as follows:

...In coastal Rāmaññadesa, at Twanté (Kanbé), Bago, Thatôn, and Kawgun Cave, some fine standing images in stone relief are found, mostly damaged or repaired but surely older than any at Bagan.<sup>23</sup>

## Stone Plaques

The Kawgun Cave has three stone plaques that belong to Mahāyana Buddhism and Brāhmanism. The first stone plaque, a splendid, royally adorned one, shows what may be a standing Bodhisattva in high relief (Height: 4.5 ft., breadth 2 ft., 9 in.; thickness 7 ft.); the head is missing, it wears a diaphanous half-open robe, has a very prominent torso and limbs or slight *tribhaṅga* pose, fragments of ornamental ear-plugs, belt, bracelet, a very low relief of necklace, elegant and plump attitude which sharply distinguish between the Historical Buddha and Budhisattva. The left hand is in *varada mudrā*<sup>24</sup> (Blessing attitude) the right in *padma haṣṭa* (holding lotus) with

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<sup>23</sup> Luce, *OBEP*, Vol. I, p.140.

<sup>24</sup> it means Boon Bestowing Gesture: *Shih Yuan Yin* in Chinese Buddhist Iconography

the palm of the hand fragmented. This gesture of the two hands is called *amidha mudrā*<sup>25</sup> and possibly belongs to the Mahayanist School. Two smaller figures flank the Bodhisattva a lay man at the left and a monk at the right. On the upper part of the Bodhisattva relief, are two figures crowned in relief seated on lotuses, with a long stalk with their hands, *dhammacakra mudrā* gesture (turning the Wheel of Law). They are flanked by figure which are curved on willowy and with the hand-gesture of *añjalī mudrā* (adoration). Perhaps, the two figures are those of Amidhāya Buddha, who resides in Sukhavatī (Western Paradise), in the Mahāyanist School. Of two reliefs, the one on the left side has been abraded. In contrast, Dr. G.H. Luce in his *Old Burma-Early Pagán* mentions that the scene may be the Descent from Tāvati sa( Trayastriśat Heaven), though there is no staircase nor kneeling Sāriputtra; and in this scene it is normally the right hand which is in *varada mudrā*<sup>26</sup>.

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25 Sao Htun HmatWin, *Mudrā*, p.100.

26 G.H. Luce, *Old Burma-Early Pagán*, Vol. I, New York University Press, 1970, p.142, 185, 203, 211, 214, 217, 218, 284.

The second stone plaque (4.5 ft. x 2.75 ft. x 0.58 ft.) is a fragment in bold relief portraying a Bodhisattva with two parts intact: torso and thighs. It is a representation of Avalokīteśvāra who resides in the abode of Sukhavatī, and in the relief of wears royal insignia: sash, waistband and necklace. There are 23 lines of writing, on the left side of the relief in Old Mon of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The inscription mentions “*rup kla [āk] voa*<sup>27</sup>” meaning devotion, propitiation or paying homage to the Buddha (*klāk*). In my opinion the term *klāk* possibly refers to the Bodhisattva rather than to the historical Buddha although its literal meaning acquires sacred beings and objects, i.e. the Buddha; Buddha image, shrine and pagoda<sup>28</sup> it indicates the iconographical syncretism of the Buddha of Theravāda Buddhism and the Bodhisattva of the Mahayanist School in Myanmar with this term *klāk* appearing as a homograph in an Old Mon inscription. Also, G H Luce says; In Indian art Buddha and Bodhisattva were not at first sharply distinguished.

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27 *ASB (1957-1958)*, p.17

28 H.L. Short; *A Dictionary of the Mon Inscriptions*, London, Oxford University Press, 1971, p.59.

Buddha and Bodhisattva types are to all appearances the same<sup>29</sup>.

The third stone plaque, measuring 4.58 ft. x 2.58 ft. x 0.75 ft., is a bold relief of a four armed Viṣṇu Anantaśayin on the serpent Śeṣa with seven heads. From the deity's navel, three lotuses emerge and three Hindu deities, including the three-faced Brahmā seated are on them. The seated Viṣṇu holds four objects-- *Vajra* (thunder bolt scepter), *Sanḥkhā* (conch-trumpet), *Padma* (lotus)--and at his feet Lakṣmi stands on guard. G.H. Luce suggests that they are as at Deoga h, personification of his attributes<sup>30</sup>. The bottom tier consists of three niches: a kneeling worshipper at each side, two seated ones in the centre; but these are hard to distinguish. Unlike a secular reclining Viṣṇu found at Śrīkṣetra, the Viṣṇu sleeping on this plaque has abroad face and square jaw, thick lips, and plump body. Undoubtedly, these features indicate the influence of the Mon School. Stone plaques have been found in

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<sup>29</sup> G.H Luce, 1970, *OBEP*, Vol.1, p.18

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p.218, 271

other archaeological sites in Myanmar --Śrīks etra, Vesālī, Bagan, and Thatôn. On the reverse side of the plaque, an inscription that paleographically belongs to 6-7<sup>th</sup> century AD in South Indian script mentions “Śrīparameraśvāra-pāda” literally means the foot-print of the Supreme Lord, an epithet of Śiva<sup>31</sup>.

The Vaishnavite tradition is noticeably strong in early Myanmar civilization as shown in its iconography, particularly in the image of Viṣṇu, which is the oldest one in Myanmar. To the devotee of Viṣṇu, he was the source of the universe and of all things. According to the most famous cosmic myth of Hinduism he sleeps in the primeval ocean, on the thousand-headed snake Śeśa. In his sleep a lotus grows from his navel, and in the lotus is born the demiurge Brāhma, the Creator of the World. Viṣṇu, is usually depicted as a four-armed god of dark blue color, crowned and seated on his throne, bearing in his hands his emblems, the conch, discus, mace, and lotus, wearing the holy jewel called Kaustubha round his neck, and with a tuft

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31 Mac Donell, Author, *Practical English. Sanskrit Dictionary*, London, Oxford University Press, 1952, pp.153-4  
23(b) ASB (1957-1958), pp.18-19.

of curly hair (Śrīvasa) on his chest. He rides the great eagle Garuḍa. Viṣṇu's spouse Lakṣmi is an important goddess in her own right<sup>32</sup>. It belongs to the 9<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> century or pre-Aniraddha period.

### ***Vasundarī* (Earth-goddess)**

Buddhism followed Brahmanism in India and assimilated a medley of popular cult which had flourished earlier such a worship of *Yaksas*, *Nāgas*, *Gandhavas*, *Devatās*, *Vriksakis* and the Earth of Mother goddesses. The cult of these popular deities spread to the land of the Mōns, the Myanmar and Thailand. In literature, the Earth goddess is mentioned in Sanskrit works on the biography of the Buddha, i.e. the *Lalitavitāra* and *Pathamasambodhi*. They mention the support given by the Earth-goddess to the Buddha in his victory over Māra, and his four armies.

In Thailand, the image of the Earth-goddess is displayed in the Bangkok Museum. Her images have also been found in Padagyi, Thanlyin , south of Yangon , and the ruins of old

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32 A.L. Basham, *Wonder that was India*, New Delhi, Rupa & Co., 2001, pp.61, 931.

(b) Luce, *OBEP*, Vol.I, p.179

Môn's literate monuments . There is a part of statue at the Kawgun Cave which are of the same size and rise to a height of 2.25 ft. The left one that is of *Vasundharā* or Earth-god and the right *Vasundharī* or Earth-goddess. They have long tresses which curl down on their shoulder and make their hands grasp the ends. Renovation made to the two statues makes it difficult to determine their original features.<sup>33</sup>

### ***Kīrtimukha* (Grotesque Mask)**



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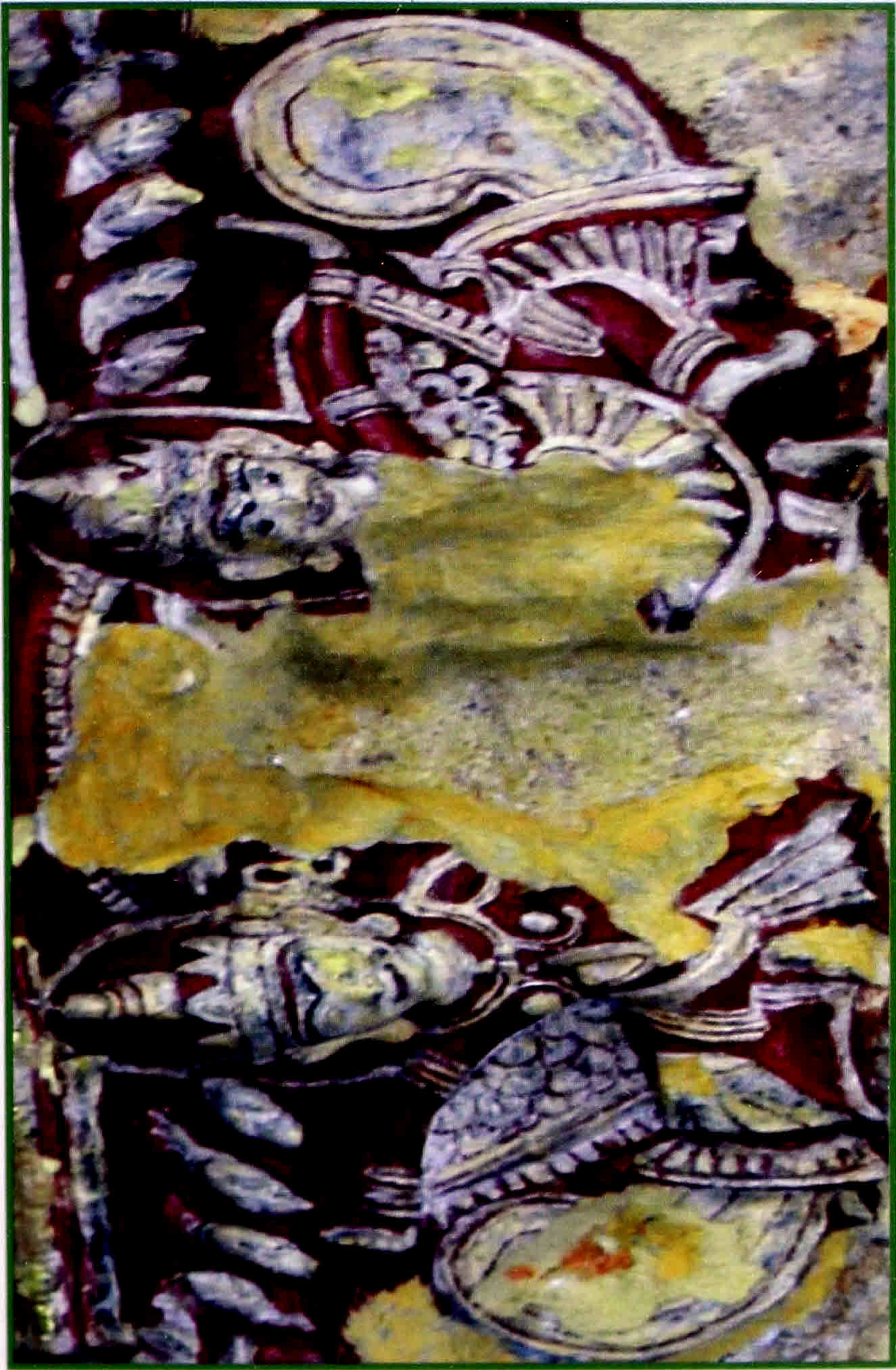
33 Radhakamal Mukerjee, *The Culture and Art India*, London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1959, p.111.

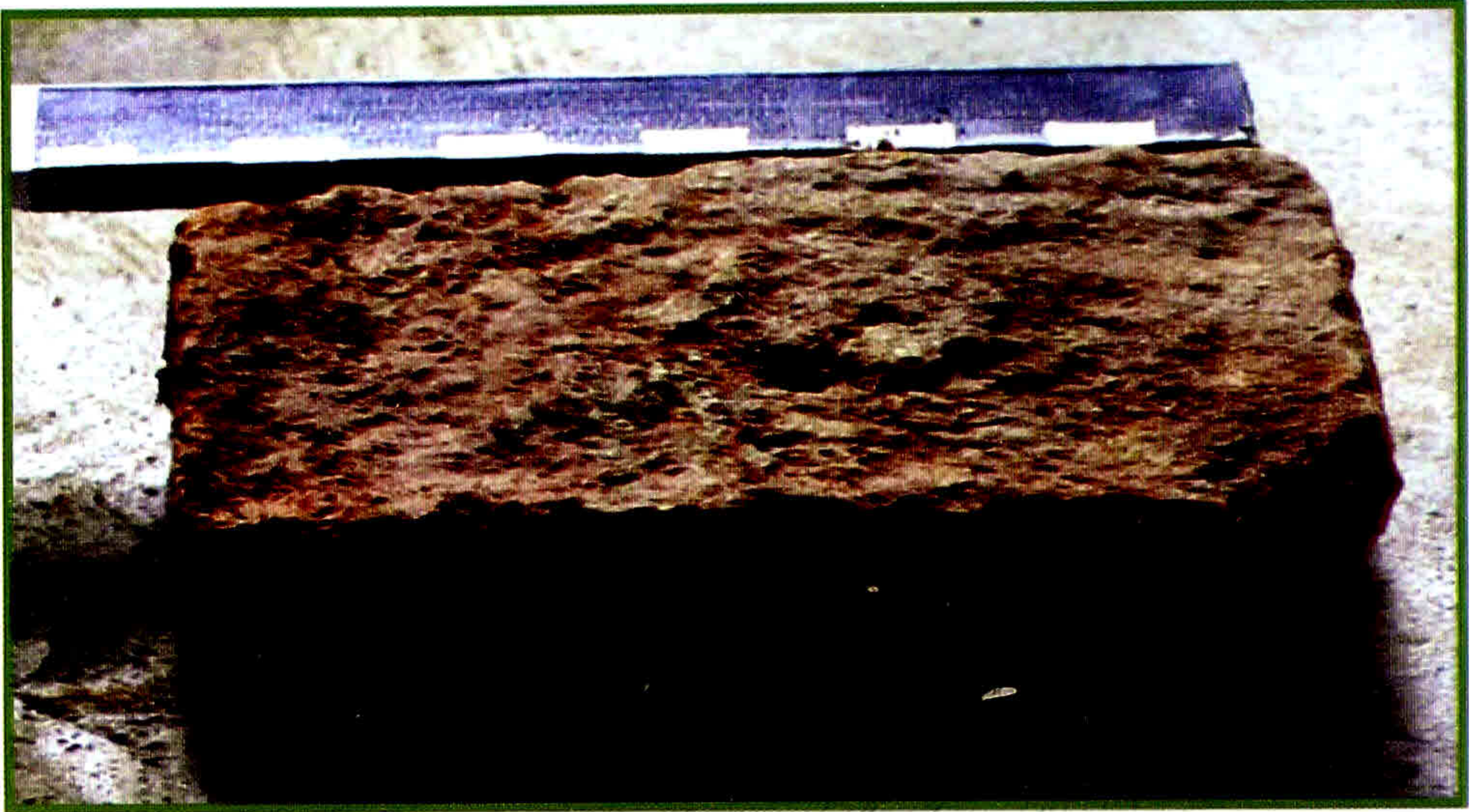
Brahmanical influences can be seen in the architectural ornamentations of Buddhist monuments from the Bagan period (11<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> centuries) to the Konbaung Period (18<sup>th</sup>. century). Notwithstanding the fact that the monuments are Buddhist temples, some Brahmanical figures – such as the *Kīrtimukha* (the grotesque mask), *kalasā*, and *makāra*—appeared to them. In India, the *Kirtimukha* became common as a decorative feature in Cālukyan temples of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, together with turned columns, often ornately carved. The figure was also found in other South Indian temples as a decorative motif, especially in the *makaratorana* , a gateway with a large *kīrtimukha* above the lintel connected by foliate designs to two *makaras* or Sea-monsters at the base of the doorposts . These motifs made their way to Southeast Asia. In Myanmar, the *kīrtimukha* is found in Buddhist temples at Bagan, and also in Rakhine and Mon areas. In Bagan , the figure appear on the uppermost horizontal of the exterior walls of the temples called *bhalū:pan:kiuk* or *bhalūpan:chwei* , the figure of ogre clutching a garland with both hands appeared as decorative feature on the bell-shape of pagodas in Myanmar . On the scarp and the wall

of Kawgun Cave, the relief of *kīrtimukha* is made as a form of decorative motif that is placed at the top of *culac* monastery of the reclining and standings Buddha. The account of the origin of *kīrtimukha* as provided by in Rāhu story makes of the first emblem of Śiva or the wrath of Śiva. At the back of colossal statue of standing Buddha, there is a *kīrtimukha* at the top of reredos, a new look, which is ruined through repair.

### ***Kinnarā* Grotesque**

The *Kinnarā* is a mythical winged, tailed and bird-legged human being which is popular in Brahmanical and Buddhist cultures. On the wall of the Kawgun Cave, two reliefs – a male *kinnarā* and a female *kinnarī* – appear under the relief of the reclining Buddha. The two reliefs are nearly the same as the one on the wall-painting of the Ânandā Oak Kyaung temple near the Ânandā temple in Bagan which belongs to the Konbaung period. Accordingly, the *kinnarā* and *kinnarī* on the wall of Kawgun Cave may be seemed to belong to the Konbaung period.





## Finger-Marked Bricks

*Ūt*, the Myanmar word for Burnt Brick, is Indo-Aryan in origin. The Old Myanmar word for Mortar comes from Mon. In the central basin of Myanmar, finger-marked bricks, the issue of so-called Pyu bricks, that have little predictive value, are found in virtually Northeastern India and Central, Northeast

Thailand<sup>34</sup>, all Pyu sites, and also have been found at Ta gaung, the earliest Myanmar capital according to the Myanmar chronicles. Aung Myint , in his *Ancient Cities in Myanmar* (Myanmar version) , mentions the ancient cities--Śrīkṣetra, Viṣṇu , Maung Mao, Thegon, Kyaikkathar, Taungtwin Gyi--where finger-marked bricks have been found<sup>35</sup>. The finger impressions may be at either end or diagonally




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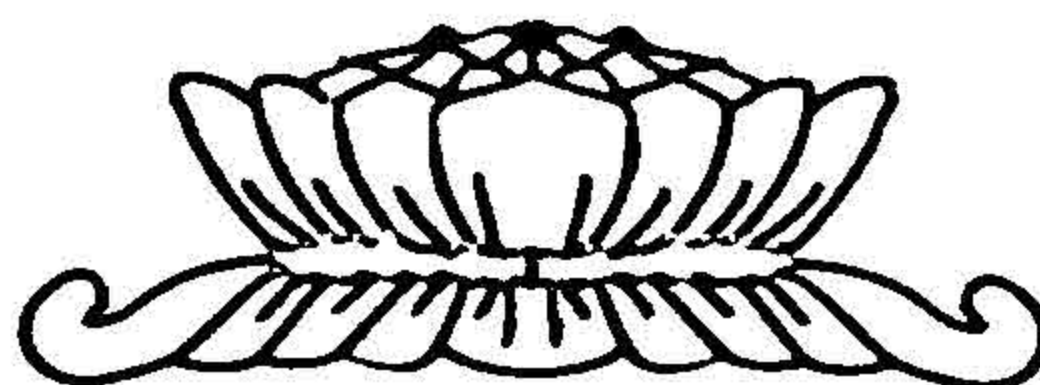
<sup>34</sup> Donald M. Standtner “,Demystifying Mists ;The Case for the Mons”, *The Mon Over Two Millennia*,2011,Bangkok,Chulalongkorn University,p.40.

<sup>35</sup> U Aung Myint, *Ancient Cities in Myanmar* (Myanmar Version), Yangon, Govt., Printing, 1995.

across the broad face of the brick and generally were made using one to three fingers of the hand. In the southern Myanmar, finger-marked bricks are found at Môn sites. These bricks belong to the early centuries of the Christian era. Similar bricks are found around Mt. Kelāsa in present day Bilin Township, Mon State, and Môn Dvārāvātī sites in Thailand such as U- T'hong.



Finger-marked bricks are also found in the Myaing Gyi Ngu area, the Datkyuik Cave, the Yathaepyan and the Kawgun Cave, Kayin State; the bricks remain among the ruins of Buddhist motifs which had been entirely replaced with newer caves. The finger-marked bricks in Kawgun Cave are the same in size; 8 in. is width, as the ones found in Pyu sites. Accordingly, these bricks, like the epigraphy on the stone plaque, and its reliefs, indicate that the Kawgun Cave, a place of worship, belong to the early Christian era, or the pre-Aniruddha Period.





Blank space on the scarp before the Cave and remains of the Images of Buddha, Kawgun Cave, 2013

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the Kawgun Cave is, therefore, called Cave of the Ten Thousand Buddhas that belongs to the Môn School in the pre-Aniruddha Period but the Môn Buddhists might learn making the tablets via from king Aniruddha. The Môn had, however, made them even prior to the reign of the king. Accordingly, it does not closely resemble the Buddhist art in Thailand. Like the Buddhist cave architecture in India, the Kawgun Cave contains two traditional types – the *chaitya* hall, i.e. the shrine proper, and the *sanghārāma* or the *vihāra*, i.e. the monastery.

In the images of the Buddha while hair of the Buddha is depicted balls or thorns or whorls in Thailand, the Buddhas at Kawgun Cave are clean shaven. Another difference is in the depiction of the hand; while the images of the Buddha in Thailand have hands with fingers of differing lengths the images of the Buddha in Kawgun Cave have fingers of equal length. In the proper of wearing the robe the Buddha images in

Kawgun Cave differ from them in Thailand . The image of Buddha in Thailand reveals the nipple of the left chest above the upper garment but the torso of the Buddha in the Kawgun Cave is covered on both sides of the chest with one hand raised in the gesture of *abhaya mudrā*. Another noticeable difference is in the depiction of drapery robes on the standing Buddha. In Thailand, the rim of double lines of the folding robe is curved at the base of the lower robe which is the same in size as the upper robe. In contrast in Kawgun Cave, the length of the upper robe is greater than that of lower robe. There is also a difference in the division of face. The face of the Buddha at Kawgun Cave has sharper features than there in Thailand which have broad and square jaws. The torso of the seated or standing Buddhas at Kawgun Cave also differs in the latter the robe of Buddha is sculpted so that the torso under the thin diaphanous robe appears a nude and sexless. The torso in Kawgun Cave has a different appearance .It is certain that the Buddhist iconography of Kawgun is not dependent upon that of the different schools in Thailand, i.e.

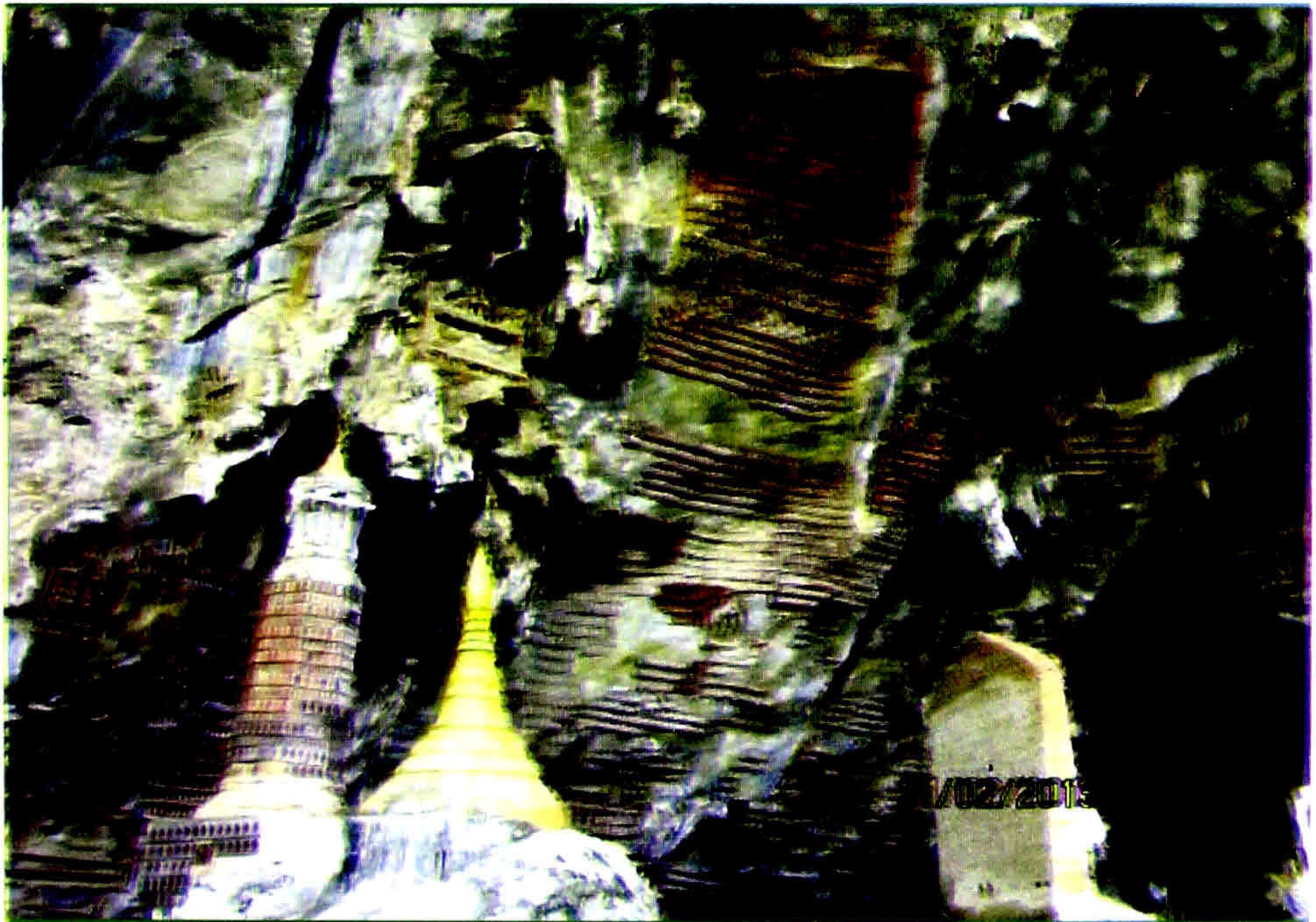
Môn-Indian (Gupta)-5<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D

Khmer and Mon-Khmer transition-10<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> A.D

Thai (Chiang Saen)-11<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D

Thai (Suk'ōt'ai)-13<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D

Thai (Lopburi)-15<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D



Khmer-Thai transition (U-T'ong)-13<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup>  
centuries A.D

Thai (A'yudhya)-14<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D

In this connection, Reginald le May in his *A Concise History of Buddhist Art in Siam* mentions noted;

. . . It would appear as if one were justified in drawing the conclusion that the Mon in Siam [Thailand] had no connection political or religious, with their brethren in Burma[Myanmar] .<sup>36</sup>



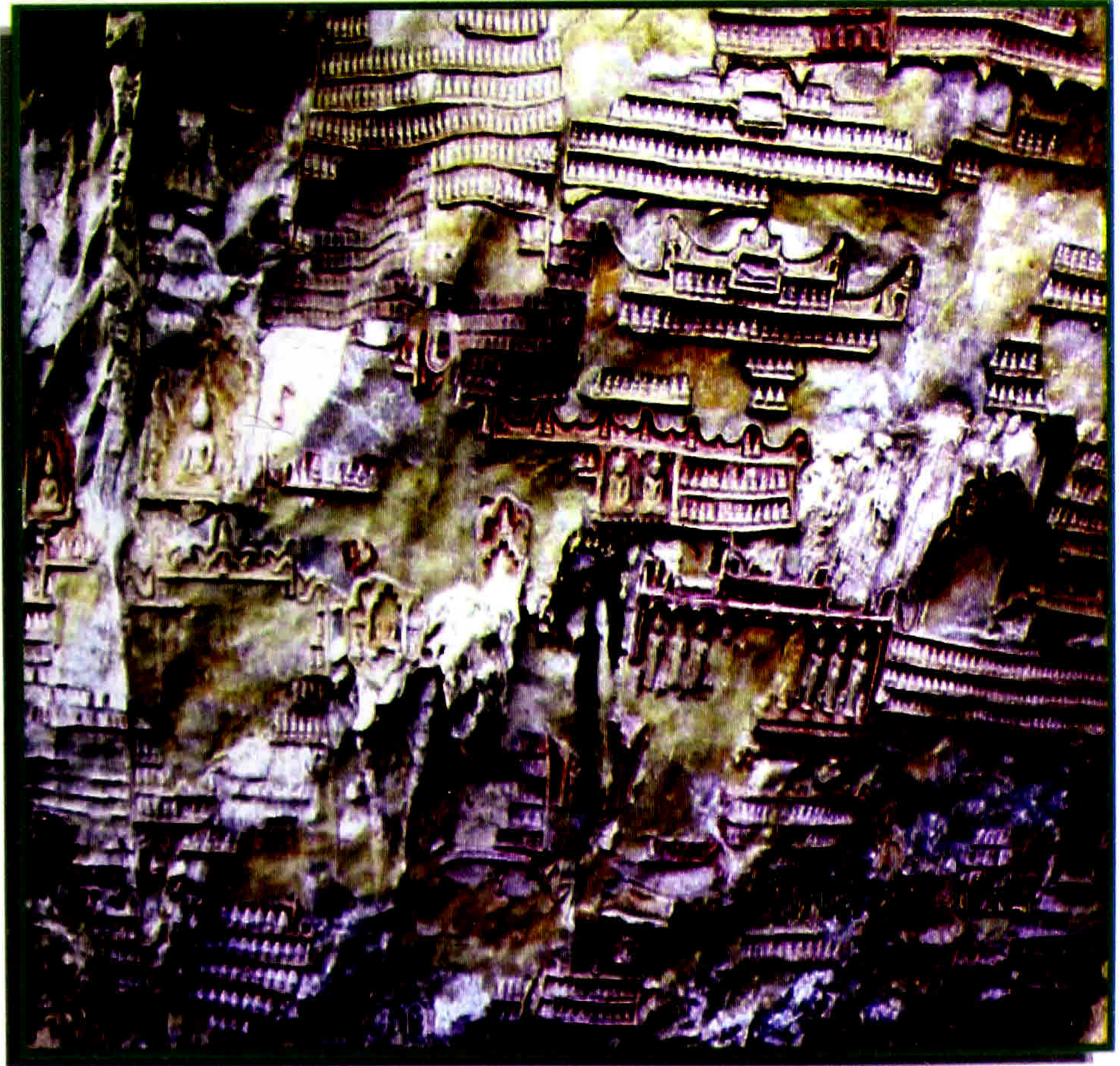
Prince Damrong, father of Thai historiographers, suggests that the ancient city of Phra P'athom in South-central

Thailand was conquered by King Anuruddha (AD 1044-1077), founder of the First Myanmar Empire, who extended his territory as far as the valley of the Menam Chao Phraya and

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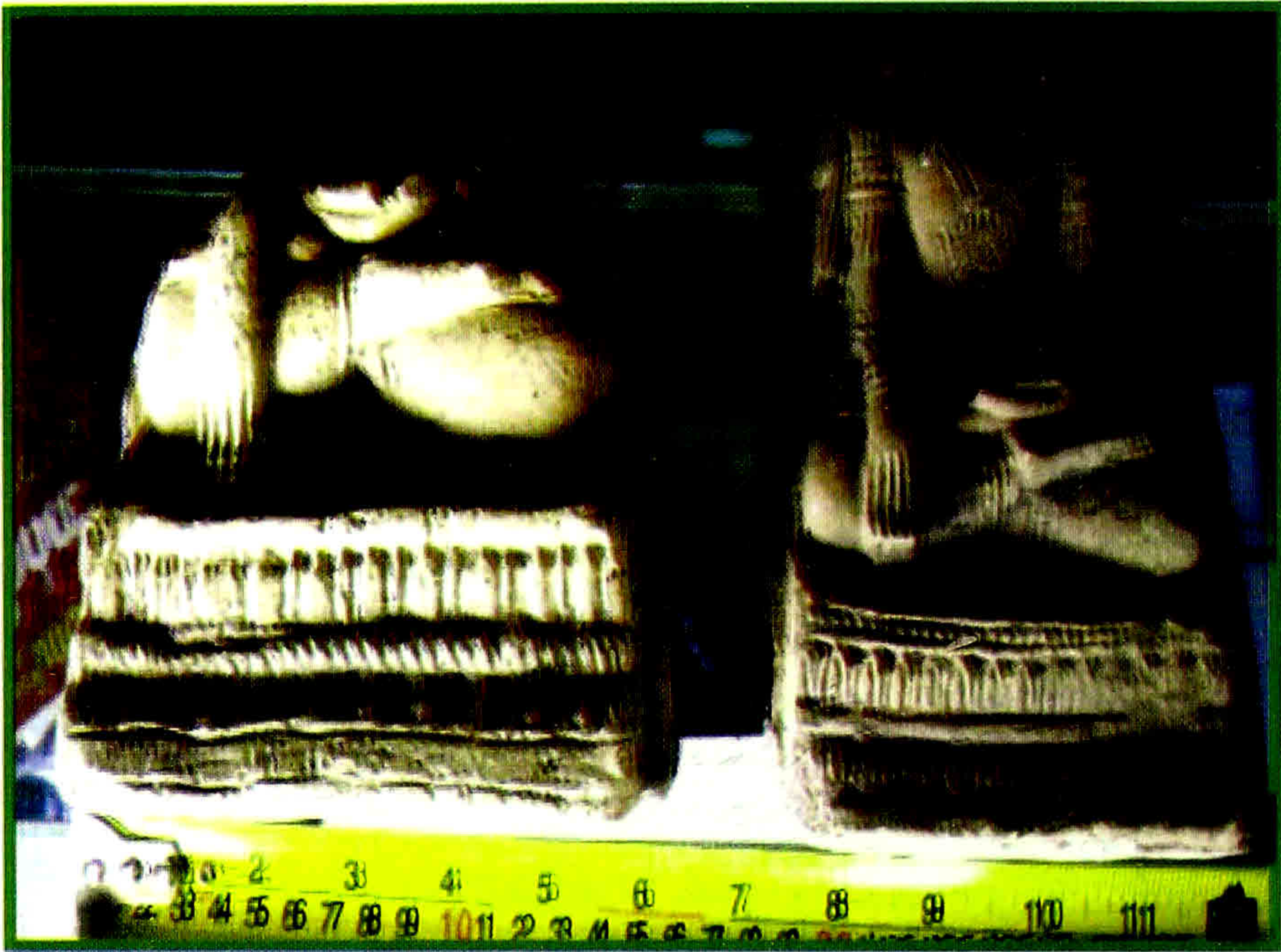
36 Reginald Le May, *A Concise History of Buddhist Art in Siam*, London, Cambridge University Press, 1938, p.30

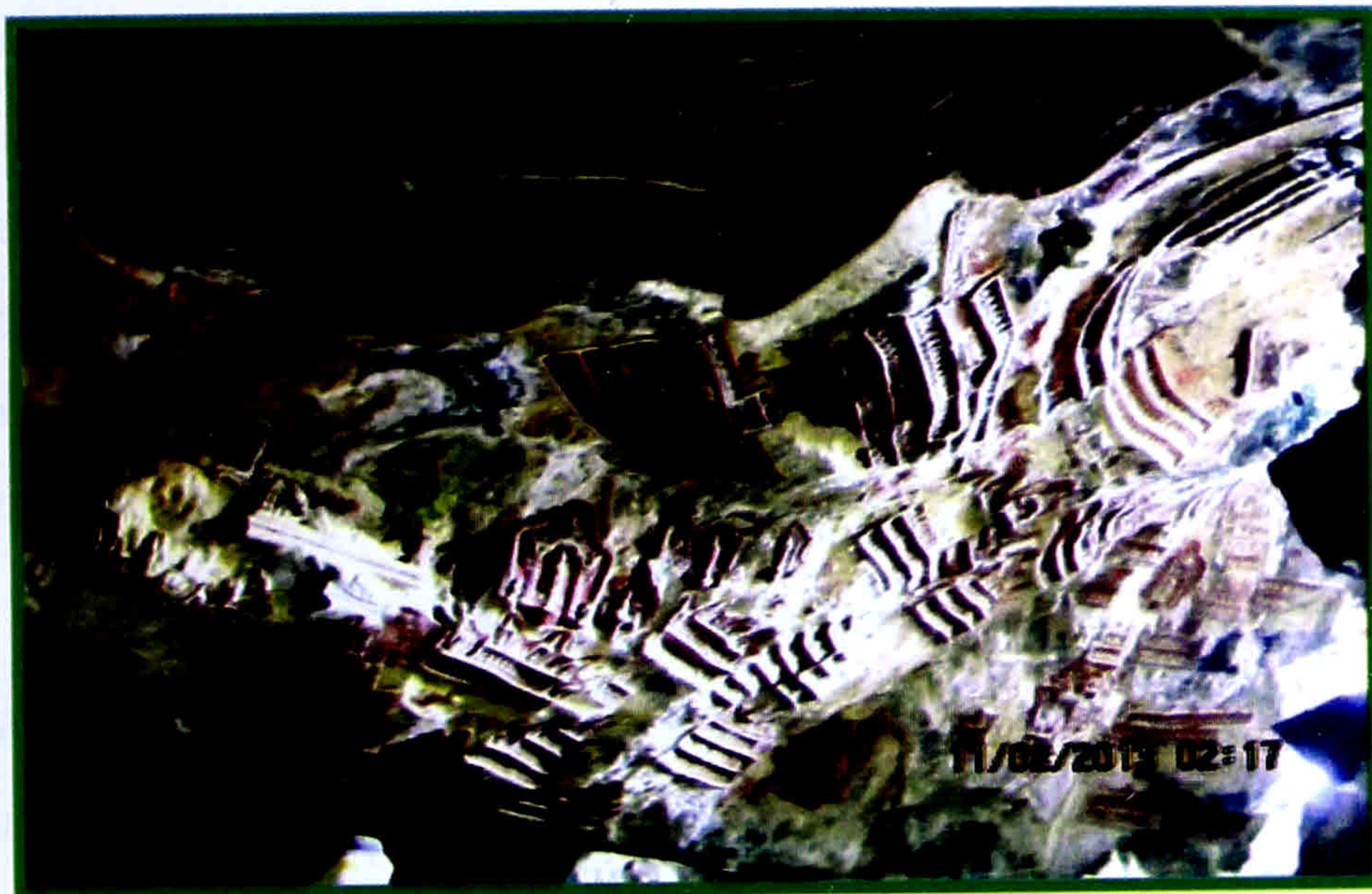
brought the Khmer into subjection under him. This does not accord, however, with Myanmar history which is explicit<sup>37</sup>.



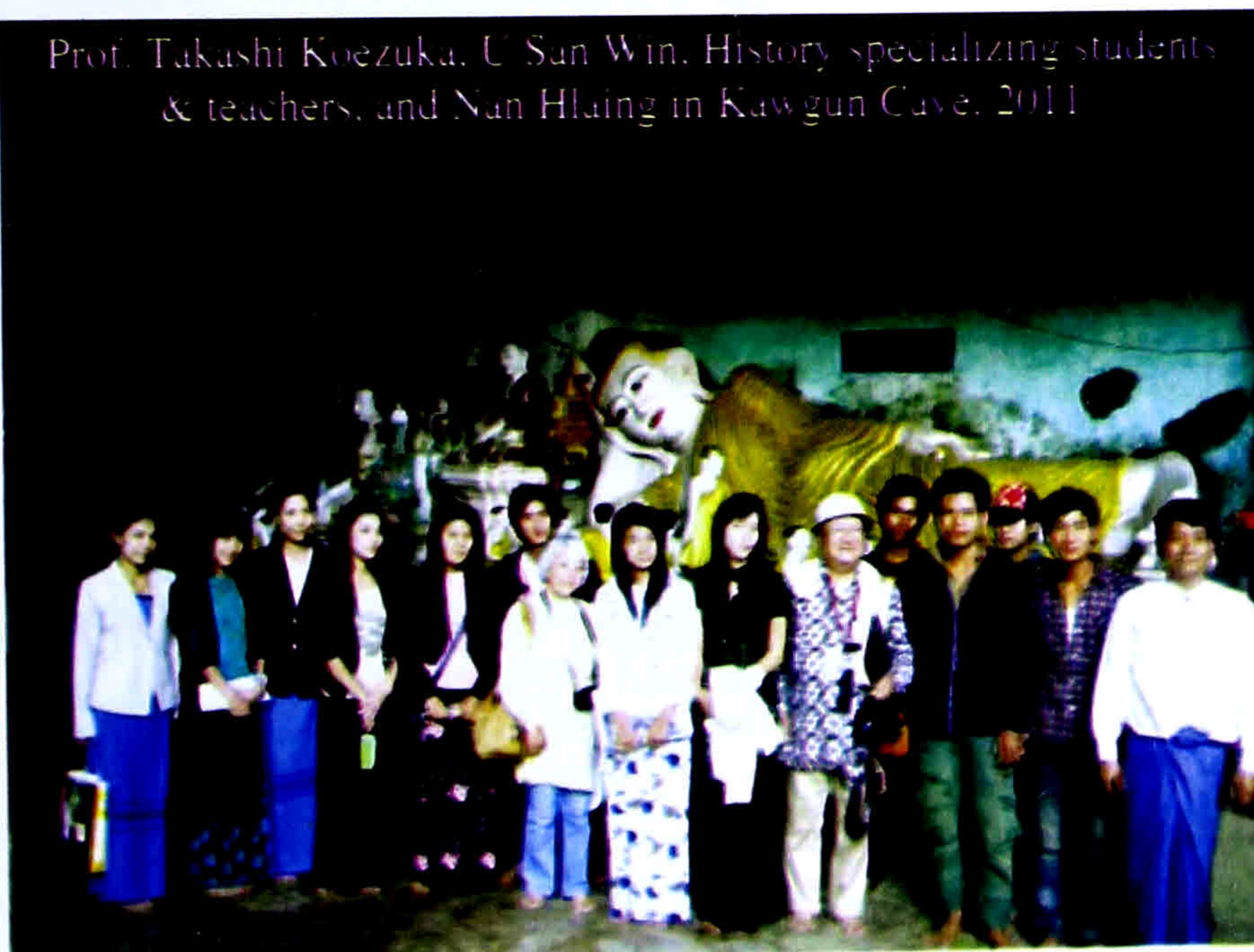
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37 *Ibid*, p.95.





Prof. Takashi Koezuka, U San Win, History specializing students  
& teachers, and Nan Hlaing in Kawgun Cave, 2011



The *Archaeological Report of 1957-1958* mentions that the images of the Buddha at Kawgun Cave closely resemble the school of Suk'hōt'hai in iconography. This cannot be accepted because Suk'hō'thai art is quite different from that of Kawgun Cave. Perhaps, the art of Kawgun Cave may be the Buddhist art in the Ayeyarwady valley which received influences from Mon Buddhist art.

The art of Kawgun Cave represents the culmination in the early Christian era of a long process of religions syncretism which began on Indian soil in centuries previously. This is clearly suggested by the three stone plaques at the Kawgun Cave which are bold reliefs of Viṣṇu and Bodhisattvas belong to 6<sup>th</sup> -7<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

The numerous terracotta votive tablets on the scrap and the walls of Kawgun Cave belong to the Môn in thirteenth-fifteenth centuries A.D. The Kawgun Cave is, therefore, interesting not only its cultural heritages but also a tourist attraction in a less travelled part of Myanmar

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## Interview

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U Maung Maung Kyi, Head- Master retd., Hpa-kap village, Hpa-an on 19 January 2013

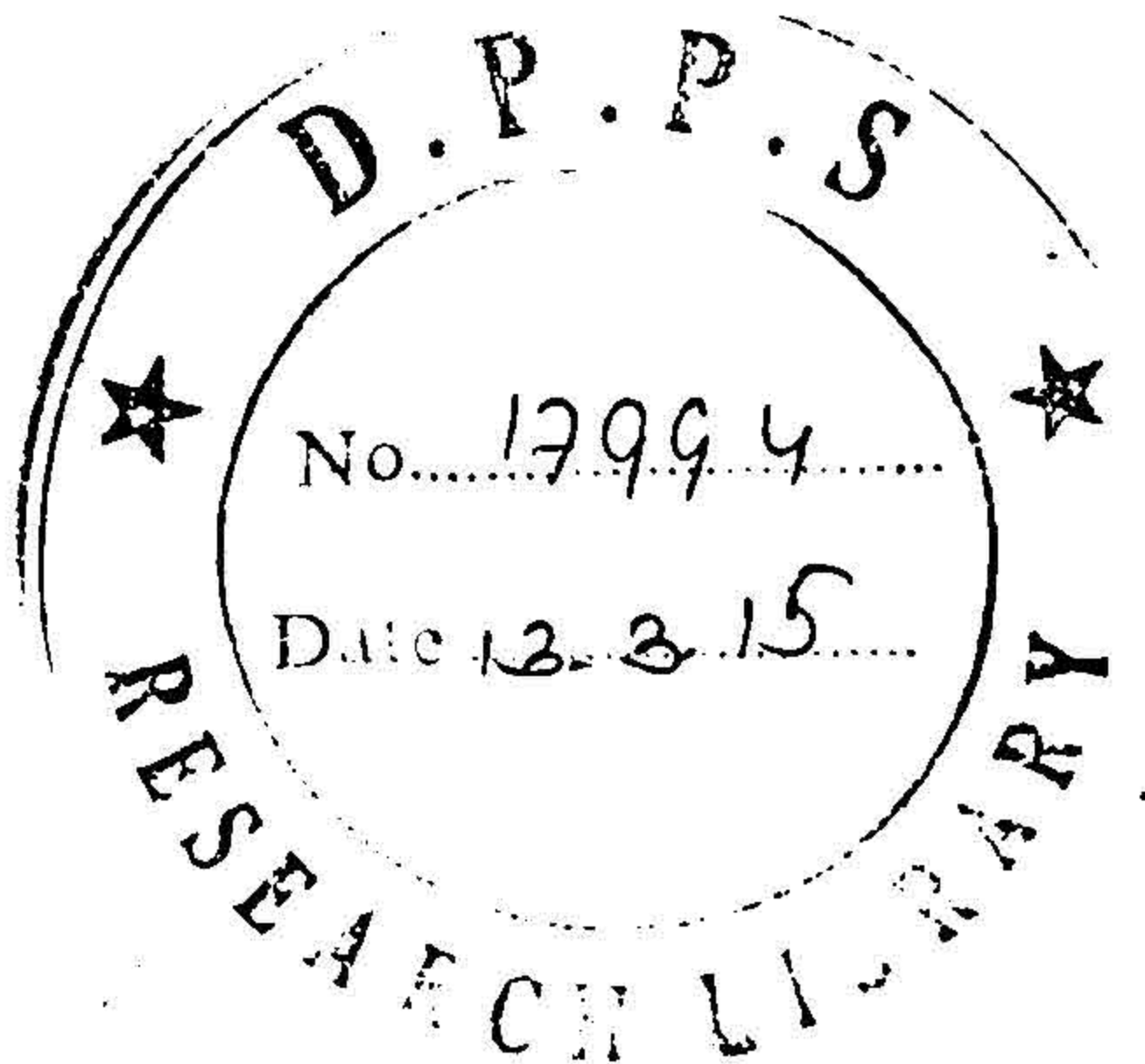
U San Win, Deputy Director, Department of Myanmar Historical Research retd., Ministry of Culture on 2 March 2013.



## *About the Author*

Nan Hlaing was born in Sanchaung, Yangon on 9 September, 1972. His parents are U TinAung(1926-2001), a publisher of Pyinnyaryaung Khyi Books, and Daw Khin Nu(1931-2009). He obtained B.A. (Honors) in 2001, M.A.in 2004; Post-Graduate Diploma in English in 2006; and Ph.D. supervised by Professor U Tun Aung Chain from Yangon University in 2010. His dissertation has been done on *the Influence of Brahmanism in Myanmar*. Also, he attended the Twenty Lectures on Myanmar Buddhist Art and Architecture by Dr. Than Tun at Universities Research Centre, Yangon University in 2001, some historical lectures held at SEAMEO CHAT in 2007 and 2011. He became a part-time tutor in 2003 at History Department, Workers' College, Yangon, an editor of the *Nakkhat Vedin* Magazine, and a permanent teacher at East Yangon University in 2005, and was transferred to Hpa-an University, Kayin State in 2011. In 2002 he got married with Khin Soe Thaik, and has two off springs. From 1997 He produced

over sixty historical articles that had published in Myanmar magazines and six papers in *East Yangon and Hpa-an University Research Journals* and *Journal of the Myanmar Academy of Arts and Science*. In May 2012 *The Research on Dakkhiñasākhā Buddha Image* (Myanmar version) is a work of him. He became an assistant lecturer in 2013. He involved a member in the *Myanmar Paññārapmyā: (The Bulletin of Myanmar Study)*, and is a secretary, Board of Editorial, Annual Magazine of Hpa-an University (2012-2013). Now, he lives in Hpa-an University Estate, Hpa-an, the Capital of Kayin State.



## ***CORRIGENDA***

Page xii, 27(Key word,l.2)	<i>For</i>	Vi——u
	<i>Read</i>	Visnu
Page 27,l.6	<i>For</i>	<i>uttarasa—ga</i>
	<i>Read</i>	<i>uttaranga</i>
Page 21(l.3), 38(l.4)	<i>For</i>	u—ni—a
	<i>Read</i>	<i>usnisa</i>
Page 50(l.12)	<i>For</i>	<i>tribha—ga</i>
	<i>Read</i>	<i>tribhanga</i>
Page 51 (l.14)	<i>For</i>	<i>Tavati_sa</i>
	<i>Read</i>	<i>Tavatimsa</i>
Page 51(l.15)	<i>For</i>	<i>Trayastri—sat</i>
	<i>Read</i>	<i>Trayastrimsat</i>

Since the weather is generally unkind to the preservation of antiquities and historical artifacts in the Mon area, the caves in which a wealth of cultural artifacts are collected and preserved provide a valuable field of study for scholars. Dr. Nan Hlaing has attempted a study of the art of the Kawgun Cave in relation to art elsewhere. This is a noteworthy step in the study of Mon art of the historical period and the beliefs underlying that art. Perhaps other efforts will be made in the study of this subject to fully reveal the wealth of Myanmar culture.

- Professor Tun Aung Chain,

# Sacred KAWGUN CAVE

A Historical Mon Buddhist Monument

NAN HLAING