

Comparing the *Parinirvāṇa* Scene in Buddhist Murals of Myanmar

မြန်မာနိုင်ငံရှိ ဗုဒ္ဓဝင်နံရံဆေးရေးပန်းချီများမှ ပရိနိဗ္ဗာန်စံခန်းကို နှိုင်းယှဉ်ခြင်း

Dr. Aye Aye Oo
Archaeology Department, Dagon University

ayeayeeoo2009@gmail.com

Received January 14, 2020
Accepted February 27, 2020
Published July 22, 2020

DOI:
<http://dx.doi.org/10.26721/spafajournal.v4i0.626>

Copyright:
©2020 SEAMEO SPAFA and author.
This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons 4.0 Attribution Non Commercial-No Derivatives License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0), which permits copying, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Abstract

From the beginning of the Bagan period (11th century CE), Buddha's *Parinirvāṇa* Scene has been depicted on wall paintings in religious buildings and hollow vaulted temples at various places of middle Myanmar. It is found that wall paintings based on the Maha Parinirvāṇa Sutta vary in layout and size from period to period with Buddhist literature: just as single-scenes and small or large wall paintings were depicted during the Bagan period so also were depictions of multiple scenes made in the late Konbaung Period. Further additions were introduced in depictions of Buddha's *Parinirvāṇa* in the late Bagan Period. When studying the Buddha's *Parinirvāṇa* scene on wall paintings, the depicting styles and colour changed from period to period. Depending on the colour, the periods can be interpreted definitely. Wall paintings depicting the *Parinirvāṇa* Sutta at temples located in Bagan and middle Myanmar regions are compared among themselves to show differences and similarities. Accounts of the purported events surrounding the Buddha's own *Parinirvāṇa* are found in a wide range of Buddhist countries of South East Asia. This paper concludes that the hypothesis is viable, with comparisons with the wall paintings depicting Buddha's *Parinirvāṇa* Scene in Myanmar and how the style changed and transformed.

မြန်မာနိုင်ငံအလယ်ပိုင်းနေရာအနှံ့အပြားတွင် ပုဂံခေတ်အစောပိုင်းကာလ(၁၁ရာစု)မှစ၍ ဗုဒ္ဓ၏ပရိနိဗ္ဗာန်စံခန်းကို ဘာသာရေးဆိုင်ရာ အဆောက်အဦးအမျိုးမျိုးနှင့် ဂူဘုရားဝတ်ပြုကျောင်းများ၏နံရံများတွင် သရုပ်ဖော်ရေးဆွဲခဲ့ကြသည်။ မဟာပရိနိဗ္ဗာန်သုတ္တံကို အခြေခံသော နံရံဆေးရေးပန်းချီ၏ အခင်းအကျင်း၊ အရွယ်အစားများသည် ခေတ်ကာလအလိုက် ကွဲပြားခြားနားမှုရှိပြီး ပုဂံခေတ်ကာလက ဇာတ်ကွက်တစ်ကွက်ကိုသာ အရွယ်အစားအားဖြင့် ကြီးသည်ဖြစ်စေ၊ ငယ်သည်ဖြစ်စေ နံရံဆေးရေးပန်းချီတွင် သရုပ်ဖော်ရေးဆွဲလေ့ရှိပြီး ကုန်းဘောင်ခေတ်နှောင်းပိုင်းကာလတွင် ဇာတ်ကွက်တစ်ကွက်ထက် ပိုမိုရေးဆွဲလာသည်ကို တွေ့ရှိရပါသည်။ ဗုဒ္ဓ၏ပရိနိဗ္ဗာန်ပြုပုံဇာတ်ကွက်အား သရုပ်ဖော်ရေးဆွဲရာတွင် ပုဂံခေတ်နှောင်းပိုင်းကာလ၌ ထပ်မံထည့်သွင်းမှုများကို ပြုလုပ်လာကြသည်။ နံရံဆေးရေးပန်းချီမှ ဗုဒ္ဓ၏ပရိနိဗ္ဗာန်ဇာတ်ကွက်အားလေ့လာသည့်အခါ

သရုပ်ဖော်ရေးဆွဲမှုပုံစံများနှင့် ဆေးရောင်ခြယ်သမှုများမှာ ခေတ်ကာလအလိုက် ပြောင်းလဲလာကြသည်။ ဆေးရောင်ခြယ်သမှုအပေါ်မူတည်၍ ခေတ်ကာလကို အတိအကျဖော်ပြနိုင်သည်။ ပုဂံနှင့်မြန်မာနိုင်ငံအလယ်ပိုင်းမှ ဘာသာရေးအဆောက်အဦးများနှင့် ဂူဘုရားဝတ်ပြုကျောင်းများတွင်ရှိသော နံရံဆေးရေးပန်းချီများ၌ ပရိနိဗ္ဗာနသုတ္တံအား သရုပ်ဖော်ရေး ဆွဲပုံများအကြား ကွဲပြားခြားနားမှု၊ တူညီမှုတို့အား ပြသနိုင်ရန်နှိုင်းယှဉ်လေ့လာထားပါသည်။ အရှေ့တောင်အာရှမှ ဗုဒ္ဓဘာသာဝင်နိုင်ငံများအကြား ဗုဒ္ဓ၏ပရိနိဗ္ဗာန်စံခန်းနှင့်စပ်လျဉ်းသည့်ဖော်ပြချက်များကို ကျယ်ပြန့်စွာတွေ့ရှိရပေသည်။ ယခုစာတမ်းသည် အရှေ့တောင်အာရှနိုင်ငံများမှ နံရံဆေးရေးပန်းချီများတွင် သရုပ်ဖော်ရေးဆွဲထားသော ပရိနိဗ္ဗာန်စံခန်းနှင့်ထိုင်းနိုင်ငံတို့မှသရုပ်ဖော်ပုံများကို နှိုင်းယှဉ်လေ့လာမှုများ ပြုလုပ်နိုင်သည်ဟူသော အယူအဆကို ကောက်ချက်ချထားပါသည်။

Keywords: Maha Parinirvāṇa Sutta, wall paintings, Bagan, Myanmar | သော့ချက်ဝေါဟာရများ- မဟာပရိနိဗ္ဗာနသုတ္တံ၊ နံရံဆေးရေးပန်းချီ၊ ပုဂံ၊ မြန်မာ

Introduction

Buddhism by Lord Buddha emerged in India around 600 BCE. The Buddhist art of the Bagan period (11th to 13th century CE) was influenced by Indian traditions and Pyu culture, which also drew on Indian and other cultural influences (Than Tun 1969). Archaeologists assumed that monuments of stupas, temples and ordination hall or *sima*, fine arts of sculpture and mural paintings related to the life of Buddha were popular at that time because Pyu people in Sri Ksetra were familiar with the Buddhist culture acquired from India. However, if there were mural paintings in the Pyu period, they might have been lost for a long time due to human and natural agencies. Unlike to those from Pyu ancient cities, numerous amounts of mural paintings illustrating Buddha's life stories in can be observed in the temples, caves and *sima* of the Bagan era (Zaw Gyi 1997).

King Anuradha (1044-1077 CE) embraced and organized Theravāda Buddhism in Bagan and also built pagodas, stupas and temples for the people to revere. During the time of King Kyansittha (1084-1113 CE), mural paintings about the life story of Buddha and Jataka stories were painted on the walls of the temples. According to the documents recorded on the stone inscriptions in Bagan era, it mentioned that the artists who worked for proper mural paintings were well paid for their services (Myo Nyunt 2011). There are some ink glosses below the mural paintings of Buddha life story and 550 Jataka stories on the inner wall of the temples. Obviously, Buddhism was strengthened and pervaded to other places due to these mural paintings in Bagan period (Myo Nyunt 2011: 115).

At that time, Buddhist donors and other contributors used to draw scenes such as Lord Buddha succumbing to *Parinirvāṇa* in the Sala (Inn Gyin) Grove, and Brahma, the *Nat* (celestial beings), Sakka (Indra), all devoted disciples and Mella kings paid their homage and reverence to him. Moreover, they preferred to depict the scene exhibiting the great disciple Maha Kassapa worshipping at Buddha's feet while cremating Buddha's body, which later produced relics that were distributed to the princes of seven countries. Therefore, such kind of difference for selecting the scene to represent *Parinirvāṇa* provokes to explore how Buddhist murals evolved and changed from period to period in Myanmar.

Parinivānā is a Pali word which means “The Great Demise” and the scene describes a part of Buddha’s life story portraying the great death of Lord Buddha. In his last days, the Buddha suffered dreadful pain after eating the last meal offered by Cunda the goldsmith. Then, the Buddha and his disciples went to the Sala Grove of Mella kings and he laid down under Sala trees by orienting his head to the north. At that moment, blooming Sala flowers, *Mandāvāra* (flowers only grown in heaven) and sandalwood powder fell and scattered over his body. His disciples, the celestial beings, kings and layman assembled at the grove to pay their last respects to the Buddha before he passed away. When the Buddha passed into *Parinivānā*, many of them had great sorrow and cried. Usually, this scene is a representative to portray Lord Buddha’s attainment to *Parinivānā*. In India, the earliest representations for Buddha are symbols, and, hence, the *Parinivānā* scene was usually depicted as stupā. However, from the of 2nd century BCE onwards, iconic representation was adopted and therefore anthropomorphic figures had been replaced to represent the Buddha, which arguably helped to spread Buddhism to other countries. In Myanmar, it is suggested that the evidence for earliest anthropomorphic representation of Buddha on stucco works and sculpture belongs to Pyu period between 2nd century BCE to 9th century CE. However, in the Bagan period, Buddha in anthropomorphic form was portrayed not only on stucco work and sculpture, but also in murals. Therefore, the *Parinivānā* scene or the great demise of Buddha is illustrated on murals, depicting the Buddha laying under the Sala trees and surrounded by his disciples, celestial beings, aristocrats and layman in great sorrow. The *Parinivānā* scene was a common scene found in the Bagan period.

Mural Paintings in Bagan

Temple No. 2157/1451

Temple No. 2157/1451 was built in the 11th Century of the early Bagan period, and situated to the east of Taung Bi village near the old town of Bagan. Its entrance hall faces to the east and there is a Buddha image with *Bhumphassa mudrā* situated in the Gandhakuti Taik (central prayer hall). The scene of Buddha’s Parinirvāṇa is depicted at the uppermost place behind the *takè* (the flaming arch). In Kusinayon grove, Buddha succumbed to *Parinirvāṇa*, reclining on a couch between two Sala (Inn Gyin) trees orienting his head to the north. In the depictions of the early Bagan period, many spiral spikes like mollusc shells are seen on the head of Buddha and diversified rays are also spread out. The rest of the eight scenes of Buddha’s life story are depicted at the appropriate areas below the *Parinirvāṇa* scene. Other mural paintings consist of the scenes illustrating Enlightenment and the Great Miracle, Displayed Power of four relics, Descent from Tavatimsa, Preaching of the First Sermon (*Dhammacakka Pavattana Sutta*) and Entering Palieya Forest where the elephant respectfully offers a variety of delicious fruits to Buddha. It is regretful that most mural paintings in this temple have been ruined due to the wear and tear and some illegal events (Figure 1).

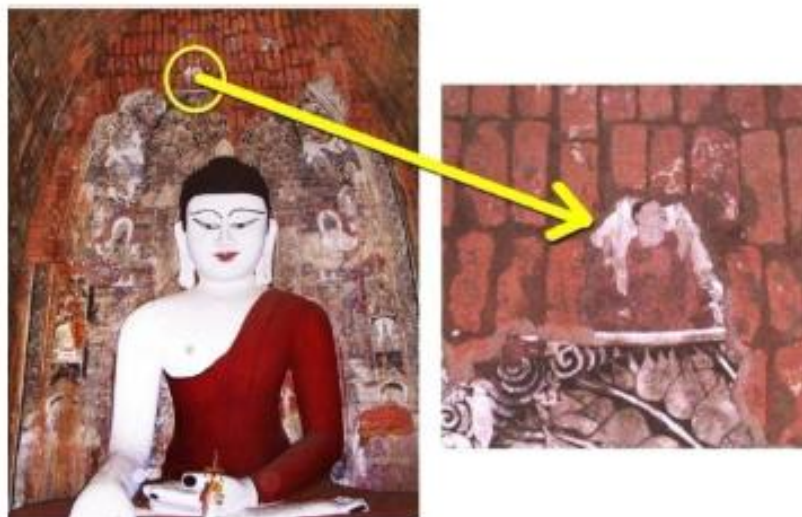


Photo by Researcher

Fig. 1 Mural Painting of Buddha Parinirvāṇa scene in Temple No.2157/1451 (11th century CE) Bagan Area. Source: Aye Aye Oo.

Nothing can be mentioned about the mourning audience of great disciples of Lord Buddha at that time. Only one depiction of an unclassified attendant who is paying homage can be seen in that scene. The pictures have been shown as follows (Figure 2).

Parinirvāṇa		
Relic		Relic
Great Miracle		Descent from Tavatīmsa
Palieya Forest		First Sermon
Relic		Relic

Fig. 2 Eight Scenes of Buddha Life Story.

Lowka Oukshoung

Temple No. 1467 (Lowka Oukshoung) is located at the southern part of the old city of Bagan and to the east of the Shwe San Taw pagoda. The temple is a temple with Sikhara (*Koentaung Pauk* in Burmese) built in 12th century CE artwork. The scene of Buddha *Parinivāṇā* is depicted at the back wall of the central shrine and it is 20 feet in height. This scene is recognized as the biggest wall painting during the period of 12th century CE. On the mural painting, groups of Malla kings and other revering followers are seen paying their homage to the area of the Holy Demise. The painting material formulated in the artwork consists of different colours such as black, white, maroon and cream (Figure 3).

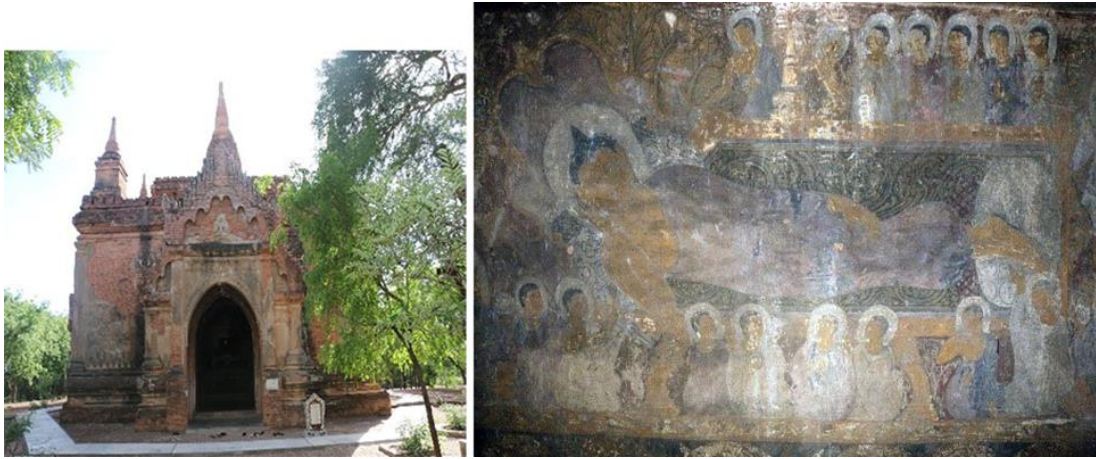


Fig. 3 Mural Painting of Buddha Parinivāṇa scene in Temple No. 1467, Lawka Oukshoung (Early 12th Century CE) Bagan Area. Source: Aye Aye Oo.

Temple No. 1668/971 (Shwe Htee Saung)

Shwe Htee Saung, Mahabodhi Kwantoung Pauk (Sikhara) temple, built in early 12th century is situated near Mahar Boddhi temple (Pichard 1995). The central hall faces to the east. On the wall of the vault at the southern part of its Gandhakuti Taik (central prayer hall), a scene of Buddha's Prinivana (4'2" × 2') is depicted. There are many spiral spikes like shells of mollusc and diversified rays (halo) emerging from the head of Buddha, which can be defined as handiwork of early middle Bagan Period. However, the mural paintings are quite pale (Figure 4).



Fig. 4 Mural Painting of Buddha Prinivana scene in Temple No.1668/971, Shwe Htee Saung (Early 12th Century CE) Bagan Area. Source: Aye Aye Oo.

Kyeik Latt Chaung Temple, Sagaing Township, Sagaing Region

Kyeik Latt Chaung Temple is situated near Chi Thae Thone Sei Ceti in Kyeik Latt Chaung, Sagaing Township, Sagaing Region. It is a temple dated to 14th century CE. Between the entrance of the central Shire Hall and on the southern wall of the sanctum, the scene of Buddha's *Parinivāṇa*

is depicted (8" length x 6" width). The *Parinivāṇā* scene is separately drawn. According to the ink glosses written on the southern wall of the sanctum, that mural painting is dated to the beginning of the artistic style of Bagan. In the scene, the Holy Buddha is reclining on the couch and one disciple is paying last homage to Demise Buddha near the foot. All the ink glosses are damaged (Figure 5).



Fig. 5 Kyeik Latt Chaung Temple (top) and Parinivāṇa scene drawn inside the temple (bottom). Source: Aye Aye Oo.

Sanay Gu Phaya, Palate Area, Kyauksel Township, Mandalay Region

Sanay Gu Phaya is situated to the northwest of Palate Mhwey Phaya. It is a temple which upper part is like Cetipauk Gu Phaya (meaning stupa built on the top of the temple), with its vestibule facing east and built in the 19th century. The scene of Buddha's *Parinivāṇā* can be seen at the entrance hall of the ceiling of the temple. The scene is about 4' x 2'. The scene of Buddha's *Parinivāṇā* is

depicted with red, reddish-brown, black, white and green dye colours but because of the bad climate condition, the colourful dyes are nearly abolished. At the bottom edge of the wall painting, Holy Buddha pays his kind sermon to the last disciple Subbadda and the scene is narrated in ink glosses (Figure 6).

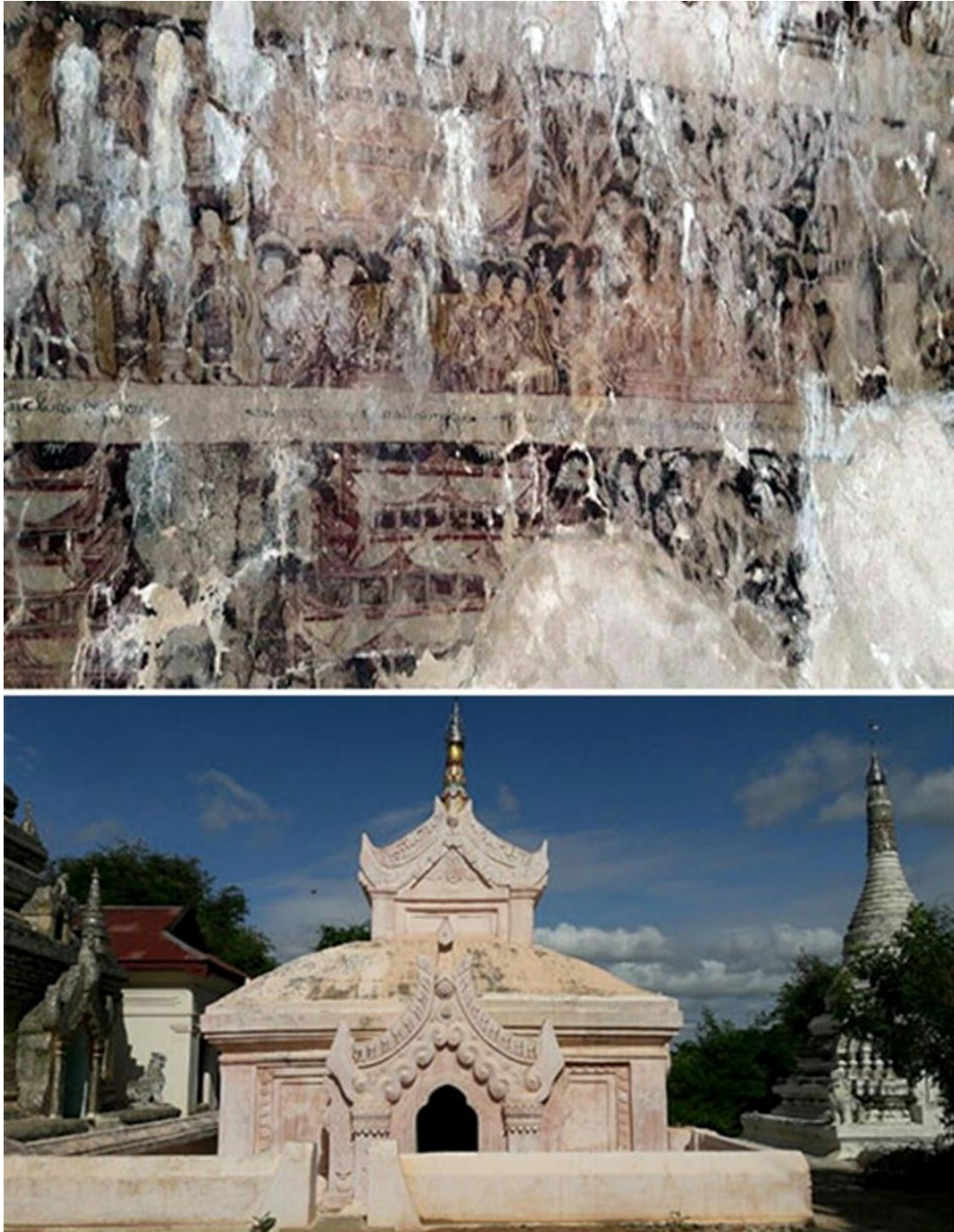


Fig. 6 Sanay Gu Phaya (Late 19th Century CE) Palace Area. Source: Aye Aye Oo.

Conclusion

The *Parinirvāṇa* scene plays a vital role in the depiction of the Buddha's great scenes in Bagan period in Myanmar. The architectural style and stucco work for construction temples in Bagan

period and those in later periods are not similar to each other. However, the mural paintings on Buddha's *Parinirvāṇa* scenes are generally similar as they are drawn in places such on the upper vault of the ceilings or archways on side walls of Gandhakuti Taik (central prayer halls) or on the *takè* (flaming arch) of the image or at the back top of the *takè*. They are never depicted on the lower part of the walls. Those places are mostly used for mural paintings on the Nativity, Entering Palieya forest to get the offerings and keeping lent. The Scene of Buddha's *Parinivānā* also takes the top place in Terracotta tablets, Andagu reliefs, bronze lotus buds and Buddha life story of four scenes, eight scene, and nine scenes since the Pyu and Bagan periods. Besides to pay last reverence to Holy Demise, the scenes of Buddha *Parinivānā* are depicted at the top places in the temples.

During the Bagan Period (11th-13th) centuries CE, Buddha's *Parinivānā* scenes were depicted as one-scene, four-scene, five-scene and eight-scene separately in panels to show Buddha's life story and often a combination of eight-scene of Thattathattha (the Blessed One) and eight-scene of Jataka stories can be observed. These scenes are depicted on the upper reredos behind of a Buddha image, under the vault area and on the wall on both sides of the inner porch. Others are depicted on the inner and outer part of the ordination hall. Some Buddha life stories are drawn as a single layout or a combination with other Buddha life stories. In the early 12th century CE, the smallest 6" square plaques and the biggest 5 ½" x 4' plates of Buddha *Parinirvāṇa* scenes are drawn at Lawka Oukshaung Temple. Buddha's *Parinirvāṇa* scene is depicted as a grand plot on the right and left walls of central shrine hall from late Bagan period to late Konbaung period extensively.

According to the records from the Myanmar Era 598 stone inscription which is from 1236 CE, (known as Saw Hla Wun Pagoda inscription) the painting colours mostly used in 11th-12th centuries CE are cream, white, black, red and maroon. From the 13th Century to late Konbaung period, more colourful materials such as green blue and blue-black are used. The artists of Bagan period utilized Sedan in Burmese word for arsenic trisulfide for yellow colour, vermilion (mercurial sulphate which is known as Hintha Pyedar Soun in Burmese) for red colour, gypsum chalk for white colour, and gum tree resin for reddish-brown colour.

The artwork used in mural paintings of religious buildings are based from the apex of Bagan, about 900 years ago, up to late Konbaung period. The traditional natural painting material can be used for long term safety of colourful dye. Moreover, Buddha's *Parinivānā* scenes are abundantly seen throughout Myanmar, although they are rarely be found in our neighbouring countries. However, in Thailand, there are *Parinivānā* scenes on the mural painting. Even though *Parinivānā* scene was mentioned in Thailand, it is very rare to see on the wall painting.

References

- Myo Nyunt, U (2011) *A Study on Buddhist Mural Painting of Bagan Period* [in Myanma]. Yangon: Ministry of Culture, Department of Archaeology, National Museum and Library.
- Pichard, P (1995) *Inventory of Monuments of Pagan: Monument 1440–1734*. Paris: Unesco.
- Than Tun (1969) *Ancient History of Myanmar*. Yangon: Maha Dagon Press.
- Zaw Gyi (1997) The Nature of Bagan Period Paintings [in Myanmar]. *Collected Works of Saya Zaw Gyi, Vol. 1*. Yangon: Union of Myanmar Literary and Journalist Organization, 3-8.