

Cosmos Encapsulated: The Maṇḍala-stūpa of Borobudur—its Polysemic Form and Functions

Cosmos yang terangkum: Maṇḍala-stūpa Borobudur, bentuk polisemi dan fungsinya

รูปแบบและความหมายของมณฑล-สถูปที่บุโรพุทโธ

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Abstract

Scholars have long debated the form and functions of Borobudur, whether it is a *maṇḍala*, a *stūpa* or both. Two Buddhist *maṇḍalas* have tentatively been assigned to the structure, namely the Vajradhātumaṇḍala and the Mahākaraṇagarbhadhātumaṇḍala. But as the concurrence between the structural and iconographical details of the monument and the textual evidence are yet to be matched precisely, research on the exact nature of Borobudur is still current more than a century after its re-discovery in modern times. Recapping and building on different scholarly views to date, this paper presents yet another interpretation, insights into, and possible functions of this ancient megastructure.

Para sarjana telah lama berdebat tentang bentuk dan fungsi Borobudur: apakah itu merupakan sebuah maṇḍala, stūpa, atau keduanya. Untuk sementara, dua maṇḍala buddhist telah dinisbatkan kepada struktur tersebut, yaitu Vajradhātumaṇḍala dan Mahākaraṇagarbhadhātumaṇḍala. Tetapi, karena kesesuaian antara detail struktur dan ikonografis monumen serta bukti tekstualnya belum dicocokkan dengan tepat, penelitian tentang sifat persis Borobudur berlangsung lebih dari satu abad sejak penemuannya di era modern. Merangkum dan membangun dari berbagai pendapat hingga saat ini, makalah ini menyajikan interpretasi lain, wawasan, dan kemungkinan fungsi-fungsi lain bangunan megastruktur kuno ini.

นักวิชาการได้ถกเถียงกันมานานถึงรูปแบบและการใช้งานของบุโรพุทโธ ว่าเป็นสถูป มณฑล หรือทั้งสองประเภท นักวิชาการบางท่านมีความเห็นว่าบุโรพุทโธนั้นสร้างตามรูปแบบของ วัชรธาตุมณฑล และ ครรภ์มณฑล ซึ่งถูกกล่าวถึงในคัมภีร์พุทธมหายาน แต่ก็ไม่สามารถหาข้อสรุปที่ชัดเจนได้ เนื่องจากมีหลักฐานทางโบราณคดีไม่เพียงพอ นอกจากจะสรุปทฤษฎีและความเห็นต่าง ๆ ของนักวิชาการในอดีตถึงปัจจุบัน บทความนี้ยังได้เสนอทฤษฎีใหม่ที่จะเป็นประโยชน์ต่อการศึกษาวิจัยโบราณสถานแห่งนี้อีกด้วย

Keywords: Borobudur, maṇḍala, stūpa, Buddhism, Java, Indonesia | Borobudur, maṇḍala, stūpa, Buddhisme, Jawa, Indonesia

Introduction

Located in Central Java and hailed as the largest Buddhist monument in the world, Borobudur was built between 780-830 CE under the rule of the Śailendra Dynasty. It is fashioned out of volcanic stone; it comprises a square base, five square galleries, three circular platforms and is topped with a solid, central *stūpa*. Narrative reliefs¹ from various Buddhist texts are carved on the base, the five square galleries and the accompanied balustrades, which form four galleries. W. F. Stutterheim (1933), an early Dutch researcher of Borobudur suggests that the narrative scheme represents the three spheres of spiritual progress, namely *kāmādhātu* (sphere of desire), *rūpadhātu* (sphere of form) and *arūpadhātu* (sphere of formless). The outer walls of these balustrades contain niches that house multiple images of the four *dhyāni* Buddhas (92 images for each) identifiable by the *mudrās* and the directions² they face. The niches outside the wall of the topmost balustrade, however, contain 64 Buddhas showing the *vitarkamudrās*, which face in all directions. The upper circular platforms contain 72 perforated *stūpas* (16+24+32) with identical Buddha images showing the *dharmacakramudrās*—these are normally identified as Vairocana, the central Buddha who is surrounded by the four *dhyāni* Buddhas. Different opinions are voiced regarding the identities of the Buddhas showing the *vitarkamudrās* and the *dharmacakramudrās*. The UNESCO labels the ones with *vitarkamudrās* as Vairocanas and the others as Vajrasattvas³. Moens (1951) calls the images with the *vitarkamudrās* Vairocanas and Van Lohuizen-de Leeuw (1965: 184) believes that they are Samantabhadra. Altogether, there are six different forms of Buddha images at Borobudur, making up a total of 504.

The presence of the directional Buddhas (*dhyāni* Buddhas), together with the geometric design of the structure lead to a major consensus that Borobudur is a Tantric Buddhist monument as the *dhyāni* Buddhas are featured prominently in various esoteric Buddhist texts, which mention the Buddhas as positioned in a *maṇḍala*. A question then arises as to whether Borobudur is indeed constructed in a form of a *maṇḍala* and, if so, what *maṇḍala*, or is it a merely a *stūpa*—this is still debatable. Hence, this paper, apart from recapitulating different scholarly opinions to date, aims to present yet another view, which may be considered in the ongoing research on Borobudur.

Scholarly Views

There are three voices on the form of Borobudur: *stūpa*, *maṇḍala* or both. Marije Klokke (1995) is the strongest voice in the minority whose opinion suggests that Borobudur is only a *stūpa* and not a *maṇḍala*. First, she points out that the overall ground plan of the monument doesn't conform to any *maṇḍala* and that 'the two outer circles of Borobudur are not exactly round, but have a somewhat squarish form' (p. 194). Secondly, she argues that the form of the Buddhas who show the *vitarkamudrās* isn't accounted as one of the five *dhyāni* Buddhas who are represented in a *maṇḍala*. She argues that no *maṇḍala* has multiple images of a form of Buddha in one setting as in Borobudur before going on to say that an image of Vairocana with the *dharmacakramudrā* is normally

¹ *Karmavibhaṅga* – the square base, *Avādanas* – 1st gallery lower main wall, *Lalitavistara* – 1st gallery upper main wall, *Jātakas* – 1st gallery upper balustrade gallery, *Gandavyūhasūtra* – 2nd gallery main wall, *Jātakas* and *Avādanas* – 2nd balustrade gallery, *Gandavyūhasūtra* – 3rd gallery main wall, *Gandavyūhasūtra* – 3rd gallery balustrade gallery, *Gandavyūhasūtra* – 4th gallery main wall, *Gandavyūhasūtra* – 4th balustrade gallery.

² Akṣobhya – East, Ratnasambhava – South, Amitābha – West, and Amoghasiddhi – North.

³ I suspect the UNESCO based this information on early research conducted by Krom who express the identical view. See Krom "'s-Gravenhage", 152.

positioned at the centre of a *maṇḍala* and, in the case of Borobudur, the central *stūpa* is devoid of a Vairocana image. Next, she says that narratives, which are the visual highlights of Borobudur, are not found in any *maṇḍala*. She also states that the visualisation and internalisation of the deities, which are normally done with the aid of a *maṇḍala* cannot be done at Borobudur as not all Buddha images and narrative reliefs can be viewed clearly enough for the practice to be deemed effective. Finally, Klokke is of the opinion that there are no traces of Tantric Buddhism in Java during the Śailendra period as all textual and epigraphical evidence seems to suggest that Mahāyāna Buddhism and not Vajrayāna was practised at Borobudur at that time and therefore, there is insufficient evidence to support the *maṇḍala* theory.

David Snellgrove (1996) also expresses the view that Borobudur is not a *maṇḍala* in a Tantric sense. Similarly to Klokke, he believes that the textual evidence and the material culture found in religious sites scattered throughout the terrain below the Merapi are all solid Mahāyāna material and have nothing to do with Buddhist Tantrism. Hence the *maṇḍala* theory cannot be applied to Borobudur. He also dismisses the conjecture proposed by Lundquist (1995) that the upper circular platforms were used for Tantric ceremonies. Snellgrove counters that for a *maṇḍala* to be functional as a ritual platform, it must be flat or on a raised platform for the practitioners to proceed from one circle to another (p. 482).

There are more scholars who believe that Borobudur is a *maṇḍala*. Early archaeologists who worked on Borobudur, namely Heinrich Zimmer (1926) and W. F. Stutterheim (1933) had already expressed the assumption of this theory, which was later expanded in depth by Lokesh Chandra (1980) and Alex Wayman (1981). Not only do Chandra and Wayman suggest that Borobudur is a *maṇḍala* due to its geometry and Mount Meru-like feature, the two scholars also identify Borobudur as the Vajradhātumaṇḍala. Besides the existence of the *dhyāni* Buddhas and the Vairocana images which, according to Chandra, follows the scheme of the Vajradhātumaṇḍala as described in the *Sarvatathāgatattvasaṃgraha*, he also proposes that the total number of Buddha images (504) when doubled, becomes the auspicious number 1008, which is the number of the deities in the Vajradhātumaṇḍala (p. 28). Having linked Borobudur with the Tibetan Tantric scriptural and pictorial tradition, Wayman, in working with numerology as Chandra does, is convinced that Borobudur also fits the plan of the Vajradhātumaṇḍala, suggesting that the 72 Vairocana within the latticed *stūpas* is a doubling of the number of deities in the Vajradhātumaṇḍala, which is 36^{4,5}. Moreover, he suggests that number 36 is the same number of star groups in the north and south of the equator, which is visible from Borobudur.

Expanding on the research carried out by Wayman concerning the *maṇḍala* formation of Borobudur, John Lundquist (1995) conceptualises that the circular tiers of Borobudur were used for initiation rituals after the *sādhakas* (practitioners) have been physically guided through different realms as if traversing a *maṇḍala*. Like Wayman, Lundquist believes that Borobudur is a Vajradhātumaṇḍala.

Huntington (1994) goes even further and expresses the idea that Borobudur embodies multiple *maṇḍalas* in one. He believes that the narratives on the fifth gallery that depict the Akaniṣṭha heaven,

⁴ Wayman relates the number 36 to a verse in a Tibetan Tripiṭaka: ‘Like the wheel of the law, it has sixteen spokes along with the nave. It is possessed of a triple series, and the spokes are to be doubled’, See Wayman 1975: 93.

⁵ It is unclear to me how Wayman came up with the number 36 for the deities in the Vajradhātumaṇḍala. The STTS prescribes a total number of 108 as Chandra has suggested. The closest is 37, which is the number of the deities generated through the *vajrasamādhi* of Vairocana within the Vajradhātumaṇḍala. See Kwon 2002: 55.

upon which Śākyamuni preached the Mahāvairocanasūtra immediately after the enlightenment, can be generalised as being the very concept of the Mahākaruṇagarbhadhātumaṇḍala. Further, he states that Borobudur is also a Vajradhātumaṇḍala⁶, a Pañcajinamaṇḍala⁷ as represented by the 72 Vairocanas and also a Dharmadhātumaṇḍala as represented by the central *stūpa*, which symbolises the absolute, unseeable state of existence (p. 136-137).

Hiriam Woodward (1981) agrees that Borobudur encompasses both the Mahākaruṇagarbhadhātumaṇḍala and the Vajradhātumaṇḍala. He bases his argument on the study of Shingon Buddhism where there are two *maṇḍalas*, each containing myriad Buddhas. He suggests that the five square terraces are part of the Mahākaruṇagarbhadhātumaṇḍala and stand for the real world from the point of view of mortals, and the upper circular galleries form the Vajradhātumaṇḍala, which depict the world from the point of view of the Buddhas. The former *maṇḍala* is perceived as the cause and the latter, the fruit (p. 46). Overall, Woodward also thinks the entire monument is representative of the Dharmadhātumaṇḍala. But in slight contrast to Huntington, Woodward thinks the five terraces and their narratives represent the ideal world of the Dharmadhātu. Additionally, by traversing the multi-levelled structure one may imagine himself being within the gigantic dome of a *stūpa*, which in itself suggests the existence within the Dharmadhātu (p. 47).

The most recent scholarship on Borobudur by Hudaya Kandahjaya (in press) also points towards an integration of the Mahākaruṇagarbhadhātumaṇḍala and the Vajradhātumaṇḍala. Kandahjaya suggests that the construction of Borobudur, in particular the planning of the five square galleries and the main *stūpa*, followed the scheme of the Vajradhātumaṇḍala laid down by Vajrabodhi⁸ who based it on the *Vajraśekharaśūtra*. However, Kandahjaya proposes that the plan of the upper terraces doesn't follow Vajrabodhi's scheme, instead it fits Amoghavajra's interpretation of the Mahākaruṇagarbhadhātumaṇḍala prescribed in the *Mahāvairocanasūtra*. By using a series of gridwork described by Amoghavajra, Kandahjaya convincingly works out a set of numbers, which is identical to the numbers of Buddha images at Borobudur. Kandahjaya's assumption that the lower portion of Borobudur is modelled after the Vajradhātumaṇḍala and the upper, the Mahākaruṇagarbhadhātumaṇḍala, thus resonates with some of Chandra's research in which he said that the two are the "Twin Maṇḍalas", known in Japanese as *ryōbu mandara*, which are the *maṇḍalas* of Caryā (Mahākaruṇagarbhadhātumaṇḍala) and Yoga (Vajradhātumaṇḍala) Tantras.⁹

Working with the textual and archaeological material, which link India and Java, Swati Chemburkar (2018) reprises the view of earlier scholars that Borobudur is a *maṇḍala*. She compares the plan of Borobudur with the *cella* at the Tabo Monastery, housing the clay image of Vairocana surrounded by those of the four *dyāni* Buddhas and other deities, which has been confirmed to be collectively in the formation of the Vajradhātumaṇḍala. Chemburkar suspects that the connection between Tabo and Borobudur was in part made by Atīśa, an Indian monk who had studied esoteric Buddhism in

⁶ Huntington doesn't explain how he arrived at the conclusion that Borobudur is a Vajradhātumaṇḍala. I suspect he based it on the research of Wayman.

⁷ Huntington (1994) states that the 72 Vairocanas stand for the 72 Mahāvairocanamaṇḍalas as stipulated by the Vairocana cycle Tantras, p. 141.

⁸ A prominent Indian monk traveller who promulgated esoteric Buddhism in Southeast Asia and China in the 8th century CE.

⁹ See Chandra 1980, 93.

Srīvijaya before visiting Tabo in 1042 CE (p. 171). Furthermore, she also draws an interesting comparison between Borobudur and the ruins of the Kesariya Stūpa in Bihar, which consists of circular-shaped base and square upper terraces as well as niches containing life-sized images of Akṣobhya and Amitābha (both facing East), while the rest are still unaccounted for due to the incomplete excavation. The 7th-century account of Xuanzang records that a *stūpa* was built at Kesariya to commemorate the event in which the Licchavis of Vaiśālī bid farewell to Śākyamuni before his *parinirvāṇa*. The *stūpa* was later expanded by King Harṣa (ca. 606-647 CE) and a crowning *stūpa* was added in the 8th century during the Pāla dynasty, thus evoking an even more striking resemblance to Borobudur. Similar to the concept proposed by Lundquist regarding the ritualistic function of Borobudur, Chemburkar suspects that the Kesariya Stūpa, which is referred to as the “Cakravartin Stūpa” by the previously mentioned record, could have been the maṇḍalic platform where the *abhiṣeka* (the lustration) of a new king was performed, thereby identifying the ruler with the central Buddha of the *maṇḍala*, which in the case of the Vajradhātumaṇḍala is Vairocana. She sees a noticeable correlation between the coronation ritual of the king at the centre of a sacred *maṇḍala* with the theory of “*samānta* feudalism” put forward by Brajđulal Chattopadhyaya (1994), in which the supreme monarch exercises absolute power over his dominion through the “*maṇḍala*” of vassal kings. Therefore, a *stūpa* of this type acts as both ritual and political centre of the empire, thus implying that a similar possibility may be applied to Borobudur.

The “Cakravartin-maṇḍala” Theory

Having surveyed many scholarly opinions and studied related primary textual sources related to the ongoing arguments on Borobudur, I came across a description of the “Maṇḍala of Cakravartin”¹⁰ in the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhanatantra*, which I argue bears links to some of the structural components and iconographies at Borobudur.

The *Sarvadurgatipariśodhanatantra* is a Buddhist Tantric work belonging to the Yoga Tantra Class. It is also a part of the Mahāvairocana cycle of Tantras, the others being the *Mahāvairocanasūtra*, the *Vajraśekhara* and the *Sarvatathāgatattvasaṃgraha* (Huntington 1994: 135, Klokke 1995: 197). As in many Tantric works, the text is written in the form of a conversation, in this case, amongst the assembly of gods led by Śakra and Śākyamuni. Śakra enquires of the Buddha how Vimalamaṇiprabha, a young god, has fallen from the Trayatṛiṃśa heaven and ended in the Avicī hell. The gods then plead with Śākyamuni to know how Vimalamaṇiprabha may be saved and all sentient beings liberated from bad rebirths. The Buddha then expounds the Tantra, consisting mainly of rites for pacifying, for procuring prosperity, and for subjugating and destroying enemies as well as rites for the dead. According to Skorupski (1983), the main feature of this Tantra is its being geared towards preparing a better rebirth for the dead and a better life for the living.

Chapter two of the Tantra contains a description on how to construct a “Maṇḍala of Cakravartin”:

In the centre he should place Vajra or Vajrasattva or Samantabhadra, the Great Bliss; to the front (east) Vajrapāṇi; to the right (south) Ratnapāṇi; to the west Padmapāṇi, to the north Viśvapāṇi. On the outside of that he draws a circle where he places all the Buddhas. On the outside of that he draws (Vajra-)sattvas in due order. Further outside he draws the (Bodhi-)sattvas, Maitreya and the others, the Great Ones. Yet further outside he draws the Bhikṣus, Ānanda etc. and the Sages. On the outside of that he

¹⁰ This is the name as translated by Skorupski. I do not have the original Sanskrit text of the Tantra at the time of writing this paper.

draws Brahmā and others accompanied by their consorts and entourage. He also draws in the *maṇḍala* the Planets, Lunar Mansions, the Four Kings and the Guardians of the Directions. Further outside, he draws the spheres of existence, the hells, tormented spirits and animals, men, gods and titans.¹¹

Starting from the bottom, I argue that images of the personalities, including those of the Bodhisattvas, which the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhanatantra* prescribes to be in different peripheries of the maṇḍala also exist on the five terraces at Borobudur. But instead of appearing independently, they are grouped within the narratives from the *Karmavibhaṅga*, *Āvadanās*, *Jātakas* and the *Lalitavistara*. The 72 Vairocanas may be linked with ‘all the Buddhas’, while sculptures of the four *dhyāni* Buddhas at Borobudur may stand in place of the four Bodhisattvas¹² as the Tantra dictates. The crowning stūpa at Borobudur also fits the scheme as its solidity can be conceived as the unseeable (*dharmakāya*) Samantabhadra or Vajrasattva, who are often referred to as the Ādibuddha.

The *Sarvadurgatipariśodhanatantra* presence in Southeast Asia, especially in the Indonesian Archipelago is well attested. Wayman bases his theory on Borobudur as a *maṇḍala* on Vajravarmaṇ’s commentary, the *Sundarālaṅkāraṇāma*, on the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhanatantra*. Wayman suggests that this commentary originates in Śrīvijaya, and was brought to India and Tibet by Atīśa¹³. J.G. de Casparis, who translated the gold and silver *dhāraṇīs* found at Candi Plaosan though couldn’t match it with the exact scriptural source, noted its affinity with a mantra from the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhanatantra* (Griffiths 2014: 106). Arlo Griffiths (2014: 169) also noticed a striking parallel between a mantra found on an inscribed stone stake (*kīla*) said to be from Sleman to the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhanatantra*.¹⁴ Finally, Griffiths observes that the source texts of many inscriptions found in Java belong to the Tantric Buddhist literature, such as the *Sarvatathāgatātattvasaṃgraha*, the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhanatantra* and the *Sarvavajrodaya* (p. 187), and therefore, affirm the prevalence of Tantric Buddhism in Java, which Klokke (1995) has disregarded.

Having established its connection to Java and elaborated on some of its contents, I propose that Borobudur also embodies some requisites of the “Cakravartin-maṇḍala” of the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhanatantra*. If so, the “*samānta* feudalism” theory can also be applied to Borobudur, perhaps with a similar political implication as in Kesariya as proposed by Chemburkar, and thus reflecting the Śailendra Dynasty’s ambition to attain the supreme political legitimation over the region.

Conclusion

Through the surveys of many scholarly opinions, textual evidence and the material culture of South and Southeast Asia. I join the chorus of scholars who believe the Borobudur is a *maṇḍala*. However, Borobudur’s crowning structure is also unmistakably a *stūpa*. I argue that its style with a distinctive bell-shaped *aṇḍa*, a square *harmikā* and an elongated *yaṣṭi* is very much after the

¹¹ See Skorupski 1983: 75.

¹² Vajrapāṇi, Ratnapāṇi, Padmapāṇi and Viśvapāṇi are the main Bodhisattvas of the *dhyāni* Buddhas.

¹³ Another well-known Buddhist monk-scholar who stayed in Śrīvijaya in the 11th century CE.

¹⁴ For the full mantra transcription, see Griffiths 2014: 169-170.

Mahāstūpa at Anurādhapura in Sri Lanka.¹⁵ Therefore, I believe Borobudur is both: it is a polysemic and a multifunctional monument imbued ingeniously with different forms and functions.

I suspect that the confusion about its function partly arose from how we are programmed to understand the word *stūpa* and *maṇḍala*. It may be useful to go back to the etymologies of these words. According to Monier-Williams, ‘*stūpa*’ means the top, a summit, a heap, a mound, a knot or tuft of hair, while ‘*maṇḍala*’ is a circle, a ring, a ball, a wheel, an orb, a country and a district. Literally, ‘*stūpa*’ refers to anything, which is at the topmost or has a peak, while ‘*maṇḍala*’ refers to anything, which is round or perceived to be round and enclosed (i.e. country, district, zone). If one looks at a round Buddhist *stūpa* from a bird’s eye view, one would obviously see a circular shape, which can undeniably be referred to as a *maṇḍala*. Snellgrove (1996) expresses the same notion that the word ‘*maṇḍala*’ is nothing but a circle, which may cause people to conceive the circular terraces at Borobudur as *maṇḍalas*. But he is not convinced that the Borobudur was built as a religious *maṇḍala* nor does it have the same function as one. Hence, I argue that the geometry of a *stūpa* is generally “maṇḍalic” in design, but not necessarily “maṇḍalic” in function. Perhaps, it may be less confusing if the word ‘*yantra*’ is used instead, but then again, people may counter that this term has a more Hindu connotation. To clearly define its form only from the academic perspective, I suggest that the term “maṇḍala-stūpa” may well serve the purpose.

I disagree with Klokke and Snellgrove regarding their opinions that the visualisation of deities cannot be done at a structure such as Borobudur. The large, three-dimensional *maṇḍalas* such as the bronze Cakrasaṃvaramaṇḍala (Figure 1) at the Gyantse Monastery and the Kālacakraṃḍala at the Potala Palace (Figure 2) in Tibet suggest that visualisation doesn’t always have to be done by focusing on a two-dimensional Thangka hanging on a wall or a flat sand *maṇḍala* on the ground where every deity can be viewed clearly from any direction as Klokke assumes. In practice, not every deity can be viewed clearly because not all images are always painted and sometimes they are so small that they cannot be seen clearly; they are just a preliminary aid for visualisation that leads to the internalisation that essentially can be performed anywhere even while climbing the terraces of Borobudur.

¹⁵ A clear connection between Sri Lanka and Java is evident from the Ratubaka or Abhayagiri inscription found at the nearby Ratu Boko confirms that the monastery was modelled after the Abhayagirivihāra in Sri Lanka. See Degroot 2006: 63 and Suebsantiwongse 2022: 74:93.



Fig. 1 Bronze Cakrasaṃvamaṇḍala at the Gyantse Monastery. Source: Photo courtesy of Christian Luczanits.



Fig. 2 Bronze Guhyasamaṇḍala at the Potala Palace. Source: Author.

A few leading scholars on Borobudur have already convincingly linked it to the Mahākaruṇagarbadhātumaṇḍala and the Vajradhātumaṇḍala with a strong possibility of it being a combination of both and I, too, see some elements of the Cakravartin-maṇḍala from the *Sarvadurgatiparośodhanatantra* in the formation of Borobudur: the depiction of prescribed personalities within the narrative framework, the arrangement of the Buddha images, the 72 Vairocanas, which suggest that it is a part of the Mahāvairocana group of Tantras, and the

unperforated central *stūpa*, which arguably represents the formless Ādibuddha Samantabhadra who is to be visualised at the *bindu* of the *maṇḍala*.

Speculations on the possible functions of Borobudur are endless. Whether it is a *stūpa*, a *maṇḍala* or both; it is undeniable that some forms of ritual must have been performed there, either by monks, pilgrims or monarchs. But, due to its impressive size, besides being a religious monument, Borobudur most certainly served as a political symbol that was meant to express the political aspirations and the supreme sovereignty of the Śailendra kings. Did Borobudur, the crowning achievement of the Śailendra Dynasty, thus ultimately stand for the throne of Mahāvairocana, the emanation of the Ādibuddha who is surrounded by a plethora of divinities within the maṇḍalic palace, and whose image the king aspires to identify with as the legitimate Cakravartin of the earthly *maṇḍala*¹⁶ akin to the “*samānta* feudalism” ideology therefore serving the same function as the Cakravartin Stūpa at Kesariya?



Fig. 3 Statue of Maitreya, 15th century, Palcho Monastery, Gyantse, Tibet. Source: Author.

¹⁶ As in ‘country’ or ‘region’.



Fig. 4 Bronze statue of Nitta Maitreya, late Sui-Tang Dynasty, early 7th century. Source: Photo courtesy of Christie's.

As for the Buddhas showing *vitarkamudrās*, I propose a new view that they could be Maitreyas.¹⁷ I base my assumption on an examination of the iconographies of Maitreya in Tibet (Figure 3), China (Figure 4) and Japan (Figure 5) some of which seem to be showing either *vitarkamudrās* or *abhayāmudrās* with the right hands as well as on the basis of textual connections, which were transmitted across India, South Asia, Southeast Asia and East Asia through the maritime voyages of several monk-scholars. Thus, vertically from the bottom, we see the lower realm, represented by images of hells and so forth from the *Karmavibhaṅga*, then the earthly realm, represented by the stories of Śākyamuni, the future realm of Maitreya, the heavenly realm of Mahāvairocana and, ultimately, the unseeable and unfathomable realm of the Ādibuddha. But admittedly, I believe more research is imperative.

¹⁷ The *Sarvadurgatipariśodhanatantra* also mentions Maitreya in the Cakravartin-maṇḍala.



Fig. 5 Bronze Statue of Maitreya, 10th century, Mirokuji Temple. Source: Photo courtesy of Michel Mohr.

I venture to propose that Borobudur is the superimposition of different elements in one. It is the embodiment of the “Trikāya”: *nirmakāya* – the narratives of Śākyamuni, *sambhokāya* – the images *dhyāni* Buddhas including Vairocana and *dharmakāya* – Samantabhadra/Vajrasattva in the form of the crowning *stupa* and also the “Trimaṇḍala”¹⁸ – Vajradhātumaṇḍala, Mahākaruṇaḥarbhadhātumaṇḍala, Dharmadhātumaṇḍala and elements of the Cakravartin-maṇḍala, and the “Trikarma”¹⁹ – *yātra* (pilgrimage), *upacāra* (ritual) and *abhiṣeka* (initiation or coronation). In short, it is the image of the cosmos encapsulated in the form of stone.

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¹⁸ Terminology mine.

¹⁹ Terminology mine.

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