

The *tunālas* of Itum Bāhāḥ (Kathmandu): Iconographic study in the context of a restoration program¹

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The *vihāras* of the Kathmandu Valley are depositaries of a rich iconographic tradition. These elaborate iconographies are found on different parts and supports of the Buddhist institutions; *caityas*, *maṇḍalas*, the exoteric and esoteric shrines, etc. Our interest will focus here on carved wooden struts (nep. *tunāla*) and the information it carries concerning the building and its community. The first part of the study mainly describes all the quadrangle's carvings while the second part gives an interpretation of settings and tries to reconstitute their history. Since very few monasteries have kept their architectural unity and the divine cohort that usually adorns it, it is rather difficult to study a complete set of struts. Karel Van Kooij produced a very interesting analysis of the Kathmandu Chusya Bāhā's struts (1977) and more recently Mary Sheperd Slusser published a precious survey about ancient Nepalese woodcarvings that were enriched by very helpful radiocarbon testing (2010). The case of

Van Kooij study is very rare in Newari Buddhism for the Chusya Bāhā presents the oldest and most complete group of setting. Other sites like Uku Bāhā and Kwā Bāhā (both in Patan) show more or less complete sets.

Though it is hazardous to pronounce whether an iconographic ensemble is complete or not, a group of carvings may reflect the community's choices in matters of ritual texts and symbolism, as the following lines will seek. The great difficulty resides in the fact that most of the items are often un-contemporaneous and their origins may be doubtful.

Various incidents in the history of Itum Bāhā have modified its aspects and art. The most sadly famous event is the 1934's massive Nepal-Bihar earthquake that shackled the Valley (magnitude 8.1) and levelled numerous constructions to the ground. As in many other sites this event severely modified the quadrangle's architecture: only the ground floor remained at Itum Bāhā.

Fairly rare, pictures taken before that devastating event are of valuable help. Such is the case of a photograph of an International Buddhist Conference held in front of the monastery (Fig.1). This precious document reveals that the eastern wing has a central door, surmounted by a tympanum (that of "Buddha's Victory over Māra") and that the roof is supported by struts. We can count twenty-eight struts: sixteen seem carved while twelve are plain. Sculpted and plain elements are alternated. Among the sixteen carved pieces, two are occupying the corners.

Nowadays, before the completion of the restoration work by the KVPT, five sculpted *tūnālas* remain, located to the eastern façade.

¹ The Itum Bāhā's eastern wing project completes the restorations of the three other wings of the compound. The project is financed by the NGOs Oriental Cultural Heritage Sites Protection Alliance (OCHSPA), the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust (KVPT, who also directs the program) and the Itum Bāhā *saṅgha*. The present paper is supported by the OCHSPA.

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Inside the courtyard, the eastern wing counts five struts as well, all carved. To the opposite side, adorning Akṣobhya's shrine are six sculpted and painted struts. The southern wing has four recently restored struts and one at the junction with the western wing. Thus, to allow a better understanding of the present complex scheme of Itum Bāhā's struts it is preferable to first consider the shrine's *tūnalas*.

Akṣobhya's shrine

As already stated in a previous restoration report³ the painting of struts was probably initiated by the end of the nineteenth century, by the occasion of major celebrations such as kings' coronations. Painters known as Citrakāras perform this specific work. These artists are well known in India for their "naïve" paintings depicting the great myths and the divine odysseys. Their arrival in the Valley is certainly due to the Ranas who hired craftsmen from India⁴. After 1934's earthquake, the monastery was reconstructed and its completion in 1939 is supposed to mark the painting of the struts. It was decided to keep the colour scheme of the Akṣobhya shrine's struts and to restore it in 2004⁵.

The common feature of exoteric shrines is to visually (not to say iconographically) indicate the presence of the deity (new. *kwāhpāḥ dyah*), by placing sculptures of Buddha's disciples (Śariputra and Maudgalyayana) on each door-jambs, a sculpted

pinnacle (*torāṇa*) representing the enshrined god (traditionally Akṣobhya-Śākyamuni Buddha) above the entrance and four to six sculpted struts representing the Jinas (transcendental Buddhas)⁶.

In our present case are found six struts with coloured gods. We may say that we have here a classical-looking organization with six Jinas identified by their attributes (vehicles, objects, colors). From the left to the right: Vairocana, Ratnasambhava, Akṣobhya, Vajrasattva, Amitābha and Amoghasiddhi.

But let us have a closer and more detailed look at the carvings. The row of six struts depicts tantric gods, all three-headed and multi-armed (from the left to the right)⁷:

- A white goddess stands on two lions, she holds: *cakra*, *vajra*, arrow, sword, bow, trident, axe and an unidentified object (jewel ?). A green Kubera is placed under the goddess. He holds an umbrella and a mongoose. (Fig.2)
- A yellow-green goddess stands on two horses, she holds: *varada-mudrā*, sword, bell topped by a *vajra* (*vajraghaṇṭā*), a kind of banner, banner, jewel (*cintāmaṇi*) or *stūpa*, fang and bowl. In the rocky scene at the basis of the carving is a white Kubera raising a sword in his right hand. (Fig.3)
- A blue god dancing on an elephant and carrying: unidentified object, fang, arrow, sword, stick topped by a jewel, bow, bell, *tarjanī-mudrā* (hand closed, index raised). The god, identifiable as (Mahā)Akṣobhya wears a garland of skulls (*munda mala*). A

⁶ Small monasteries would sometimes display a simple horizontal painted banner (new. *bilāpau*) of the Jinas. Interestingly, these objects usually show the Jinas as non-tantric meditating Buddhas, while struts depict tantric forms.

⁷ The attributes are given following a clockwise order starting from the first right hand (skt. *pradaksin*).

³ Gutschow & Schrom, 2005: 89-95.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

Caityarāja Kubera, painted red, holding a *caitya* and a mongoose supports the god's pedestal⁸. (Fig.4)

- A blue goddess dances on two bodies (a woman and a Bhairava-like figure), she holds: *varada-mudrā*, stick, arrow, sword, jewel or mirror, bow, axe and rope. As for Akṣobhya, this female (Mahā)Vajrasattva wears a garland of skulls. Under it is a white Kubera playing vina. (Fig.5)

- A red goddess stands on two peacocks and holds: *abhaya-mudrā* and open hand with the palm toward the top, *dhyāna-mudrā*, *varada-mudrā*, empty hand, arrow, *vajra*, rope or rosary, bow, jewel and umbrella. The Kubera depicted below the goddess is coloured clear white and was probably holding something in his hands. (Fig.6)

- A green coloured goddess stands on two Garuḍas, she carries: *abhaya-mudrā*, *vajra*, arrow, bow, rope or rosary and umbrella. At the lower register of the strut is a white Kubera holding a *dharmacakra* mounted on a stick. (Fig.7)

When looking at the texts (*Sāadhanamāla*, *Niṣpannayogāvalī* and *Piṇḍikrama-Sādhana*), we notice that the god's colours are followed, though with slight variations for the side faces. Most attributes were missing before the restoration. Arms and new features were added, with more or less accuracy. In the image of the said Vairocana (Fig.2) for instance, the attributes are taken from different texts describing the god. Similarly, only one text depicts Vajrasattva with a "sapphire colour", the *tarjanī-mudrā* is an unusual feature of Akṣobhya, the string (*pāśa*) is never indicated among Vajrasattva's attributes and so on⁹.

⁸ Gutschow & Schrom, 2005.

⁹ Mallmann, 1986.

These quick considerations may be extended to many sites in the Valley and this leads us to the fact that carvers and painters, follow their own illustrations or sources, and we yet know very few craftsmen's handbooks (new. *thiyasaphū*, skt. *kalāpustaka*)¹⁰. Nonetheless, it has to be pointed that the feminine aspect of four of the deities indicates another interpretation. Previous publications dealing with these statues have been more or less wrong. H. Rau for example identifies from the left to the right: Mahālakṣmī, Indrāyaṇī, two Bhairavas, Vaiṣṇavī and Kaumārī¹¹ while others saw female partners of (Mahā)Akṣobhya and (Mahā)Vajrasattva¹². The fact is that all of the struts depict female forms except for Akṣobhya (Fig.4) who has no breast.

In tantric Buddhism the gods are often depicted with their female counterpart and as such the feminine aspect is known as the *prajñā* while the masculine is the *upāya*. As a *prajñā*, the goddess is the reflect (skt. *svābha*) of the described deity and she consequently carries the same attributes¹³. The Jinas may sometimes hold a *prajñā* with specific features, as it is the case for Ratnasambhava with Māmaki or Amoghasiddhi with Locanā. Thus it is tempting to identify here the *prajñās* of five Buddhas. However, their colours are different from textual prescriptions and that brings us to another iconography, except for the female

¹⁰ Blom, 1989, Bangdel, 2003. According to Rohit Ranjitkar, chief architect at the KVPT, the Citrakāras hardly share their sources (personal communication).

¹¹ Rau, 1985: 148. The identifications are most probably based on a mis-interpretation of the gods' vehicles. Vaiṣṇavī has a Garuḍa for vehicle, not a peacock, Indrāyaṇī the elephant and not the horse, etc. By habit or by convenience, H. Rau saw four of the Seven Mothers (Sapta Mātṛkā).

¹² Gutschow & Schrom, 2005.

¹³ Mallmann, 1986: 38-39.

image of Vajrasattva. We would propose to keep the identification of it as Vajrasattva-*prajñā*.

The *pañcarakṣās* are five apotropaic mystic prayers (skt. *dhāraṇī*) personified as goddesses associated to the five Jinas. Their colours on carvings are the same and their attributes correspond to the texts (*Sāghanamāla* 201, 206 and *Niṣpannayogāvalī* 18). There might be no doubts for this identification since it explains unusual attributes of the “Jinas” like the trident (*triśūla*) and the axe (*paraśu*) that holds “Vairocana”, absent from its descriptions. Thus we can read the following couples: Pratisarā/Vairocana, Mahāmāyurī/Ratnasambhava, Mantrānusāriṇī/Amitābha and Sītavatī/Amoghasiddhi¹⁴.

The blue colour, the skull garlands and the cheveux hérissés of Akṣobhya and Vajrasattva-*prajñā* recall the shrines protectors’ images of Tibet¹⁵ and other irritated deities. Instead of fierce faces the gods show appeased expressions. Tantric literature created Buddhist versions of the *astabhairavas* (eight Bhairavas) named *krodhas*. Their aspect evokes some features of our present Akṣobhya and Vajrasattva-*prajñā* and even if there are few doubts about their identification, the propitiatory location above the shrine’s door and the association with the *pañcarakṣās* is notable.

Indeed, *pañcarakṣās* and *krodhas* are found together in Guṁ Bāhāḥ (Sankhu) and Chusya Bāhāḥ. According to D. Bangdel the tradition of displaying the *dhāraṇīs* together with the *krodhas* reflects “the complex Tantric Buddhist soteriological

methodologies of sixteenth-century Newar Buddhism ¹⁶.” Without saying that the two dancing Jinas were considered as *krodhas* by the original image-makers, it is possible to suggest that the iconography is exploiting a nexus of visual and symbolic correspondences. Though the present setting is probably posterior to the 16th century, it shows the continuity of the *pañcarakṣās* and *krodhas*-like subject until more recent times. The same organisation is found at Pinche Bāhā (Kathmandu).

Pañcarakṣās and Jinas are related, and that allows us to compare the iconographic setting of *kwāḥpāḥ dyaḥ* shrine with others from the Valley (Table 1). Though none of the schemes are the same, they share similarities enlightening a general organisation. Jinas of the southern and eastern quarters of the *maṇḍala* are largely placed to the left side, those of the northern and western quarters occupy the right side while the central and supreme Jinas (Vairocana and Vajrasattva) are often placed to the margins or the centre¹⁷. At Itum Bāhā a protective pre-eminence is given to the tantric aspects of the enshrined god and the master of the other Jinas: respectively Akṣobhya and Vajrasattva-*prajñā*.

¹⁴ Mallmann, 1986: 289-295.

¹⁵ C. D. Buckley, 2004, Fig.7.

¹⁶ Bangdel, 1999: 130.

¹⁷ A similar setting of the Jinas may be observed in numerous pinnacles of the Valley.

Chusya Bāhā (Kathmandu)	-	Ratnasambhava South	Akṣobhya East	Amoghasiddhi North	Amitābha West	-
Tadichen Bāhā (Kathmandu)	Vairocana Centre	Akṣobhya East	Ratnasambhava South	Amitābha West	Amoghasiddhi North	Vajrasattva
Uku Bāhā (Patan)	Ratnasambhava South	Akṣobhya East	Vairocana/ Vajrasattva	Amitābha West	Amoghasiddhi North	Vairocana Centre
Itum Bāhā (Kathmandu)	Pratisarā (Vairocana) Centre	Mahāmāyurī (Ratnasambhava) South	Akṣobhya East	Vajrasattva	Mantrānusāriṇī (Amitābha) West	Sītavatī (Amoghasiddhi) North
Pinche Bāhā (Kathmandu)	(Akṣobhya) East	Mahāmāyurī (Ratnasambhava) South	Vajrasattva	Mantrānusāriṇī (Amitābha) West	Sītavatī (Amoghasiddhi) North	-

Table 1: Comparative table of the *kwāhpāḥ dyaḥ* shrines' struts of some *bāhās*.

Eastern wing

Eastern wall

Few struts remain in the façade of the monastery's entryway. As stated above, sixteen carved *tūnalas* were supporting the overhanging roof. Five remain to the northern corner and to this number we shall add three stolen pieces.

Except for the corner strut, they all depict three-headed gods standing on lotuses. No arms remain. Thus only the lower registers with carved *mahāsiddhas* ("Great Accomplished Ones") may bring some light to the subject. From the left to the right:

- A seated character holds a dog in the right hand and a bowl in the left one. He wears large earrings and has pearly Buddha-like hair. An inscription below indicates; Kukuripā. This clearly

identifies Kukkuripa, an ex-brahmin famous for having fed a *Ḍākinī* disguised as a starving bitch for twelve years. (Fig.9)

- The second strut presents the Siddha Nāgarjunapā sitting in *padmāsana*, executing the *dharmacakra-mudrā* and surmounted by *nāgas*. Only the gesture differentiates Nāgarjunapā from Amoghasiddhi and the inscription running below confirms his identity. Former Brahmin, he is the alchemist *siddha*. (Fig.10)

- The next sculpture depicts a character riding a tiger. His right hand holds a sword while the left one is broken. The inscription below the rider reads "*kuvū[...]*". The tiger identifies *Ḍombi Heruka* (or *Ḍombipa*), a king of Magadha who lived between the 8th and 9th centuries and took a twelve-year-old outcast girl as a

tantric consort. Dombi is famed for practising woman worship (*str-pūja*)¹⁸. (Fig.11)

- The lower part of the fourth *tūnala* shows a *siddha* sitting in a yogic posture: right leg folded, left one raised, his foot slightly touching his upraised left forearm. The left hand grips a bell topped by a *vajra* while the right hand holds a bowl. The yogic *asana* somehow recalls some Dāikini's postures. Below the scene, in foliage, an inscription reads "*gathā[...]*" and this leads us to recognize the *siddha* Ghaṇṭāpa, the bell-ringer. He also united himself with a twelve year old girl, the daughter of a prostitute. A large inscription runs at the basis of the strut and may be translated as:

"In the name of dead father Dhanadeva (his) son Jayadeva offered height struts and two corner struts." (Fig.12)

- The corner strut represents a classical ithyphallic dragon (new. *mala* or *mola*) with a monkey climbing on his penis. The lower register shows a musician. (Fig.13)

The three missing śālabhañjikās

During the 1960's three struts showing *yakṣīs-śālabhañjikās* were placed above the entryway of the monastery. In 1972 after the collapse of the roof the three carvings were lost. These very rare struts were among the oldest and finest wooden sculptures of Kathmandu Valley. By chance, and thanks to M. S. Slusser, we have pictures of the *tūnalas* before the event (Fig.21,22,23). The only one to remain from this sad incident is the *yakṣa* support of one of the struts. This was enough for a radiocarbon dating who gave the dates 770-970, placing these productions in the continuity of Bhelācē *capāḥ* (660-860) and Uku Bāhā's (690-

890) carvings¹⁹. According to the author, and we agree with it, the struts most probably originated from somewhere else or from a former structure, as it is ascertained by traces of truncating.

Slusser describes the struts as following²⁰:

"Sculpted almost in the round, the yakṣīs are very tall and, compared with other early śālabhañjikā figures, exceptionally slender. They are represented in the bloom of youth, with improbably narrow waists but ample hips and opulent breasts whose weight creates a fleshy roll below them. All wear the towering, side-swept chignon as described for the Bhelache archetype, and all are ornamented with the same complement of jewellery and with the same restraint; a single crest diadem, large earrings, a short necklace, and a wide girdle. A shoulder scarf and a transparent ankle-length skirt clothes them and defying time, engraved textile patterns still can be faintly discerned on the skirts depicted on struts 2 and 3. On one, small rosettes between sets of paired engraved lines are favoured, while on the other large Sassanian-like roundels are featured.

[...] On struts 1 and 3 the supports are yakṣas, almost identical carvings that must have been by the same hand. They are heavyset and clearly equal to their task, although the strained expression and bulging eyes reflect the effort. They have curly hair, and a beard rings their faces. Although they appear to be nude, one of them at least, wears a dhoti, which when photographed in the 1970s still bore an engraved pattern of rosettes between sets of paired lines. The third support is a rather obese kneeling woman with

¹⁸ Dowman, 1985: 59.

¹⁹ Slusser, 2010: 61-66.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

pendulous breasts and bloated abdomen. She smiles or grimaces, her eyes bulge, and in her right ear she wears a long, cylindrical ornament. Unlike the majority of early support figures, which are generally just small ordinary folk, she qualifies as grotesque.

[...] Most of the rock motif on these struts has been sawn off: what remains serves as a platform for the supporting figures. Most noteworthy however, is the naturalistic treatment of the foliage in the upper register. Despite the stylization of the leaf clusters, the branches that bear them appear as living things as fertile as the beautiful yakṣis who grasp them."

Western wall

The five struts found inside the compound show features similar to these from the eastern wall. The major difference lies in their state of conservation, way worse to the western wall. Here also the three-headed gods ornamenting the *tūnalas* have lost the attributes they use to carry in their multiple hands and only the lower parts of the struts are exploitable.

- Starting from the left, the first strut, cracked, shows a sitting *yogi* that an inscription identifies as Indrabhūti. The right hand touches the right knee while the left hand is broken (we can guess that it was raised to the chest). The dedication at the lower part states:

"Bekhasimhadeva, a resident of Okochen devotionally offered strut(s) to thrice venerable Akṣobhya on the second day of the bright half of lunar month of Jeṣṭha in NS 837".

The image of Indrabhūti, the tantrika king, is therefore datable of 1717 AD. A problematic issue remains in the fact that we

don't know if this Bekhasimhadeva donated a single strut or a set. (Fig.15)

- On the second strut is a sitting *siddha*, holding a flame-like item in his right hand and a skull-cup in the other. An inscription reading "Samādhipā", the "Master of Samādhi", identifies the character. (Fig.16)

- The main figure of the third strut may be identifiable as the Jina Amoghasiddhi, characterised by the two Garudas supporting his lotus pedestal. Below are found four sitting Jinās or Bodhisattvas set on two registers. Their attributes are: jewel and manuscript, *abhaya-mudrā* and jewel, a piece of fabric (?) and eventually the *anjali-mudrā*. (Fig.17)

- The fourth strut shows a sitting emaciated *siddha* eating entrails. To the right flank of the holy man is a stick topped by a jewel. The inscription reads "Rohinipā", another name of the *mahāsiddha* Lūpa, the "Fish-gut Eater" and the first of the eighty-four great *yogis*. (Fig.18)

- Finally the fifth strut, probably the better preserved in this row, presents a main image of Akṣobhya standing on two elephants. Exceptionally, six arms remain, but only a skull-cup and a bell are preserved. Below are four characters similar to those from the third strut. Some of their attributes are damaged and are as follow: a jewel (?) and a bell, unidentifiable, a manuscript and a bow (this clearly identifies Mañjuśrī) and a double *abhaya-mudrā*. (Fig.19)

The central parts of the *mahāsiddhas'* struts were undoubtedly hosting tantric aspects of Avalokiteśvara, as it is the case in many *vihāras*. Thus we would have seven Avalokiteśvara-*mahāsiddhas* couples.

Southern wing

This is the wing that houses to the first floor, the *Āgam*. The Sanskrit *āgam* means secret, and it is indeed a place of secret, for its access is restricted to the few initiates of the Cakrasaṁvara Maṇḍala.

The southern wing was restored by the KVPT in 2003. It contains, to the inner side of the compound, a group of four well-restored struts. A fifth strut is found in the south-western corner.

- Two corner struts showing a *mala* figure (dragon) are framing the centre of the building (Fig.25,28). In both cases the basis of the strut has a Kubera-like atlantes displaying a double *abhaya-mudrā*. The *tūnala* at the south-western corner shows the same features (Fig.29). The only difference between these pieces is that the second strut, starting from the left, is partly resorted. The two others are new sculptures. Identical sculptures are found at Bhote Bāhā, Kathmandu, and numerous sites of the Valley.

- The first strut after the left side *mala*, shows a goddess presenting the *dharmacakra-mudrā* (or the *anjali-mudrā*) and standing on a lotus. Below is a sitting *siddha*, *abhaya-mudrā* in the right hand and the left hand raised, palm to the top. To the basis runs a carved inscription:

“Jaya Dhana Simha offered (the strut) on the 8th day of bright half of the lunar month of Gūlā (Śravan) in NS 838 (1718 AD)”.

It is relevant to note that the strut is the only one in the compound to show a goddess with (only) two hands and a single face. This figure evokes the eighteenth century Grahamāṭṛkā strut of the Chusya Bāhā (Kathmandu), and it is probably the

same goddess that is represented here²¹. Besides, the *siddha* is not identified, contrarily to the other representations. (Fig.26)

- Following is another interesting strut. It shows as a central figure the image of a finely carved three-headed goddess standing on a blossomed lotus. The features of the goddess are in all points similar to those of the shrine’s façade. The feet of the deity were with no doubt already missing since they are shown on a simple (but well carved) lotus pedestal, while it certainly depicted the elephant vehicle of Akṣobhya (see below). The strut was assembled with another one of totally different origin as the differences of wood and width attest. It shows two smaller images. The upper one represents a dancing goddess with four hands. Though the wood is very damaged, according to some *saṅgha* members, the remaining right hand holds a *damaru* (double drum) while the lower left hand makes an *abhaya-mudrā*. Under the dancer is a character sitting in ... He holds a lotus in his left hand and a probable incense burning pot (...). The most striking element of this latter representation is certainly the Tibetan hat belonging the Dge-lugs-pa or the earlier rNying-ma-pa sects. This is probably the image of an Indian or Tibetan hierarch. (Fig.27)

²¹ Grahamāṭṛkā is one of the *saptavaras*, the seven days of the week. At Chusya Bāhā the *saptavaras* are all represented among other groups of deities: Jinas, *dhāranīs*, dancers and musicians and the *navagrahas* (nine planets or astronomic phenomena).

Different levels of iconographic reading

From the Jinas to the *pañcarakṣās*

If the study of Newar Buddhist iconography is often a problematic task, the situation at Itum Bāhā is complicated by the fact that out of twenty-four struts, at least half of it is not in its original position. There may be no room for doubts concerning the *pañcarakṣās*/Jinas on Akṣobhya's shrine as it shows graphic unity and corresponds to usual settings of the Jinas, however unique by the representation of the *pañcarakṣās*. In a similar case, at the Gum Bāhā of Sankhu, Bangdel indicates: "[...] the goddesses are represented both as fully Enlightened Buddhas and as female emanations of the Pañca Buddha²²". This marks an iconographic choice operated by the *saṅgha* (monastic community). The *pañcarakṣās* are masters of three *maṇḍalas* described by the *Sādhanaṃālā* (201 and 206) and the *Niṣpanṇayogāvalī* (18) and the monastery's rulers probably used a version of one of these texts. Afterwards craftsmen maybe revisited the textual references.

Considering their art, the six shrine's struts may be attributed to the 18th-19th century and their iconography assimilated to the one at Pinche Bāhā.

The strut 13 is particularly puzzling as we have here two parts of different origins. The main goddess is exactly similar to the four painted *pañcarakṣās* (struts 16,17,20 and 21). In the foliage is an acrobatic monkey playing with a horse or a donkey. This kind of scene is also found in the six shrine's struts and the goddesses share the same features: a thin necklace falling between small breasts, same crown topped by a *caitya* and same

jewelleries. The arms are missing, as well as the original lotus basis. Nevertheless it is my opinion that this is an image of ... the *pañcarakṣā* corresponding to Akṣobhya. For an unknown reason the hence complete set of five *pañcarakṣās* and Vajrasattva-*prajña* was modified. The artist and/or the *saṅgha* changed their minds and decided that a tantric aspect of Akṣobhya would be of better effect. Even if one considers that the carving broke at that time already the subject was anyway changed, in a rather short time, since the "new" sculpture shares the same style. The carving at the basis remains mysterious.

Struts 8 and 10 are classical Jinas depictions datable to the 17th century and probably contemporary to the *mahāsiddhas*. This is based on similarities in the motifs of jewelleries, crowns and clothing. There is no *bāhā* where Jinas are placed opposite to the *kwāḥpāḥ dyaḥ* shrine. According to a copper-plate inscription on the left side of the *kwāḥpāḥ dyaḥ* shrine entrance and dated NS 983 (1861 AD) the roof collapsed to the point that the "pinnacle fell down to the worshipping room²³". The copper-plate marks the reconstruction of the roof and I suggest that (two) remaining struts were placed to their current location and a new group, that of the *pañcarakṣās* was set. Indeed, it is a common use in *vihāras* to relocate old adornments when new ones are produced. That is particularly the case with pinnacles (*torāṇa*).

The *mahāsiddhas*

An interesting element of the studied iconography is the presence of *mahāsiddhas* on height struts. The carving offered by Bekhasimhadeva; dated 1717 AD presents a subject and a

²² Bangdel, 1999: 130.

²³ Gutschow & Schrom, 2005: 147.

style in all points identical to the other struts of the eastern wing. Hence it is possible to date the other pieces of the same period (first quarter of the 18th century). The supposed Grahamāṭṛkā-*mahāsiddha* image is dated 1718 AD. It is therefore contemporary to the Avalokiteśvara-*mahāsiddhas*'s carvings and the Grahamāṭṛkā of Chusya Bāhā, datable of the early 18th century²⁴.

We earlier said that according to a picture taken before 1934's earthquake, there must have been fourteen carved struts (exception made of the two corner elements) supporting the eastern wall of the oriental wing. If the set of *saptavaras-mahāsiddhas* was complete and the Avalokiteśvara-*mahāsiddhas* were at least seven and all placed together, we thus would have fourteen struts (seven *saptavaras-mahāsiddhas* + seven Avalokiteśvara-*mahāsiddhas*). This is an ideal reconstitution and it is certain that more struts took place inside the quadrangle (the strut 13 is the echo of other iconographic arrangements). At Chusya Bāhā the *saptavaras* are located inside the quadrangle, in complement of other groups of struts and probably for ritualistic purposes (initiations, astrology, etc.). Hence we would suggest a second scheme: fourteen Avalokiteśvara-*mahāsiddhas*'s adorning the eastern wall of the entry-wing, seven *saptavaras* inside the quadrangle combined to lost groups of gods and four Jinas on the shrine.

The *yogi* support of the supposed Grahamāṭṛkā induces an iconographic unity between the *saptavaras* and the supposed Avalokiteśvaras. *Mahāsiddhas* (Rohinipā, Nāgarjunapā, Ghaṇṭāpa and Kukkuripa) are also found in the roof supports in and

outside the compound of Pinche Bāhā (Kathmandu). These sculptures of superior quality may be dated to the eighteenth century as well and this would indicate common soteriological aspirations. Besides, the recurrent identification of the depicted characters on Chusya, Pinche and Itum Bāhā eighteenth century's struts reveals a didactic intention. Moreover, as Linrothe brilliantly demonstrates, *mahāsiddhas* are functioning "as a totality, not as an agglomeration of individual (representations)²⁵". Since they did not have the necessary place to represent the eighty-four holy men, the artists and/or the recipients chose easily recognisable figures like Kukkuripa feeding his dog or Lūipa eating fish-gut. The characters are identifiable by typical attributes and this attests of the functionality of their teachings.

Each one of the eighty-four *mahāsiddhas* is "a symbol for human potentiality, and it is thus similar to (the roles) of the *bodhisattva* in the Mahāyāna and the *arahant* Theravāda and *nikāya* Buddhism²⁶". Apart from using unorthodox ways to attain spiritual insight, these Indian Buddhist saints are coming from all the fringes of the society of the 8th-12th centuries. We thus find monks, kings, servants, young girls, etc. Ḍākinīs, the

²⁵ Linrothe, 2001: 191.

²⁶ Yeshe & Katz, 1977: 269. In different words in Linrothe's study (2001: 196): "[...] a *mahāsiddha* is a fusion of the two ideals of pre-Esoteric Buddhisms: the earthly ārhat who reaches wisdom and salvation through meditation and asceticism, and the celestial bodhisattva who defers ultimate nirvāṇa so as to render critical assistance to those mired in ignorance through compassionate action directed by wisdom. For Esoteric Buddhism in the pan-Himalayan region, the images of the *mahāsiddhas* are concurrent signs of the affective power of those teachings, power which has been repeatedly proven in the past, and of the availability of those teachings in the present."

²⁴ The Grahamāṭṛkā of Chusya Bāhā is a finest sculpture. The two struts were made by different artists.

“embodiment of female principles and awareness”, are their spiritual teachers and sexual partners. The presence of *mahāsiddhas* in a Newari *bāhā* may be a surprise, for they are in clear opposition against ritualism, monasticism and cast-system²⁷. Kukkuripa’s song emphasise the *siddhas*’ paradigm: “*Ritual worship is futile, concealing the truth*”, and increases the strangeness of our iconographic setting. Hence why would one presents non-monastic personae in front of a monastic institution, especially when one knows the complexity of Newari ritualism?

Of course the *siddhas* are represented at the lower registers of the struts, like in Pinche Bāhā. This is probably because the tradition is not so, and the bases of the sculptures are therefore, in this case, working as subtitles. The *yogis* are here as models of achievements, regardless of their anti-monastic/ritualistic methods. In a way it is a very “tantric mode of acting”; using symbols, even paradoxical, to serve a greater purpose and accentuate the teachings’ performability.

The *saṅgha* organisation and iconographic choices

Though the organisation of Newar Buddhist institutions is well known through different ethnological works²⁸ it is essential to evocate it here. The *saṅgha* of Newari *vihāras* is divided in two groups of members: the Sakyas and the Vajracharyas (“Vajra Masters”). While the Sakyas outnumber the latter the Vajracharyas receive a more intensive initiation (*dīkṣā*) to the

tantric mysteries²⁹. They supervise the exoteric rituals (generally in the courtyard) and the secret esoteric ceremonies (performed in the *āgam* shrines). They are family priests, executing rites solicited by their “clients”³⁰.

At Itum Bāhā, ten (or eleven) historical lineages are represented by the elder man (new: *thāypā*, skt: *sthavīra*, *thakālī*) of each lineage. These lineages are said to date back to the foundation of the monastery and originated at Sankhu. To the head of the elders body is the *mū sthavīr* or *mū thāypā*, the main elder, a Vajracharya. This responsibility is hereditary. The other elders are known as *sthavīras*, except for the sixth, the *sthavīras*, also a Vajracharya. The seventh elder may take his charge after he received Vajracharya instruction. During rituals the main elder is assisted by the second *sthavīr* who is sitting to his left.

A. Gell’s anthropological art nexus

The *mū sthavīr*’s role is very significant to the institution’s life, for whenever devotees wish to offer statues, adornments or any element of the traditional monastic decorum, it is made upon his consultation. His knowledge of religious texts will make him able to decide whether the desired subject is adequate or not. This is one of the moments where texts are consulted. The *vihāra* possess an exemplar of the *pañcarakṣā* book, and it was probably used by the *mū sthavīr* of the time to decide the setting of the Akṣobhya shrine. A similar process may have been observed when one had to decide for the installation of struts

²⁷ In a comparative view, *siddhas* constitute a more open club, than the earlier *arhant* and probably less “narrowly scholastic” than the *bodhisattvas*, to quote the words of Katz (1991: xvi). They are

²⁸ The most brilliant works on this matter are probably signed by J. K. Locke and D. N. Gellner.

²⁹ After receiving his Name Empowerment (skt. *nāma abhiśekha*), the Vajrasattva is entitled and considered as Vajrasattva. (Bangdel, 1999: 170)

³⁰ This Sakya/Vajracharya distinction does not infer the superiority of a groupe against another one. The only observed hierarchy is that of the age.

depicting the *mahāsiddhas*³¹. The *Legends of the Eighty-four Mahāsiddhas* was known in Tibet (where it encountered a great success) after the twelfth century as the *Grub thob brgyad cu rtsa bzhi'l lo rgyus*, part of the *bsTan'gyur*³². Whether the *saṅgha* possessed this text, an extract, or a Sanskrit version of it is yet unknown. In any cases, the *mū sthavīr* acts as a sensor. He is thus an intermediary between the donators, seeking for apotropaic helps by “adorning” the compound he is related to³³, and the artist, creating images following their proper rulings.

The impressive work of Alfred Gell (2009) is partly focused on the study of the art nexus. He describes pieces of art as “index” and considers them (to draw a quick sketch of his theory) as resulting of a nexus of agencies³⁴. The social agents (the “index” is also perceived as an agent) express their respective agency rather it is active or passive (or even both like in our scheme). Trailing Gell’s anthropological theory of art, one may draught the following scheme:

³¹ This is said, one have to note that, in Newari art, struts’ basis have something of a “space of freedom”. It is there, for the example, that we find the famous erotico-tantric carvings (Tucci, 1969).

³² Dowman, 1985: 384-388.

³³ The attempt of a ritual (here the setting of struts is considered as such) to avoid diseases or procure wealth is considered as an instrumentalist ritual. Gellner, 2003: 70.

³⁴ “[...] the index possesses an involutionary hierarchical structure that allows abductions of agencies simultaneously and at different levels.” Gell, 2009: 66.

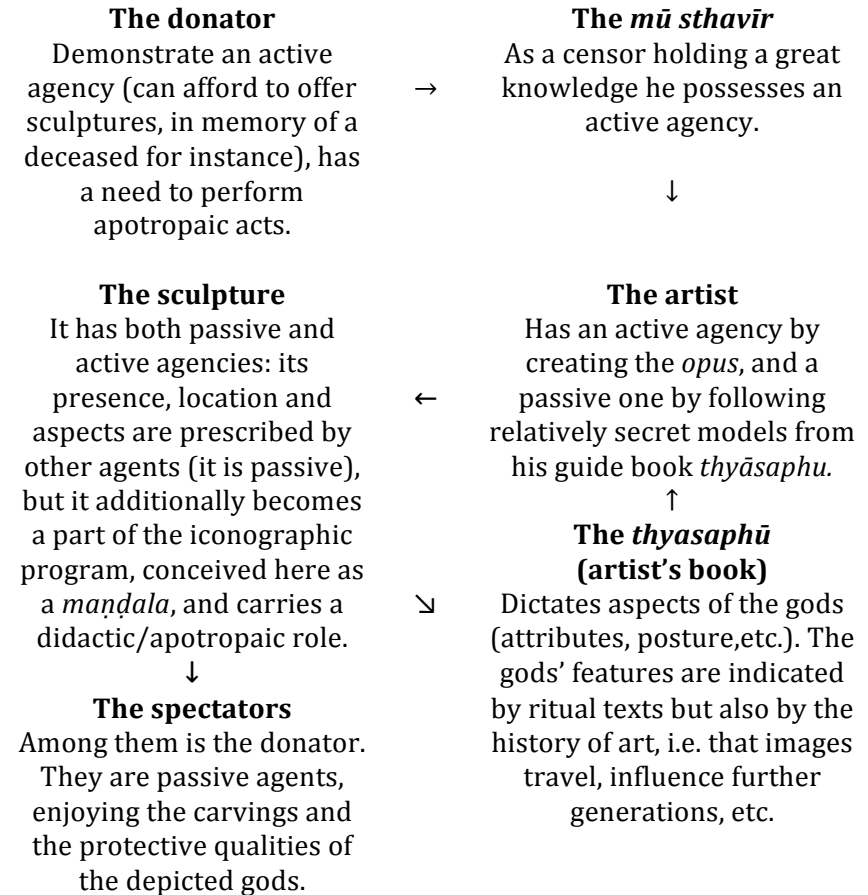


Table 2: The art nexus of Newari Buddhists struts.

Since the offering of statues or else, to religious institutions are perceived as a propitiatory/apotropaic gesture in the present context, the act of the donation constitutes a worldly activity. The *bāhā*, the gods’ dwelling, is thus the place of

interpenetration of these worldly interests and the local soteriology.

When looking at the art-making-process one has to notice the more or less constant presence of secrecy. Hence is there a nexus of secrecy? The *mū sthavīr* undoubtedly is the most prominent “secret-holder” of the scheme. He, and the elders’ body, have a great deal of keeping tantric teachings secret (this follows the belief that these teachings, if in the hands of the wrong person, may be fruitless or even devastating). Additionally the artists are holding their iconographic prescriptions “secret” and the final opus may assume esoteric meanings. This question and the different issues it underlines are too vast for the present paper and I hope that the subject will find an extended interest for the Himalayas in general.

As an effect of the described situation we have a partially incomplete-looking iconographic program resulting of un-contemporaneous gifts from donators³⁵ elements of various subjects, dates and probably origins; these factors being all tributaries of external conditions (earthquakes, humidity, thefts, “loans” from other institutions, etc.). That the iconographic program of Itum Bāhā is incomplete is rather obvious, especially when compared to other structures like Chusya Bāhā (Kathmandu) or Kwā Bāhā (Patan). Comparatively, what makes these programs complete is the relative contemporaneity of the arts and/or their rational arrangement as a whole *locus symbolicus*. The present case does unfortunately not show what I dare call an iconographic harmony: struts seem to be constantly moved from one place to another and there are doubts about the

³⁵ These donators may be Buddhists or Hindus for some *caityas* in the courtyard were donated by Thapas (Chhetris).

origin of some carvings. Interestingly, the *saṅgha* has a different view about it, and particularly stressed the original setting of most struts and their all-time presence in the quadrangle.

The emic conception³⁶

Seeing their *bāhā* from the inside, the *saṅgha* members have a specific approach of the structure, somehow different from the scholarly depiction. Whereas the *bāhā* is clearly perceived as a *maṇḍalas*, a symbolically organised dwelling of the gods with soteriological meaning, the struts are conceived as mere adornments. According to them, the *tūnalas* have no ritual purposes. This is emphasized by the fact that no worship is given to them, but as valuable as this testimony may be it is a short-term historical consideration. If the struts ever had a ritualistic aim and were worshipped it is yet impossible to ascertain.

The *pañcarakṣās* are visualised as *śaktis* of the Buddhas. They thus play a double role as *śaktis* representing Jinas and as protective goddesses, the anthropomorphised *dharanis*.

Where the emic view totally differs from ours on the anterior location of the struts. For most of the members *pañcarakṣās* always adorned the shrines façade (while we propose four Jinas) and the struts 14 and 16 - two Jinas - have always been placed on the western wall of the eastern wing. As stated above we propose that these two carvings were at first among the four initial Jinas.

³⁶ I am much indebted to Chandra Bahadur Shakya, active member of the community and its intermediary for the restoration program, and fellows who attended our rich interviews.

According to the *saṅgha* it is impossible to give away the monastery's belongings. If this was always the rule it is not known, but it explains for the informants that the three missing *yakṣīs-śalabhañjikās* always belonged to the institution. For Slusser, the *śalabhañjikās*, "[...] if original to the *vihāra*, imply a correspondingly early foundation. However, the struts must have been moved more than once and may have originated elsewhere. For one relocation within the monastery they were shortened by truncating the rock motif registers, and in their final location they were lengthened with supplementary wood blocks.³⁷" This opinion that the struts "originated elsewhere" does not meet a great adherence among the *saṅgha* for the reason cited above.

Restoration proposition

The restoration project led by the KVPT propose to rebuild the eastern wing, and the struts locations may be considered to give the façade its original aspect back (prior to 1934). Following the above survey, the three Avalokiteśvara-*mahāsiddhas* of the western wing could be relocated to the east and complete the four others already there (Fig.32d)). Seven new struts would have to be carved; with images of seven aspects of Avalokiteśvara to the central part, and seven *mahāsiddhas* to the basis. Considering that the depicted *mahāsiddhas* are already the most famous, the easiest to recognize, and are working as a totality and there is no record of any original setting, I would advise, if that is the community's choice, to choose seven new

characters. If possible these new *mahāsiddhas* have to be identified by their specific features and by epigraphic annotations.

This nevertheless poses a new problem. If new struts are decided, which attributes will be given to the existing Avalokiteśvaras whose hands remain empty? It will be an interesting thing to observe how Citrakāras would deal with the task of completing a given set and giving new attributes to existing carvings.

To the western façade would remain two Jinas (struts 14 and 16), punctuated with plain struts, Akṣobhya to the left and Amoghasiddhi to the right side. Here also carving two (Amitābha, Ratnasambhava) to four other Jinas (+ Vajrasattva and Vairocana) and placing them according to the Figure... may reconstitute a new set. But, since this group would have no historical validation to my opinion (such a setting is unseen in other *bāhās*), it would be more accurate to place plain struts with the two existent Jinas.

Conclusion

The present study has tried to give a better understanding of the rich iconography of the Newari struts. If some aspects remain in darkness (like the provenance and the subjects of strut 13's basis), it is hoped that it brought some light to the evolution of the carvings' locations. Like most religious structures a *bāhā* is subject to various changes. These vicissitudes are perceived with more or less accuracy by the users, and it is my belief that iconographic studies in such a living context have to consider both scholar and emic views.

³⁷ Slusser, 2010: 61.

The proposed restitutions cover over three centuries of earthquakes, soteriological and iconographic evolutions (or fashions?). It shows that the present state, especially to the eastern wing's western façade, is not truthful. Well-preserved iconographies such as Chusya Bāhā's show that iconographic programs were often conceived as a whole. It is certain that Itum Bāhā's carvings had a completely different history. Aware of the limits of a comparative study, the observer may nevertheless infer that in the present case, the iconographic unity is fractionated in the concerned wing.

The restoration to come could consider relocating some of the struts in order to recreate an original design, additionally to the carving of new struts (eastern façade). On the other hand, fantasist restitutions based on absent evidences have to be avoided. The two Jinas (14,16) once probably adorned the main shrine, it is therefore useless to reconstitute an inexistent group and locate it in a place (eastern wing – western façade) dictated by both historical and architectural events, and empiric choices³⁸.

To judge the pertinence of these considerations is the *saṅgha* and the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust's relevancy.

Thanks to: Dr Mahes Raj Pant, Dr Rohit K. Ranjitkar, Captain Chandra Bahadur Shakyā and Raj Bhai Shakyā

³⁸ Contrarily to the proposed restoration plan (Fig.32d)).

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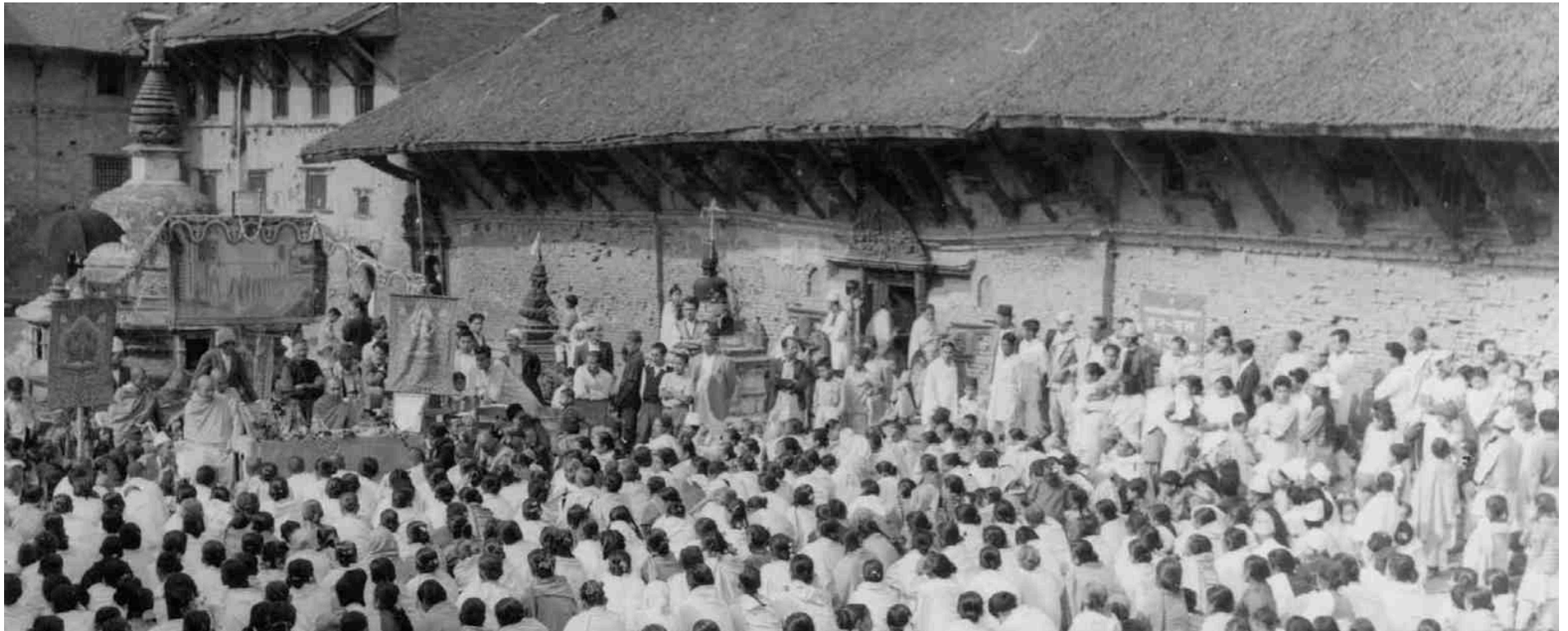


Fig.1: International Buddhist Conference held in front of Itum Bāhā, before 1934. ©KVPT.





Left page, from left to right:

Fig.2: Pratisarā (1)

Fig.3: Mahāmāyurī (2)

Fig.4: Akṣobhya (3)

Fig.5: Vajrasattva-Prajña (4)

Left:

Fig.6: Mantranusarinī (5)

Fig.7: Sitavatī (6)

All struts pictures were taken before the restoration of the carvings in 2004. They have been repainted, received new arms, hands and attributes. © KVPT

Above: Fig.8: The shrine of Itum Bāhā, to the west.





Fig.14: View of the eastern wing – eastern façade (northern corner) where the struts 7,8,9,10 and 11 are located.

Left page, from left to right:

Fig.9: Bodhisattva and *mahāsiddha* Kukkuripa (7)

Fig.10: Bodhisattva and *mahāsiddha* Nāgarjunapā (8)

Fig.11: Bodhisattva and *mahāsiddha* Ḍombi (9)

Fig.12: Bodhisattva and *mahāsiddha* Ghaṇṭāpa (10)

Fig.13: Corner strut with a *vīna* player (11)

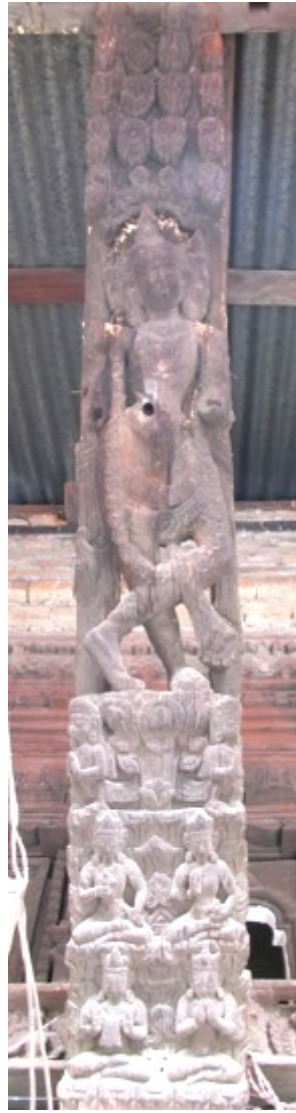




Fig.20: View of the eastern wing – western façade where the struts 12,13,14,15 and 16 are installed.

Left page, from left to right:

Fig.15: Bodhisattva and *mahāsiddha* Indrabhūti (12)

Fig.16: Bodhisattva and *mahāsiddha* Samādhīpā (13)

Fig.17: Amoghasiddhi Jina (14)

Fig.18: Bodhisattva and *mahāsiddha* Rohinīpā (15)

Fig.19: Akṣobhya Jina (16)





Fig.24: The compound's entryway (eastern wing – eastern façade), where the three *śalabhañjikās* were located between the 1960's and 1972.

Left page, from left to right (Photos: Slusser, 2010):

Fig.21: *Śalabhañjikā*. (22). Slusser's strut 1.

Fig.22: *Śalabhañjikā*. (23). Slusser's strut 2.

Fig.23: *Śalabhañjikā*. The *yakṣa* basis remains somewhere in the quadrangle (24) and was radiocarbon dated 770-970. Slusser's strut 3.



Left page, from left to right:

Fig.25: Recent corner strut representing a *mala* (dragon) (17).

Fig.26: Supposed Grahamāṭṛkā and an unidentified *mahāsiddha*, dated 1718 AD (18).

Fig.27: Supposed Aksobhya and an added basis with two characters (19).

Fig.28: Restored corner strut representing a *mala* and a *yakṣa*. 18th-19th century (20).

Fig.29: Recent corner strut with a *mala* and a *yakṣa* (21).

Fig.30: The southern wing, containing the struts 17,18,19,20 and 21.

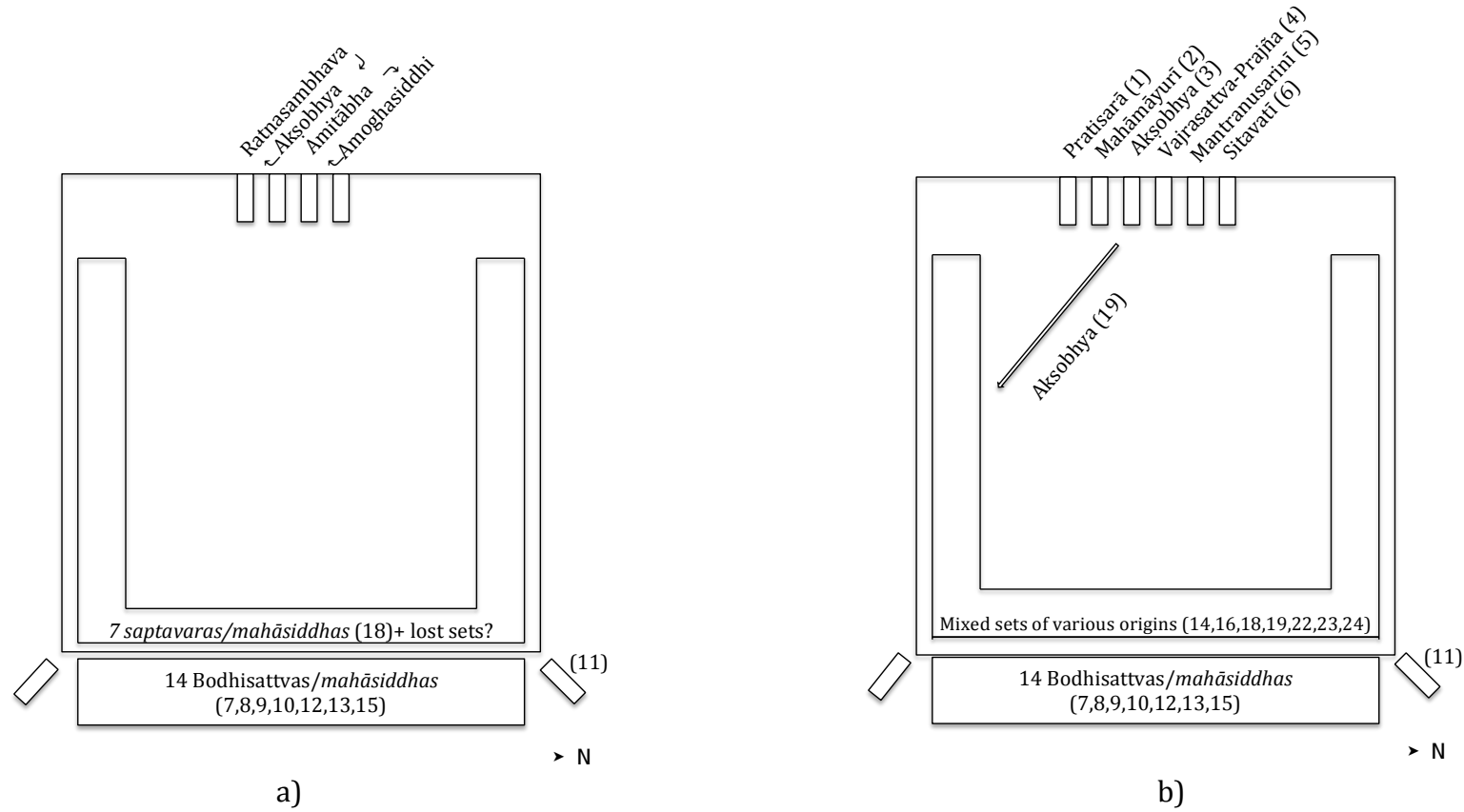
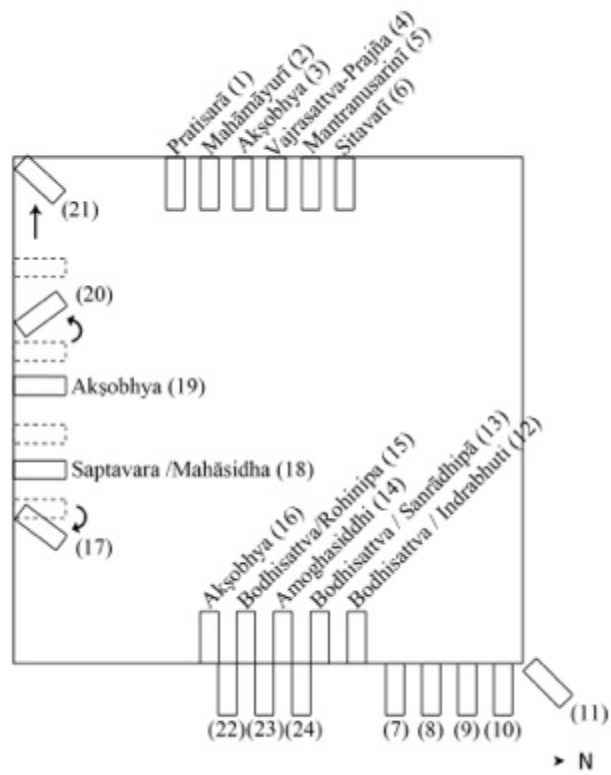
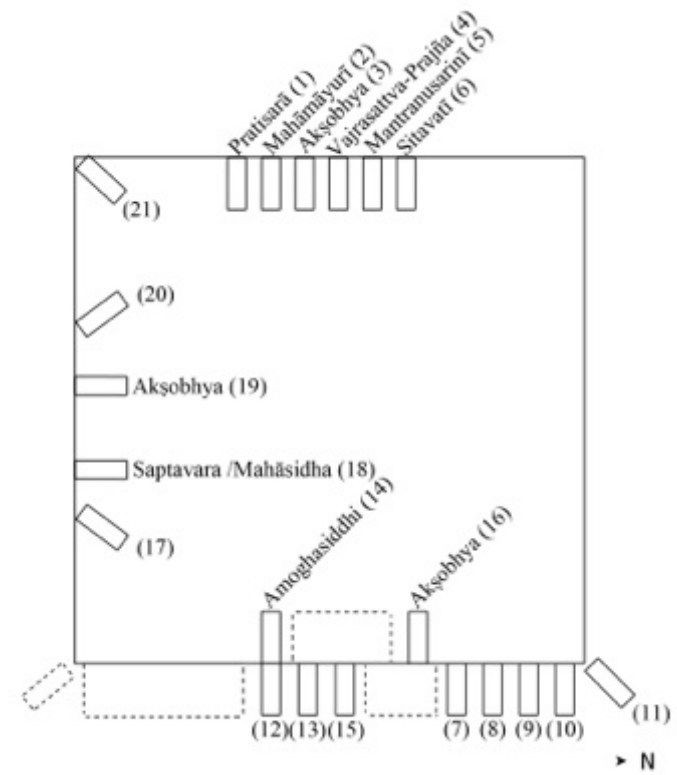


Fig.32: Hypothetic restitutions of Itum Bāhā struts's settings: a) between 1717 and 1861 AD, b) between 1861 and 1934 AD, c) from 1934 to present days, d) proposition of new setting. The blank quadrangles in Fig.32d) indicate spaces where carved or plain struts may be installed, depending on the *saṅgha*'s choice.



c)



d)