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Excerpts from *Borobudur*

Louis Frederic

Introduction

The following excerpts from Louis Frederic's book on Borobudur present a series of interpretations of this enigmatic Buddhist monument, from both a historically grounded understanding of the religious and political context of ninth-century Indonesia, and a more ahistorical spiritual and formal perspective. As Frederic guides the reader through the monument, he explores the experiences of the patron, the pilgrim, and the contemporary scholar. Thus, rather than proposing a single interpretation of Borobudur, he offers the reader a spectrum of options for reading the structure, as a temple, stupa (burial mound), mandala or *yantra* (both types of cosmic diagrams), labyrinth, or numerological diagram.

The Shailendra Dynasty (eighth to thirteenth centuries) ruled over much of what is now Indonesia, centering their empire on the island of Java, but extending to Kalimantan to the north, Sulawesi to the northeast, and Sumatra to the northwest. Scholars debate the precise dates of Borobudur, but for the most part agree that a series of Shailendra kings of the eighth century patronized the structure and brought it to completion in the late eighth or early ninth century. Because no inscriptions on the monument detail its patronage, this too remains unclear. Several of the kings recorded in inscriptions on other monuments from the period carry Hindu names, further raising questions of religious identity and patronage for present-day viewers.

As Frederic points out, however, this period of Javanese history saw a great deal of syncretic activity, bringing Brahmanical (Hindu) religious practices together with Buddhism. On the island of Java at this time, Shailendra kings patronized other *chandis*, or temples, to Hindu gods, and as Frederic argues, aligned the Buddhist monument of Borobudur in relation to both a major Hindu temple nearby and

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another important site for the local, indigenous religion. Thus, these monuments fulfill the royal duty to support the spiritual life of the kingdom in all its forms.

Despite our lack of certainty about what Borobudur *is*, Frederic presents us with a wealth of reasons for looking closely at this monument. The structure purposively guides its visitors through a series of escalating galleries, focusing the pilgrim's attention on the many relief sculptures along the passageways. Its sculptural and architectural program suggests a complex planning process, from the precise number of Buddhas seen on the pilgrim's path to the relationship with the larger geography of the site. Like Angkor Wat and other major sites, Borobudur guides the visitor through a series of spiritual realms while clearly embodying a symbiosis of political and religious power.

Building Borobudur

Borobudur is shaped like a somewhat flattened, stepped pyramid, with straight sides that incorporate uneven projections. The whole complex serves as a plinth for an immense stupa with a three-tiered base. Its design was inspired in part by certain Indian stupas, and also by Indonesian traditions, but whatever its origin, in its definitive state Borobudur was probably conceived as the roof of an invisible shrine, represented by the hill itself, a symbol for the Mount Meru of Hindu and Buddhist tradition. The structure resembles, on an infinitely grander scale, the roofs of certain nearby temples, namely Chandi Pawon and Chandi Mendut, whose characteristics are present in Borobudur: the rising stories of diminishing size, the terminal stupa surrounded by subsidiary ones, and the whole covering the true shrine – the hill itself – a symbol of both Mount Meru and the Shailendra dynasty, whose rulers were known as the “Lords of the Mountain.” This title, which identifies royalty with mountains, was also used in India and Funan (ancient Cambodia), where it was later revived by the Khmer rulers. It is likely that Borobudur was built on a site where people had worshiped since the earliest times, to be a Buddhist counterpart to Mount Tidar, the Nail of Java.

It is possible that Borobudur was built on a hill facing Tidar (from whose heights it is readily visible) to proclaim the newly adopted Buddhist faith of the Shailendra rulers. When the ancient Hindu complex at Dieng was abandoned in favor of the one at Prambanan, where Chandi Kalasan was built in 778, the hill at Borobudur might have been chosen for the monument because it was thought to exist in a magical relationship with these other sacred sites.

The Initiate's Journey

On entering the east gate and starting his ascent, the pilgrim undergoes a number of symbolic transformations, depending on his spiritual state and his beliefs. The

ascent itself represents a being's rise through the many stages of existence, with the experience extending over one and a half miles (2,500 m) of narrative reliefs. The tales of the Buddha's earlier lives (*jatakas*) line the way, reminding the pilgrim that every being is fated to repeat the cycle of death and rebirth many times before his final release.

The Double Structure of Borobudur

A pilgrim traveling between Chandi Mendut and Borobudur would have found himself crossing wooded terrain, and he must have been astonished when he arrived at the foot of the monument. Even today it is practically impossible to photograph the monument from far enough away to capture its profile undistorted. Either one is too close and cannot see the whole, or one moves back to find oneself suddenly at the bottom of the hill with the profile hidden. Trees also obscure it from view. To get an idea of the monument as it appears viewed from a distance, as one would with any European monument, is impossible. We can therefore reasonably infer that the total effect, an aesthetic consideration we are quite accustomed to having from our own monuments, played little or no part in the design of Borobudur. On the contrary, it would seem that every effort had been made to keep the pilgrim from seeing the round terraces and the terminal stupa. Consequently, the internal structure of Borobudur remains invisible from the outside.

As Paul Mus has pointed out, the better part of what forms the religious aspects of Borobudur remains invisible from the outside. Hidden behind its facade, the sacred aspects of the monument are obscured from view. Thus there exist two Borobudurs, one that is exoteric or external, and another that is esoteric or hidden and initiatory, to which the visitor can only gain access from within the galleries.

From the outside, the infinitude of buddhas in their countless niches evoke the idea, in the end, of one and the same Buddha. Why, when the original base was encased, were the reliefs on it not reproduced elsewhere? Paul Mus suggests they remained hidden "because they were part of the microcosm that initiates reserved for themselves as a *yantra*, sheltered from all eyes. . . . The apparent Borobudur conceals a secret world under its covering of stone, and that secret world was now complete."¹

When the pilgrim enters the first gateway and starts to walk through the galleries, illustrated with scenes from the life of the Buddha and other didactic tales, high balustrades separate him from the external world. He is cut off from both the surrounding countryside and the summit of the monument. His attention is entirely drawn toward the narrative reliefs. "Each story," writes Paul Mus, "must have been assigned to a separate level of initiation."² The disposal of the

four galleries, each separate from the others, would have reinforced the hierarchy of knowledge. "In Ceylon as in Java, the floors or *bhumis* (grounds) of the sacred sites correspond one to one with the 'grounds' or levels of transcendence."³ Mus further writes: "It was undoubtedly the general rule that the initiate would rise from terrace to terrace as he progressed in religious instruction. . . . Borobudur does not offer its center freely to the worshiper, it is surrounded with a succession of obstacles. Each of these marks a particular world and a particular degree of ecstasy."⁴

It is at this stage that the "magical" function of the monument becomes apparent, the monument being a place where meditation is reinforced by an array of symbolic teachings and hence becomes initiation. Today's visitor, even if prepared and genuinely affected by the sacred aspect of the monument, can have no conception of what a Buddhist pilgrim or monk would have seen on approaching or ascending Borobudur in the year 800. "The monument only assumes its full meaning if we restore to the sacred hill its population of monks, the minute preparation and ordering of whose movements by the sole arrangement of the site undoubtedly played an integral part in the architect's plans."⁵

As soon as the visitor reaches the three upper terraces, his view opens out onto the entire surrounding countryside. After the confinement of the galleries, the cosmic universe is revealed to him along with the imposing mass of the final stupa. All around him, seventy-two small stupas partially conceal from sight as many buddhas, visible only by peering through the square or diamond-shaped openings. This makes it easier to understand the term *budur* and those related to it, which, according to Mus, do not mean "to stand, to rise up" but rather "to be partially visible."⁶ Once arrived at the third level (the round terraces), the pilgrim is in some sense freed of the attachments that are inherent to the world of forms. Doubtless he still understands the world conceptually, the all being more accessible to him for his having found inner freedom. And, according to a saying in the *Dharmapada*, "He who considers the world a bubble, a mirage, becomes invisible to the King of Death." The rounded surfaces in fact represent the celestial vault, extension, just as the circle is an extension of the point. It indicates at one and the same time the center and the immaterial nature of all things, insofar as the visible is only the apparent structure and form of the invisible.

The Three Levels of Reality

The pilgrim who makes the spiritual ascent of Borobudur is invited to explore symbolically the different levels of being and to attain by his ascent the ultimate vision, which, like the topmost point of the stupa crowning the edifice, is beyond both words and concepts.

The symbolism, generally accepted by the experts, provides for three levels to the monument, namely, the realm of desire (*kamadhatu*), the realm of form (*rupadhatu*), and the realm of formlessness (*arupadhatu*), in conformity with Buddhist tradition but also with the models used in contemporary physics to understand the universe.

The first level, *kamadhatu*, represents the world of the senses – the desires and the passions. It is therefore the plane of the ego. Its world is linear, which is to say dualistic, ruled by cause and effect. Man is consequently the victim of his own desires as long as he fails to see the essence of reality and judges it on the sole evidence of his senses.

This world of desire, which is the world of ordinary men, is represented on the original base of the monument and hidden by the added plinth; it is therefore

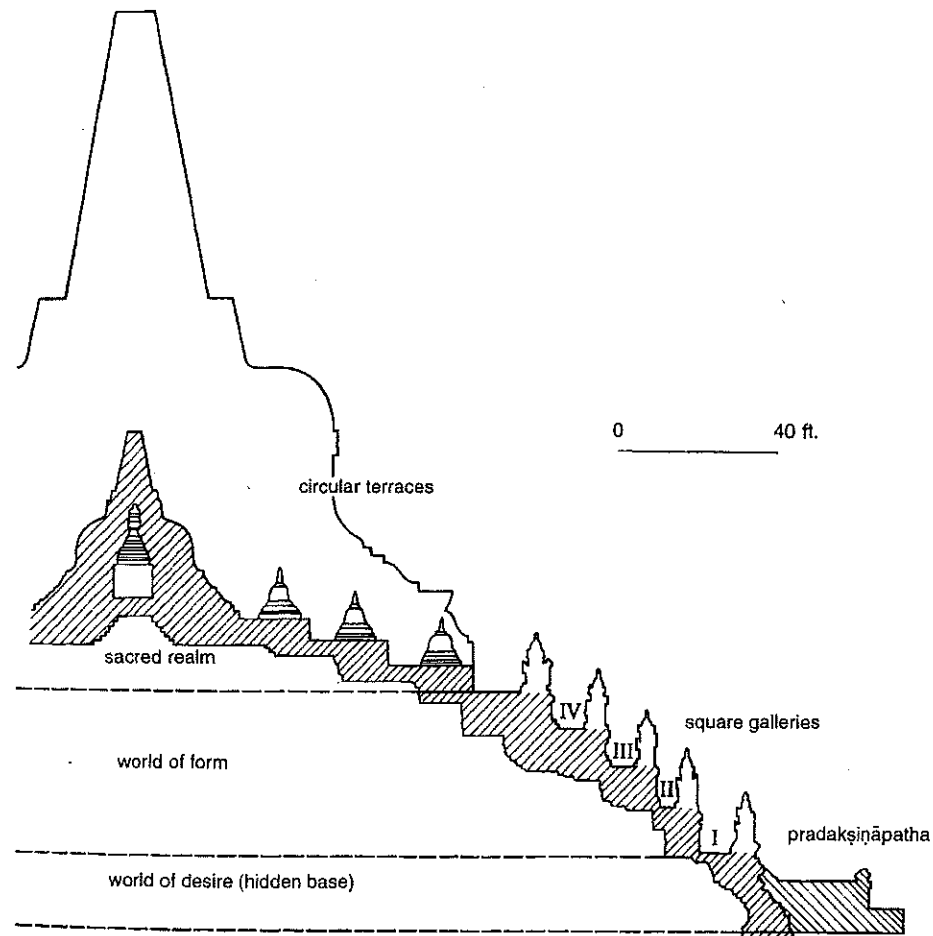


Fig. 6-1 Elevation, Borobudur, Java, ninth century. Shaded area indicates extant monument; outline marks conjectural planned monument.

invisible to those making the pilgrimage to Borobudur, who may well be expected to have gone beyond notions of good and evil. The scenes depicted in the reliefs of the hidden base do in fact illustrate karmic law, or the law of cause and effect, showing how bad actions and good necessarily have their respective consequences. As a whole, the reliefs show the endless and repetitive cycle of birth and death, of expiatory punishment for actions considered bad and fortunate rebirth for those considered just.

The law of karma continues to hold as long as a man remains bound to his desires (causes), which inevitably produce effects (either pleasures or torments). This is the Buddhist concept of *samsara*, the wheel of existence where illusory beings are reborn and die, and from which one must free oneself. The initial action is generally presented on the right side of the panel, and its consequence (good or bad) on the left, as the reliefs were to be read in the direction of the *pradakshina* or ritual circumambulation. Men who are shown tossing fish and turtles into a cauldron to boil will in turn find themselves roasting on the fires of hell – this is the law of correspondence at work. A matricidal man is plunged headfirst into the flames of perdition. A person who refuses to give alms sinks into poverty. These different examples also illustrate the law of compensation, whereby each thing calls into being its opposite effect. An early death is the result of a life in which the person was a criminal, a hunter, or in some way accessory to a crime, and might be represented in the narrative reliefs by a child's illness or death, an abortion, or a view of a cemetery. Other reliefs show an aristocrat being reborn into the low caste of a fisherman.

Although the sculptors modeled the scenes on daily life in Java, the examples they chose to illustrate are inspired by the *Karmavibhanga*, a popular Buddhist text describing the stages of deliverance from the bonds of karma. They are therefore illustrations of the law of cause and effect (karma). According to Hindu-Buddhist thought, each is responsible for his or her own salvation. No god, either wrathful or compassionate, exists to punish or reward the acts of men; the faithful are simply warned against actions that Buddhist philosophy considers bad. Good and evil assume a binary structure when put in opposition, but the dualistic world perceived by men is in itself an absurd, illusory, and unreal conception of what is. Those unable to grasp this truth are doomed to the realm of oppositions and to run counter to the laws of nature and wisdom. They will be subject to the law of retribution, which will condition their future lives.

The text of the *Karmavibhanga* exists in different versions: in Pali, Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese, and even Kuchean. Of different lengths, the texts consist of concrete examples, augmented by moral and philosophical reflections that are ill-suited to pictorial representation. Only the scenes that illustrate the working of the law of cause and effect, or individual karma, are represented at Borobudur. The sculptors seem to have used the *Karmavibhanga* to describe humorously and with great accuracy a multitude of actions from daily life that Buddhist morality judges to be either good or bad. Domestic life is represented, as are street scenes, festivals, and merry-making.

Many actions are illustrated that, though not necessarily catastrophic in effect, result in rebirth at a lower level, usually in one of the lower castes. It is certain that the sculptors went beyond the strict description of cause and effect that appears in the *Karmavibhanga* and gave free rein to their imaginations, thus sparing the reliefs from monotonous repetition. But a panel-by-panel description of the narratives would be tedious and of little interest to any except specialists. These pictures of people and animals primarily interest us as an ensemble.

The hidden base was discovered in 1885 by the Dutch architect J. W. IJzerman. Wanting to shore up the first balustrade, he moved some of the stones of the processional plinth and found, to his surprise, that the original base was decorated with a series of rectangular reliefs. This so-called hidden base is provided with 160 narrative panels, some of them unfinished, others still bearing inscriptions in Kawi script that allows the whole to be dated approximately to the year 800. IJzerman cleared away the encasing stones from the reliefs, had them photographed, then carefully replaced the entire 12,500 cubic meters of material that form the massive plinth.

During the restoration of Borobudur from 1975 to 1982, the question arose whether the added terrace might not be entirely removed, or, failing that, whether a space might not be provided between it and the original base to allow the reliefs to be viewed. The decision was made, however, to leave the monument as it was in order to preserve it in its finished state; an added consideration was the financial burden such a project would have created. Finally, it seemed the stability of the whole structure would be better served – despite what some architects advised – by retaining the buttress in place. Today, that base is visible at only one corner, where the stones have been cleared to expose five of the long-hidden panels.

The second level, or *rupadhatu*, represents the world of form, the multiple self. It is a striking fact that the initiatory path of the pilgrim at Borobudur centers on this level in particular, comprising as it does four stories of galleries with thousands of reliefs illustrating the essential tenets of Buddhist philosophy. While this long pilgrimage is carried out under the open sky, one is isolated from the exterior world by high balustrades, which cut off one's view of the surrounding countryside, as well as the galleries above and below, and encourage the mind to concentrate on the deep significance of the scenes pictured. The slow, somewhat spiraling progress of the pilgrim represents the ascent through the world of form, that is, through the multiple stages of his consciousness. While the first level, or *kamadhatu*, represents the directly perceptible world, the second associates the multiplicity of representations and the continuous aspect of the voyage with the discontinuity of forms. No longer is the experience localized on a single plane, but on a succession of planes where the relation of the one to the many is constantly internalized. Today one might associate the second level, or *rupadhatu*, with the quantum aspect of reality, whereby it is impossible to locate absolutely both the position and momentum of an object in space. Localization is never more than a mental construct. In other words, the self is not linked to

continuous time, but to the discontinuous or oscillating time of consciousness and its modes of representation. At Borobudur, as in all religious traditions, the voyage is a symbol for consciousness discovering itself amid the multiplicity of images relating to the various states of being.

The gods of meditation, spiritual projections of the immanent Buddha, reside in the realm of appearance and form, *rupadhatu*, and in the realm of formlessness; being universal, they are assigned to the points of the compass and are represented by the *jinas* on the balustrades of the galleries.

The gods who have freed themselves of all desire but who may still appear before men in various forms live in the upper realm of form. They are divided among four levels according to their degree of meditation and psychic state, with each level comprising several stations. It is these four stages that allow one to identify the four galleries of Borobudur with the realm of form.

The third level, *arupadhatu*, consists of the three concentric circles around which sit the seventy-two buddhas under their perforated stupas. The buddhas here are practically invisible from the outside. They can only be seen through the diamond-shaped or square openings into the stupa. Unlike the buddhas that preside over the five preceding levels and face toward the outside, the seventy-two buddhas of the circular terraces are symbols of the secret inner world, that is, a world stripped of form, at once present and hidden. These buddhas suggest formlessness. The third level therefore represents the state where being and nonbeing become one. It is the highest vision a being in this world can attain. Above is the great mass of the enormous central stupa, rising to the final point, symbolic of being, of the conjunction of the visible and the invisible: the absolute. At this high point there exists no concept or word to express reality. It is the Buddhist image of a being that has been perfectly liberated into a realm of namelessness and formlessness, to become that which *is*.

In the downward direction, by contrast, the whole of Borobudur reveals the world of manifestations, for the stupa is also the germ of all creation. The stupa's vanishing point is both its being (our present infinity) and the beingness of all creation, which constantly engenders the infinity of all creation in every dimension of space and time.

This identification of Borobudur with the three Buddhist worlds would be more justifiable if those who built the monument had not changed doctrine during its construction. Since the original base, corresponding to the sphere of desire (*kamadhatu*), was obliterated, it can no longer be thought of as part of the symbolic nature of the monument; it was intended by its builders to be seen by pilgrims and the faithful. Thus one should not include the "hidden" base in discussions of the general symbolism of Borobudur.

It would be more plausible to disregard that base and consider the four square galleries as representing the realm of desire; the three round terraces as the realm of form; and the terminal stupa as the realm of formlessness. One can only account for the presence of the *jinas* in the realm of desire if one considers them as existing above it, serving as guides to those who find themselves in that realm.

One could alternatively consider that the "levels" of Borobudur symbolize the four states of meditation that lead progressively toward *nirvana*, the state of perfect bliss without desires or conscious thought, bringing to an end the cycle of rebirth and, as a result, all suffering. The first level would be the discrimination (*viveka*) between the good and the evil, and the exclusion of all that is considered evil. In the second level of meditation, there is the stilling of spiritual activities, or pure joy. The third consists of the suppression of the notion of happiness, and the achievement of full consciousness and bliss without active thought. The fourth and ultimate level is the achievement of total purity, imperturbability, and awareness of mind.

Mandala, Yantra, and Labyrinth

Even the theoretical form of Borobudur, its ground plan, immediately brings to mind a *mandala*, a diagram representing the cosmic organization of the deities, and their forces, in the Buddhist pantheon. It has the *mandala's* square exterior and inner circular organization. The center of the Hindu diagram is reserved for Mount Meru, as the axis of the world, and is therefore identified with the immaterial body of the divinity. On the slopes of Mount Meru are the stages representing the levels of the various gods; beyond it are the continents and the seas. From the center of this diagram of the universe, the world expands outward like the petals of a lotus flower opening. In some Buddhist *mandalas*, it is of course Vairochana Buddha (representing *dharma*, or Buddhist law) that stands at the center. All around him on the petals of the central open lotus are arrayed the *jinās* with their corresponding bodhisattvas among them. But Borobudur's resemblance to a *mandala* ends there. For if one can identify the terminal stupa with the highest expression of the idea of Buddhism, the central point without real existence from where all things come, one cannot explain the cosmic function of the buddhas in the perforated stupas on the three round terraces, nor the presence of the *jinās* in the square galleries. Even less can one explain the set of reliefs that ornament the galleries. It would be more tempting instead to see Borobudur as a gigantic *yantra*, or instrument of meditation and self-perfection for those seeking awakening. The pilgrim on his initiatory journey to Borobudur, having paid homage to the Buddha and his law by performing the ritual circumambulation (*pradakshina*), penetrates "into" the monument as into a shrine (here, the square terraces may be compared to the stories of a *prasada*). After crossing the first entry – the east one, on the side where the sun is born – the pilgrim proceeds through the galleries in an ascending spiral, passing from one story to the next through a gateway that symbolizes his death and subsequent rebirth on a higher plane; he sees on his right the relief carvings that unfold for him the life of the historical Buddha, his earlier lives and those of his close followers, and the odyssey of young Prince Sudhana in search of enlightenment,

until, moved by example, the pilgrim too receives the spirit of *bodhi* and perfect knowledge, by the grace of the bodhisattva Samantabhadra. Having become bodhisattva himself, the pilgrim arrives at the round terraces where the material world and the world of ideation disappear little by little to be replaced by principle, represented by the great stupa. Afterward he descends in a downward spiral, still keeping the center of the monument on his right, this time observing the reliefs on the balustrade and passing a second time through the gateways, gradually to return to the world below. He will complete his pilgrimage with a further ritual circumambulation.

In so doing, he will have pronounced his mantra (the word or syllable given to him by his guru or spiritual teacher to invoke the deity) 1,008 times, once before each statue of a Buddha. Having traveled the entire labyrinth, in the process perhaps becoming an enlightened being himself, he will have directly experienced a spiritual ascent comprising a "progressive concentration of the many into one: the self reintegrated into the all, and the all reintegrated into the self, thus passing in his spiritual journey from the diversity of creation and ideas to the One, and subsequently returning to earth from the One to diversity."⁷ Borobudur therefore can be identified with the labyrinth and its related symbolism – the pilgrim must after all pass through its galleries to reach the end of his journey of initiation and find the hidden meaning at its center. The monument is from top to bottom a symbol, at times not easy to understand, of the way to follow, which leads at last to the infinite, summed up in a nonexistent central point, the image of emptiness in Mahayana Buddhism, *shunyata*. As in a labyrinth, such as that of the cathedrals of Chartres or Amiens, the pilgrim who passes to every level of the monument and crosses every threshold, symbolizing the passage to a higher state, must follow a complicated itinerary, passing through each gallery twice, but each time in a different direction. This is why reliefs cover both walls of the galleries. The very center of the labyrinth (in this case the three round terraces) is reserved for the initiate who has completed the passage through all the galleries and undergone all the trials of initiation before at last receiving knowledge, through which the formless is revealed to him. The round trip into the labyrinth and back symbolizes the pilgrim's spiritual death and rebirth, beyond which he must venture to reach the interior sanctuary hidden in the depths of the unconscious. A person then rediscovers the unity of the self, dispersed by the multiplicity of perceptions and desires. The pilgrim's voyage thus marks, according to Marcel Brion, "the victory of the spiritual over the material and, at the same time, of the eternal over the perishable, of intelligence over instinct, and knowledge over blind violence."⁸

Thus Borobudur is at the same time a *mandala*, a *yantra*, and a labyrinth. It gives the highest aspirations of the human soul a concrete form in stone, providing simultaneously their illustration, their experience, and their demonstration. It is the heavenly Jerusalem, saying, "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end."⁹

The symbol is the same, the heavenly Jerusalem being square in outline while paradise is circular: the union of the two makes up the universe, heaven on earth and earth in heaven.

The Number Symbolism

The harmony and coherence of Borobudur become evident through its proportions. But one of its most fascinating aspects only becomes apparent when one studies its numerical correspondences, which reveal an underlying coherence and harmony, calculated and symbolic in all its parts. This supports the belief in a strong initial plan, rigorously carried out.

In its present form, Borobudur has five square platforms (those of the four galleries and another supporting the round terraces). The processional plinth cannot be counted in this number, as it serves only as part of the ritual *pradakshina*. If we add the three round terraces to the five square platforms, we arrive at a total of eight, the most sacred of all numbers, symbolic of infinity.

On the three circular terraces we find three series of 32, 24, and 16 perforated stupas – all multiples of 8. This gives us a simple arithmetic progression: 4 ($4 \times 8 = 32$), 3 ($3 \times 8 = 24$), 2 ($2 \times 8 = 16$), and finally 1, for the central stupa. As to the 1,472 ornamental *stupikas* (368 on each side of the monument), they also represent multiples of 8. The number 8 is a symbol of infinity and limitlessness. While infinity is comparable to eternity, the latter in some sense resolves into itself and exists in space-time, a present infinity.

The *jinās* are arrayed in five zones corresponding to the total number of balustrades surmounting the four square galleries and bordering the final platform. They number 108 on each side of the monument: 92 *jinās* associated with the cardinal points (26 on each of the first two balustrades, 22 on the third, 18 on the fourth), and 16 Samantabhadras.

The number 108 is sacred throughout Indian civilization, as it symbolizes victory (*jaya*) according to Indian numerology: the syllable *ja* has a value of 1, and the syllable *ya* a value of 8. The number 0 is not counted. The 108 buddhas on each side of Borobudur are a reminder that *dharma* or Buddhist law is everywhere victorious, and the *jinās* are also “conquerors” (of their passions and desires). The total number of buddhas on the five balustrades, counting all four sides of the monument, is therefore $4 \times 108 = 432$. But the pilgrim who has completed his initiatory journey and reached the highest point must add the 72 buddhas from the perforated stupas on the round terraces to this number. The total number of statues of the Buddha, therefore, stands at 504. This number would mean nothing in itself, but the pilgrim cannot be expected to stay at the top of Borobudur. He must continue his journey by returning down through the round terraces and the square galleries, always keeping the center of the

monument on his right hand. He completes his spiral course in this way and passes before each of the 504 buddhas a second time. He will therefore have paid homage to them 1,008 times. This number is also symbolic of his own victory over his desires and passions. Before each statue of the Buddha, he will likely have recited a sacred invocation, the mantra, which he will have repeated 1,008 times – just as in India the name of each deity is to be repeated 1,008 times, and there are said to be 1,008 (*ashtottasahasranamastotra*) of them, or by going twice through one's rosary, which consists of 54 beads.

Let us also note that the number 108 constantly recurs in Hindu numerology. For instance, the *Brahmanas* tell us that the *Rig Veda* consists of 10,800 *panktis* (a metric form consisting of five octosyllabic elements or lines).¹⁰ The 432 *jinās* of the balustrades also correspond to the 432,000 *panktis* of the *Rig Veda*. Analogies could be multiplied endlessly, and they are far from coincidental, as Brahmanic tradition makes great use of numbers.

These calculations have been criticized for not accounting for a central buddha, supposed by some authors to have been hidden in the terminal stupa. But it can be argued here that there is no need to count this hypothetical and invisible buddha. Even if we agree that the terminal stupa at Borobudur in fact contained a statue of a buddha (but which one?), the pilgrim could not take it into account, as it was completely invisible. Further, in the 54 beads of Hindu and Buddhist rosaries, the central bead (*shikhamani*, *mukha*, or *bindu*, meaning “point”) is never counted. One may not go beyond it, and must retrace one's tracks, just as when visiting the monument; in so doing one counts 108 “pearls” on the rosary.

Further, an ancient Hindu ritual notes that the central bead is also known as Meru, “evoking as it does the cosmic mountain, or *axis mundi*, and marking the end of each counting of the rosary, of which it is both the end point and the center. The recital of the rosary reaches the central bead and halts there temporarily, unable to ‘cross over’ it, Meru being the place of dwelling of the lord himself, the unsullied omniscient one.”¹¹

The number 8 crops up everywhere at Borobudur. Representing as it does multiplicity, it is also the symbol of cosmic equilibrium. This explains why the *harmikas* atop the perforated stupas of the highest round terrace are octagonal, while those of all the other stupas are square. It is also for this reason that the central masts rising from the *harmikas*, and which represent transcendental unity, are also octagonal in section. Similarly, the primordial lotus has eight petals, and the lotus flowers at the foot of the stupas have a number of petals that is a multiple of eight. The number 8, symbolic of equilibrium and justice, appears in the theories of Pythagoras and the Gnostics, and in most other world religions as well. Eight is also the symbol of a new era, and a new person, who has managed to transcend his own nature and so regained his fundamental unity with all existence. For 8 reduces to 1: here also one finds the concept of diversity (8) in unity (1). When paired with the latter, it becomes the celestial number: $8 + 1 = 9$, a number that subsumes all numbers and which, in mathematics, is equivalent to zero. This is *shunyata* or emptiness itself. The 72 (9×8) perforated stupas of the round terraces represent

the union of man, symbolized by 7, which joins the earth (4), the sky (3), and diversity (8). The one reality (1) is in the center; it is the terminal stupa. The whole therefore represents $8 + 1 = 9$, which is to say the all, emptiness.

Tantric Buddhism, like most esoteric traditions, gives great weight to number symbolism. One can therefore imagine the builders of Borobudur conceiving of their work as a sort of colossal rosary; the pilgrim gained merit by journeying through, thus improving his individual karma, or the "rosary" at least might serve as the subject of his meditations.¹²

Exploring the Hindu-Balinese religion, one finds that tantric cults related to the techniques of *kundalini* yoga play a large part in it: Shiva becomes the synthesis of the three major elements represented by the sacred syllable "OM." As R. Goris explains it, "The ten-syllable mantra (expressing the all, $3 \times 3 = 9 = 1$, or zero) disappears in the five-syllable mantra invoking Shiva, then into the three-syllable one (A-U-M) to finally dissolve into nonbeing."¹³ Which brings us back ineluctably to the Buddhist concept of *shunyata*, unity in emptiness. This is what the Balinese and Javanese call even to this day *sang hyang widi*, a term expressing the very essence of divinity that goes beyond (or contains) all diversity, and in consequence "plays the role of guardian of the cosmic and moral order."¹⁴

Borobudur without question offers a model of knowledge that calls for severing the ties of this world. Man is a lion: an old Chinese saying holds that every hair of the lion is also a lion. Put differently, the part reflects the whole. For those who possess knowledge, then, there can be no difference between the part and the whole. This image of the lion, which one finds at Borobudur on the stairway walls, acts as a protector but also functions as a symbol. Representative of power and the penetrating force of light, the lion is also the embodiment of the verb, that is, of the original sound that engendered all creation. Just as the lion is the emblem of Shakyamuni Buddha – is he not called the "Lion of the Shakyas?" – it is at the same time the supporter of Vairocana, the ineffable Buddha of spiritual light. The roar of the lion is likened to the word of the law, *dharma*. In the *Mahavairocana sutra*, the ultimate sound is represented by the letter A. The terminal stupa at Borobudur – like the heart of the central lotus in a *mandala* – can be identified with the pure heart of *bodhi*, created by the short vowel sound "a." From the spiritual point of view, a person who has disposed over his own body all the syllables or sounds that follow from the sound "a" transforms his body into a sphere of light, and all his latent virtues blossom and become reality. The sound-symbol AM, defined as the "mantra of the universal shining forth of the hundred splendors," produces the hundred syllables that are all developments of the primordial sound "a," for if A is the cause, M is the effect. And these hundred syllables of esoteric Buddhism consequently symbolize the effect, which is the realization of buddhahood. Might not these "hundred syllables" correspond at Borobudur to the hundred waterspouts that pour forth rainwater through the *makara* jaws, just as the mouth of man sends forth engendering sounds?

Are we to see in the *makaras* a simple play of forms? Or is it not rather a way of defining living beings, various as the sounds that created them, as they appear in all the traditional architectures of Asia, as well as medieval Europe and Byzantium? Monsters, whether *makaras* (crocodilian creatures) or *kalas* (monsters with human heads and no lower jaw) are above all mythical beasts that symbolize the instinct toward creation and, therefore, of diversity and plurality.

Notes

- 1 Paul Mus, *Barabudur* (1935; reprint, Paris: Arma Artis, 1990), p. 367.
- 2 Ibid., p. 357.
- 3 Ibid., p. 362.
- 4 Ibid., p. 363.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid., p. 367.
- 7 J. Filliozat, *L'Inde classique: Manuel des études indiennes* (Paris: Payot, 1954), vol. 2, section 2302.
- 8 Marcel Brion, *Léonard de Vinci* (Paris, 1952), p. 202.
- 9 Revelations 12:1-16.
- 10 Mario Piantelli, Preface to *Borobudur: Mandala de pierre*, by L. Saccà (Milan: Archè, 1983), p. 11.
- 11 André Padoux, "Un rituel hindou du rosaire, Jayākaṣaṃhita," *Journal Asiatique* 275, nos 1-2 (1987): 118, 126.
- 12 Mus, *Barabudur*, p. 684.
- 13 R. Goris, *Bijdrage tot de Kennis der Oud-Javanische en Balineesche Theologie* (Leiden, 1926), p. 123.
- 14 J. L. Swellengrebel, *Bali: Studies in Life, Thought and Ritual* (The Hague, 1960), p. 52.