

Re-examining the Division of *Candi Borobudur* into *Kāmadhātu*, *Rūpadhātu*, and *Arūpadhātu* Meninjau Ulang Pembagian Candi Borobudur Menjadi *Kamadhatu*, *Rupadhatu*, dan *Arupadhatu*

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Abstract

The interpretation that *Candi Borobudur* is divided into *kāmadhātu*, *rūpadhātu*, and *arūpadhātu* is widely adopted in many writings about Borobudur, despite being questioned by some scholars. This paper analyses the narrative reliefs, the latticed *stūpas* of the three circular terraces, and the central *stūpa* of Borobudur to examine if they correlate with the three *dhātus* (realms of existence). Thematic narrative analysis was conducted to inquire the narrative reliefs in relation to key themes and subjects they represent. Comparative analysis was employed by comparing the key themes depicted on each group of narrative reliefs with the characteristics of each realm of existence. The findings suggest that the association of Borobudur with *kāmadhātu*, *rūpadhātu*, and *arūpadhātu* is problematic. There is no correlation between the narrative reliefs, the latticed *stūpas* of the three circular terraces, or the central *stūpa* with the three groups of *dhātus*. In terms of goals, the *Lalitavistara* and *Gaṇḍavyūha-Bhadracarī* aim for the highest and complete awakening (*anuttara-samyak-sambodhi*) by means of *bodhisattva* practices. The *Gaṇḍavyūha-Bhadracarī* discusses the *dharmadhātu* (realm of reality), the reality experienced by those who are awakened, which is beyond the three *dhātus*. As evidenced by its carvings and the *sūtras* they reference, Borobudur can be viewed as a roadmap with a gradual framework, depicting the *mārga* (path) towards Buddhahood within the *bodhisattvayāna* (bodhisattva vehicle). The findings of this research are expected to enhance the understanding of the Buddhist notions that underpinned the construction of Borobudur around the mid-8th to the early 9th century CE.

Interpretasi Candi Borobudur dibagi menjadi *kamadhatu*, *rupadhatu*, dan *arupadhatu* diadopsi secara luas dalam tulisan-tulisan mengenai Candi Borobudur meskipun dipertanyakan oleh para sarjana. Tulisan ini menganalisis relief-relief naratif, stupa-stupa berterawang di tiga teras melingkar, dan stupa induk Candi Borobudur untuk memeriksa korelasinya dengan tiga kelompok alam keberadaan (tiga *dhatu*). Analisis naratif tematik dilakukan untuk menyelidiki relief-relief naratif terkait tema pokok dan subjek yang diwakilinya. Analisis komparatif diterapkan dengan membandingkan tema pokok dari relief-relief naratif dengan karakteristik dari masing-masing *dhatu*. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mengasosiasikan Candi Borobudur dengan *kamadhatu*, *rupadhatu*, dan *arupadhatu* adalah problematik. Tidak ada korelasi antara relief-relief naratif,

stupa-stupa berterawang di tiga teras melingkar, dan stupa induk dengan tiga kelompok *dhatu*. Berdasarkan segi tujuan, *Lalitawistara* maupun *Gandawyuha-Bhadracari* membicarakan pencapaian Penggugahan Tertinggi yang Lengkap dan Sempurna (*anuttara-samyak sambodhi*) melalui praktik-praktik bodhisatwa. *Gandawyuha-Bhadracari* membicarakan alam realitas (*dharmadhātu*), yaitu realitas yang dialami oleh yang telah “tergugah”, realitas yang melampaui tiga *dhatu*. Sebagaimana ditunjukkan oleh pahatan-pahatan dan sutra-sutra yang menjadi acuannya, Candi Borobudur dapat dilihat sebagai peta dengan kerangka bertahap yang menggambarkan marga untuk merealisasi Kebuddhaan dalam wahana bodhisatwa (*bodhisattvayana*). Hasil penelitian ini diharapkan dapat menyumbang pemahaman mengenai gagasan *Buddhadharma* yang melatarbelakangi pembangunan Candi Borobudur pada pertengahan abad ke-8 hingga kuartar pertama atau kuartar kedua abad ke-9 Masehi.

Keywords: Borobudur, Buddhadharma in Java, dharmadhātu, Dharmākaya, kāmadhātu-rūpadhātu-arūpadhātu | Borobudur, Buddhadharma di Jawa, alam realitas, Tubuh Dharma, kamadhatu-rupadhatu-arupadhatu

Introduction

Although *Candi* Borobudur was rediscovered in the first quarter of the 19th century, intensive studies of this great monument only began in the first half of the 20th century. The term *candi* is defined as “temple building” (Soekmono 2017: 219-220), especially of Buddhist and Hindu contexts. The key research on Borobudur might be divided into studies that have focused on the physical aspects, such as archaeological descriptions, design, and architecture, and studies that have attempted to understand the symbolic meaning or meanings of the monument.

Among the earliest group of scholars who studied Borobudur, the most prominent was Nicolaas Johannes Krom (1927), who identified and discussed archaeological descriptions of more than 1400 narrative relief panels carved on the main walls and balustrades. Krom contributed significantly to the identification of the stories and scenes of *Jātakas-Avadānas*, *Lalitavistara*, and part of the *Karmavibhaṅga* and *Gaṇḍavyūha-Bhadracarī*. Apart from Krom, other notable scholars who contributed to the identification of *Gaṇḍavyūha-Bhadracarī* reliefs were Frederik D. K. Bosch and Jan Fontein (Fontein 1967, 2012). Fontein also identified most of the reliefs of *Karmavibhaṅga* (1989). Another scholar, August Johan Bernet Kempers (1976), discussed the physical components of Borobudur in great detail, including description of the meaning of the monument and the historical background underlying its construction. Soekmono (1976) summarised different topics with regard to the rediscovery and restoration of Borobudur, the structural design, and safeguarding efforts. Jacques Dumarçay (1978) discussed Borobudur’s design, architecture, and the stages of construction.

Later scholars focused more on the meanings of the monument, and their research results can be clustered into the following: viewing Borobudur as a *maṇḍala*; as a *stūpa*, *prasada* or *stūpa-prasada*; as representing the ten stages (*daśabhūmi*) of the bodhisattva path; as representing the realm of reality (*dharmadhātu*); or as symbolising the three *dhātus* – *kāmadhātu*, *rūpadhātu*, and *arūpadhātu*.

Scholars who advocated Borobudur as a *maṇḍala* imply that Borobudur was inspired by the esoteric tradition (Zimmer 1926 in Klokke 1995: 191; Stutterheim 1933 in Klokke 1995: 196 and in de Casparis 1981: 49; Shoun 1971 in Snodgrass 1992: 145; Chandra 1980 in Snodgrass 1992: 141 and in Klokke 1995: 194; Wayman 1981: 162; Snodgrass 1992: 135; Suebsantiwongse 2022: 6). However, a number of scholars disagree with this association between Borobudur and the esoteric *maṇḍala* or *Tantrayāna* tradition. They argued that although Borobudur's ground plan and aerial view depict squares and circles – typically found in *maṇḍala* diagrams – the design and architecture of Borobudur lack the characteristics of a typical Buddhist esoteric *maṇḍala* (de Casparis 1981: 50; de Casparis 1990 in Gomperts and Klokke 2003: 483; Klokke 1995: 195-196; Gifford 2004: 61; Fontein 2013: 6, 9). Furthermore, the principal sūtra of Borobudur is *Gaṇḍavyūha*, which mainly conveys the approach of the bodhisattva path, and is not tantric (Klokke 1995: 207-208). As for certain passages in the *Gaṇḍavyūha* that resemble esoteric aspects, a previous study has suggested that these are “proto-tantric” and not tantric (Osto 2009: 176).

Another group of scholars maintain that Borobudur was a *stūpa*, *prasada* or *stūpa-prasada*. Within this group of scholars, the definitions offered differ slightly from one another, namely that Borobudur was “a stupa planted upon a series of terraces” (Foucher 1905 in Gómez and Woodward 1981: 7); “a true stupa, one with a hemispherical form that was camouflaged by the aisles and the ornamentation” (Foucher 1909 in Gómez and Woodward 1981: 8); “a stepped pyramid (*prasada*) topped by the huge closed stupa on the highest terrace” (Bosch 1961 in Gómez and Woodward 1981: 7); a *stūpa-prasada* (Stutterheim 1956: 35, 38; Mus 1935 in de Casparis 1981: 51-52 and in Klokke 1995: 217; Kandahjaya 2021: 148-149); “a stepped pyramid with a stupa on the top” (Soekmono 1976: 41); or that Borobudur was a *stūpa* with three symbolic layers: cosmology, causation, and memorialisation (Woodward 1981: 121-122, 134). Following that is a proposal that Borobudur symbolises the ten levels of bodhisattva (Friedmann in Fontein 1967: 161, 195; de Casparis 1950: 202-203).

One of the most widely cited interpretations is that Borobudur represents *kāmadhātu*, *rūpadhātu*, and *arūpadhātu*, as proposed by Willem Frederik Stutterheim (1956). Stutterheim suggested that the ground level (a hidden base) represents *kāmadhātu*, the reliefs on levels I-IV represent *rūpadhātu*, and the three circular terraces and the main central *stūpa* represent *arūpadhātu* (1956: 9, 36-38). This division was put forward in the first half of the 20th century, when many Dutch scholars were involved in documenting and studying Borobudur. In carrying out these tasks, many scholars at that time faced challenges due to limited resources and access to the corpus of the *Buddhadharma* (teachings of the Buddha) that could have provided a more comprehensive understanding of Borobudur.

The interpretation of understanding Borobudur as a representation of the three realms was adopted by some scholars during Stutterheim's era and afterwards (Bernet Kempers 1976: 152, 154-155; 1981: 115-117; Soekmono 1976: 17-20, 36-38), and later cited in official publications about *Candi Borobudur* (UNESCO 2005: 31, 33; UNESCO World Heritage Convention: the third paragraph; Balai Konservasi Borobudur 2016).

The division of *kāmadhātu*, *rūpadhātu*, and *arūpadhātu* was not unchallenged by other scholars, in Stutterheim's time or since. Among those who expressed disagreement about this interpretation included Dumarçay (1978: 39), Johannes Gijsbertus de Casparis (in Gómez and Woodward 1981: 9), Luis Oscar Gómez (1981: 180, 192), Lewis R. Lancaster (1981: 202-203), and Fontein (2012: 214-217).

Dumarçay did not support the idea of Borobudur symbolising three *dhātus* because it is not based on sound reasoning, although he did not further elaborate.

“Some theorists, too, out of self-defence, indicate that an element of vagueness in a part of the theory does not distract from the validity of the whole. They often repeated division into the three spheres of Buddhism, *kamadhatu*, the sphere of desire, *rupadhatu*, the sphere of form, and *arupadhatu*, the sphere of formlessness ...” (1978: 39).

Gómez asserted that the division into three *dhātus* has no textual support:

“I am not rejecting the possibility that Barabudur is divided basically into three levels; this seems most likely. But I do object to identifying those three levels with the three *dhātus*. And I do object to an identification of *arupadhatu* and nirvana as proposed, e.g. by Stutterheim (no textual proof is offered)” (1981: 192).

Fontein (2012: 217), after conducting a careful study of the *Karmavibhaṅga* (1989) and *Gaṇḍavyūha-Bhadra-carī* (2012), stated that “Neither the texts of the *Karmavibhaṅga* and the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, nor the reliefs illustrating them support the concept of the three spheres as interpreted by Stutterheim”.

The reservations of some scholars towards the division of Borobudur into *kāmadhātu*, *rūpadhātu*, and *arūpadhātu* drove the interest in our current project to carry out further study on this subject. The interpretation that Borobudur represents the three realms of existence, widely quoted and circulated, is often regarded as the sole explanation for Borobudur. Consequently, there is a need for further study to address this noticeable research gap. The timing is also suitable, due to increasing availability of more allocable resources on Buddhist texts, providing opportunity for us to better assess and understand Borobudur. By re-examining the division proposed for Borobudur nearly a century ago, there is still a possibility to see Borobudur from new perspectives.

The key objective of this paper is to review the narrative reliefs of Borobudur, being the latticed *stūpas* on the three circular terraces and the central *stūpa*, to examine correlations with the concept of the three *dhātus*. Substantiated by the textual records and sculptural depiction, this paper seeks to elucidate the ultimate goal aimed at Borobudur and the approach of achieving that goal.

Method

The research approach adopted in this study combined elements from *thematic narrative analysis* (Riessman 2008; Smith 2016) together with *comparative analysis* (Freiberger 2018). Being part of narrative inquiry, thematic narrative analysis highlights the content – i.e. on what is said, written, or shown visually (Riessman 2008). Thematic narrative analysis focuses on what topically and thematically surfaces within the story as a whole (Smith 2016: 207). This analysis is applied to the narrative reliefs of *Karmavibhaṅga*, *Jātakas-Avadānas*, *Lalitavistara*, and *Gaṇḍavyūha-Bhadra-carī* and their referencing sūtras and manuscripts. Because the narrative reliefs of *Candi* Borobudur are thematic in nature, the texts consulted are primarily sūtras containing the stories or scenes depicted on this monument.

The subjects of those narrative reliefs were analysed based on key themes, common themes, recurrent themes, as well as the thematic relationships among them. This is subsequently followed by comparative analysis. The comparative analysis was applied by way of examining the key themes depicted on each group of narrative reliefs on the main walls and balustrades, the latticed *stūpas* on the three circular terraces and the central *stūpa* of Borobudur, with the characteristics of each *dhātu*: *kāmadhātu*, *rūpadhātu*, and *arūpadhātu*.

The Three *Dhātus* in the Buddhist Realms of Beings

Buddhists believe in the existence of various realms of beings. The realms of existence or rebirth destinies are referred to by the term *gati*, and are usually grouped into six *gatis*, namely *naraka* (hell), *preta* (ghosts), *tiryak* (animals), *asura* (demigods), *manuṣya* (humans), and *deva* (gods) (Galasek-Hul and Lama Kunga Thartse 2023: g. 4). The other most common division of the realms of existence is *dhātu* (the three realms): *kāmadhātu* (the realm of desire), *rūpadhātu* (the realm of forms), and *arūpadhātu* (the realm of formlessness).

The three *dhātus* are usually discussed in relation to the various realms of existence where rebirth can occur for sentient beings based on their actions and deeds. The system of the three *dhātus* as the *sattva-loka* (world of beings) was formalised around the 4th-5th centuries CE in the *Abhidharmakosa*, by Vasubandhu. In the *Prajñāpāramitā* (Perfection of Wisdom) *sūtras*, the discussion of *dhātus* revolves around the four *dhyānas* (concentrations) in the form realms and four *samāpattis* (absorptions) in the formless realms, in relation to the development of *śamatha* (calm abiding) and *vipasyana* (insight) (Zahler and Hopkins 1983: 11), and without emphasis on cosmology. In the Theravada tradition, the three *dhātus* as Buddhist cosmology are systematised into 31 realms of existence in a number of Pali sources (Ñānamoli and Bodhi 1995: 46).

The first group, *kāmadhātu* (the realm of desire), is so called because living beings in these realms are dominated by sensory desires of the five senses (Ñānamoli and Bodhi 1995: 46). *Kāmadhātu* is further divided into 11 realms: the realms of hell, ghosts, animals, demigods, humans, and the six realms of the gods, namely *Cāturmahārājika* (Heaven of the Four Great Kings), *Trayastrimśa* (Heaven of the Thirty-Three), *Yama* (Heaven Free from Strife), *Tuṣita* (Heaven of Joy), *Nirmāṇarati* (Heaven of Delighting in Emanations), and *Paranirmitavaśavartī* (Heaven of Making Use of Others' Emanations). The realms of the hells, ghosts, and animals (sometimes including demigods) are considered *durgati* (lower realms) because of the higher degree of suffering. The human and the *devas* realms are considered *sugati* (higher realms) because of having better conditions. Birth as humans and *devas* are attributive to good deeds such as observing the ten *kuśalakarma* (virtuous actions) (Ñānamoli and Bodhi 1995: 47).

The next group of existence is called *rūpadhātu* (the form realm) with only subtle material forms and no gross material forms. “In the fine-material realm the grosser types of matter are absent and the bliss, power, luminosity, and vitality of its denizens are far superior to those in the sense-sphere realm” (Ñānamoli and Bodhi 1995: 47). In the *Abhidharmakosabhasya* (*Commentary on the Treasury of Abhidharma*) and *Abhidharmakośakārikā* (*Verses on the Treasury of Abhidharma*) by Vasubandhu, the form realm is divided into 17 realms which are grouped according to the attainment of four states of concentration (Sanskrit: *dhyāna*; Pali: *jhāna*): (1) the first state includes three realms: *Brahmakāyika*, *Brahmapurohita*, and *Mahābrahmanu*; (2) the second state has three realms: *Parīttābha*, *Apramānābha*, and *Ābhāsvara*; (3) the third state consists of three realms: *Parīttāsubha*, *Apramāṇasubha*, and *Śubhakṛtsna*; (4) the fourth state includes a total of eight realms: *Anabhraka*, *Mintaprasava*, *Bṛhatphala* and the five *Śuddhāvāsika* realms namely *Avṛha*,

Atapa, *Sudṛśa*, *Sudarśana*, and *Akaniṣṭha* (Pruden 1991, II: 365-366; Korin n.d.a: 46-47, n.d.b: 39). In the Pali sources such as the *Majjhima Nikāya*, the form realm is divided into 16 realms instead of 17 (Ñanamoli and Bodhi 1995: 47), as based on *Vaibhāṣika* tradition, the *Mahābrahmanu* is a continuation of *Brahmapurohita*, not a separate stage in the first state of *dhyāna* (Korin n.d.a: 39). The causes for rebirth in the form realms, beside practising the ten virtuous actions, are mainly due to the attainment of *samādhi* (concentration) (Tiānxízāi 984-1000: 0897c17).

The third group is *arūpadhātu* (*ārūpyadhātu*, the formless realm). “The immaterial realm, where matter has become non-existent and only mental processes exist” (Ñanamoli and Bodhi 1995: 47). The formless realm is divided into four states of imperturbability or four *ārūpyasamāpatti* (formless absorptions) attained, namely: (1) *ākāśānantyāyatana* (infinite space), (2) *vijñānānantyāyatana* (infinite consciousness), (3) *ākimcanyāyatana* (nothingness), and (4) *naivasamjñānāsamjñāyatana* (neither perception nor non-perception) (Pruden 1991, II: 366; Ñanamoli and Bodhi 1995: 46-48; Galasek-Hul and Kunga Thartse 2023: g. 74-77; Korin n.d.a: 46-47, n.d.b: 39). The formless realm is characterised by a state of *samāpatti* (deep meditative absorption). In the *Abhidharmasamuccaya* by Asaṅga, these four stages of formlessness are considered as *laukikadhyāna* (worldly absorptions) (Boin-Webb 2001: 149).

The Themes of the Narrative Reliefs at Candi Borobudur

The narrative reliefs at Candi Borobudur total 1460 panels carved in 11 registers on the main walls and balustrades, which consist of the following themes: (1) *Karmavibhaṅga*, a total of 160 panels in one register on the ground level; (2) *Jātakas-Avadānas*, in 720 panels in four registers: the upper row on the balustrades of the first level, the lower row on the balustrades of the first level, the lower row on the main wall of the first level, and the balustrade on the second level, (3) *Lalitavistara*, in 120 panels in one register on the top row of the main wall of the first level, (4) *Gaṇḍavyūha-Bhadra-carī*, in 460 panels on five registers: the main wall on the second level, the main wall and balustrade on the third level, and the balustrade and main wall on the fourth level (Balai Konservasi Borobudur 2016). The themes of the narrative reliefs and the *stūpas* of Borobudur can be schematised as represented in Figure 1.

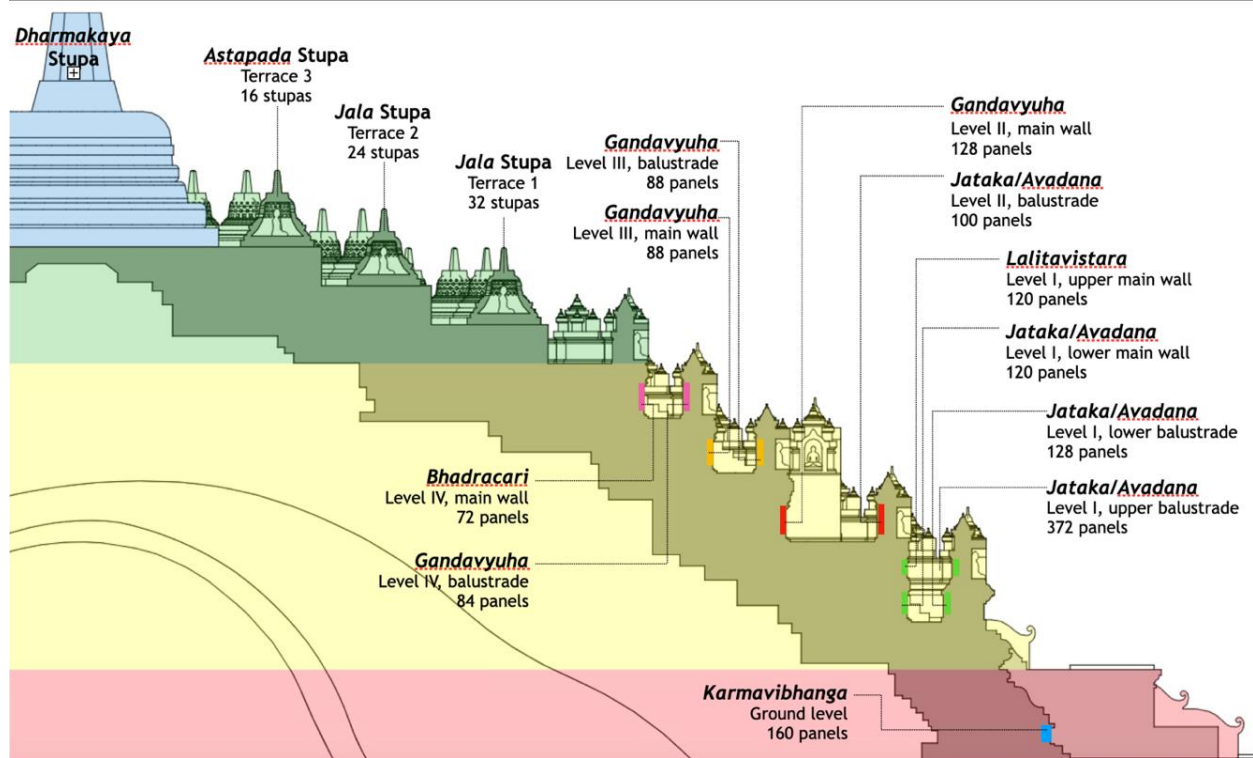


Fig. 1 Themes of the narrative reliefs and *stūpas* of Candi Borobudur. Source: Courtesy of Bumi Borobudur, 2022.

The Karmavibhaṅga on the Ground Level

Stutterheim associated the ground level of the *Karmavibhaṅga* with *kāmadhātu* for the reason that the reliefs depict causes and effects in the desire realms: “That is to say, the foot – which we have equated with the *kamadhatu*, the sphere of desire – does show the actions of daily life caused by desire and the resulting punishments in hell or sojournings in heaven” (1956: 38).

This association at first glance seems reasonable. However, when examined more closely, there are issues in regard to the broader coverage of *Karmavibhaṅga*. The analysis of karma (*Karmavibhaṅga*) covers a much wider topic although *kāmadhātu* (the desire realm) are also discussed in the former. The *Karmavibhaṅga* reliefs illustrate unwholesome actions and their unpleasant consequences as well as the wholesome actions that bring pleasant results. The first 85 panels of *Karmavibhaṅga* depict human existence with unfavourable and favourable conditions due to the bad and good actions being performed via body, speech, or mind.

There are 20 panels depicting the karmic results of being born in the three realms. Among them, 17 panels depict rebirth in *kāmadhātu* (the desire realm), two panels in *rūpadhātu* (the form realm), and one panel in *arūpadhātu* (the formless realm). These 17 panels of the desire realms are further divided into the following: panels O.86-92 concern birth in the realms of hell (O. denotes the ground level of the monument), panels O.93-94 concern birth in the realm of animals, panel O.95 concerns birth in the world of ghosts, panel O.96 concerns birth in the demon realm, panels O.97-100 concern birth in the human world, and panels O.101-102 concerns *kāmāvacaradeva* (*devas* in the realms of desire). Meanwhile, the two panels O.103-104 concern the birth as *rūpāvacaradeva* (*devas* in the form realm). One panel, O.105, concerns birth as *arūpyāvacaradeva* (formless *devas*) (Fontein 1989: 37-46). Therefore, the form realm and the formless realm were actually carved on the ground level, as part of the *Karmavibhaṅga*. In addition, the fact that the form realm and the

formless realm were depicted on O.103-105 (of a total of 160 panels) and not at the end, signifies that they are not the culmination of the *Karmavibhaṅga*.

The last 37 panels of *Karmavibhaṅga* (O.124-160) narrate various kinds of acts of generosity that yield good results. The acts of generosity are actualised by performing various gifts to monastics (monks), ascetics (Brahmans and mendicants), parents, elders, householders, as well as to sacred objects such as *caityas* (shrines). Such acts of donation lead to physical and mental wellness, taking rebirth in the *deva* realms, and attainment of spiritual realisations (Krom 1927, I: 47-98; Fontein 1989: 56-68). In fact, the left side of the last panel of *Karmavibhaṅga*, O.160 (Figure 2) illustrates the attainment of the four *phalas* (fruits), namely *srotāpanna* (stream-enterer), *sakṛdāgāmin* (once-returner), *anāgāmin* (non-returner), and *nirvāṇa* (*arhat*) (Tiānxízāi 984-1000: 0900c22). Thereupon, even at the ground level of *Karmavibhaṅga*, the last panel aims for the attainment of *nirvāṇa*, which transcends the three *dhātus*.



Fig. 2 O.160 (Ground level, panel 160). The left side (from the perspective of the viewer) of the last panel of *Karmavibhaṅga* depicts four figures in meditative posture, symbolising the attainment of the four *phalas* which transcend the three *dhātus*. Source: Kassian Céphas, KITLV 40106, in Leiden University Libraries Digital Collections, 1890-1891.

The Jātakas-Avadānas, Lalitavistara, and Gaṇḍavyūha-Bhadracarī on Level I-IV

Stutterheim associated the four square terraces (level I-IV), which portray *Jātakas-Avadānas*, *Lalitavistara*, and *Gaṇḍavyūha-Bhadracarī*, with the *rūpadhātu*, for the reason that these depictions go beyond the desire realms but have not transcended the form realms.

“A middle part (the four higher terrace walls and their niches with *dagob* decorations) ... where the *rupadhātu* should begin, i.e. the sphere where one has already relinquished desire (*kama*) but not yet form (*rupa*)” (Stutterheim 1956: 37-38).

Lancaster disproved that the association of *Candi* Borobudur with three *dhātus* did not provide a plausible explanation of the narrative reliefs on the main walls and balustrades.

“The explanations of the structure that rely on ... the three *dhatu*s appear to be inadequate ... The theories of the triple realm which equate the square terraces with the *rupadhatu* and the buried base with *kamadhatu* do not explain how the *kamadhatu* can be limited in this fashion ... most of the teaching done for and by bodhisattvas belongs in the *kamadhatu*, if this is the activity depicted on the square terraces, it is misleading to talk of that part of Barabudur as belonging to the *rupadhatu*” (1981: 202-203).

Lancaster’s primary argument was that bodhisattva activities are mainly carried out for sentient beings in various realms in *kāmadhātu*. That being the case, how would *Jātakas-Avadānas*, *Lalitavistara* and *Gaṇḍavyūha-Bhadracarī* reliefs, which are loaded with bodhisattva activities, symbolise *rūpadhātu*?

The *Jātakas-Avadānas*, totaling 720 panels, were sculpted in four registers: the upper row of the balustrades on the first level (372 panels), the lower row of the balustrades on the first level (128 panels), the lower row of the main wall on the first level (120 panels), and the balustrade on the second level (100 panels). *Jātakas* (literally: birth stories) mainly recount the stories of former births of the Buddha, when he was a bodhisattva (Buddha-to-be) who carried out virtuous actions imbued by wisdom to aim for the highest and complete awakening, such as the practices of *pāramitās* (perfections) (Ohnuma 2004: 400-401) and *Avadāna* (literally: a great or glorious act, achievement, heroic deed) (Monier-Williams 2005: 99; Wisdom Library). The subjects of *Avadānas* are more diverse and include actions propounded in *Dharma* and *Vinaya* (discipline), the workings of karma (action), the importance of devotion and faith, with genres covering biography of the Buddha, tales of Buddha’s former lives, and biographical accounts of both monastics and lay disciples (Tatelman 2004: 36-37). Sometimes the *Jātakas* are called the *Bodhisattva Avadāna*. In this sense, the *Jātakas* are a sub-category of the *Avadāna*, with the bodhisattva as the main character.

Some texts of the *Jātakas-Avadānas* depicted at Borobudur have been identified (Krom 1927, I: 230-478), among them being the *Jātakamālā* (Garland of Birth Stories) by Āryasūra, the *Divyāvadāna* (Heavenly Exploits), *Avadānaśataka* (A Hundred Glorious Deeds), *Avadānasārasamuccaya*, and the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* (Elucidation of the Meaning of the *Jātaka*). Not all the *Jātakas-Avadānas* reliefs have been identified. However, there are recurrent themes in the *Jātakas* and *Avadānas* which allow readers to draw plausible inferences about the key subjects represented. In general, *Jātakas-Avadānas* inform observant readers to live a meaningful way of life that brings benefit to others.

The second to last story of *Avadānas* on the lower row of the main wall on the first level at Borobudur is about *Maitrakanyakāvadāna*, carved on seven consecutive panels 106-112 (Krom 1927, I: 304-311). Judging from the underlying messages, this story perhaps represents one of the pinnacles of the practise of *bodhicitta* (thought of awakening), when the main character Maitrakanyaka willingly bore upon himself, out of compassion, all the suffering as the consequences of unwholesome actions of those who have done similar deeds like himself (Figure 3). This unselfish and altruistic act prompts him to be reborn in *Tuṣita* (Heaven of Joy) (Appleton 2014: 12-18). This story of *Avadāna* at Borobudur provides a perfect transition to the carvings of *Lalitavistara* where the narration started with the Great Bodhisattva addressing the teachings to the *devas* in *Tuṣita*.



Fig. 3 Ib.112 (first level, main wall, lower row, panel 112). The last panel of the *Maitrakanyakāvadāna* at Borobudur, where the main character, Maitrakanyaka (the standing figure who converses with the *yakṣa/rākṣasa*), due to his *bodhicitta*, determined to take on the sufferings of all beings upon himself, a powerful thought that prompted him to be reborn in *Tuṣita* (Heaven of Joy) (Krom 1927, I: 309-311). Source: Courtesy of Bumi Borobudur, 2022.

The term *Lalitavistara* is derived from the combination of *lalita* (played, sported) and *vistara* (extensive, fully; vast) (Monier-Williams 2005: 897, 1001). The *Lalitavistara*, which is carved on 120 panels on the upper row of the main wall on the first level, begins in *Tuṣita* when the Great Bodhisattva imparts teachings to the *devas* before descending to *Jambudvīpa*, taking birth in a noble family, demonstrating excellence in various arts and skills at a young age, living the household life, going forth, performing asceticism, conquering the armies of Mara, and culminating in the turning of the *dharmacakra* (Wheel of Dharma) (Krom 1927, I: 99-229; Dharmachakra Translation Committee 2022).

In the last panel of *Lalitavistara* at Borobudur (Figure 4), the Buddha is depicted seated in the center with two groups of audience carved on the left and right sides. The *śrāvakas* (listeners) are represented by five monks to the right of the Buddha (left side of the viewer) while the bodhisattvas led by Bodhisattva Maitreya are to the left of the Buddha (right side of the viewer). This concluding panel of *Lalitavistara* summarises how the Buddha addressed the teachings on the Four Noble Truths with twelve permutations as well as addressing the questions posed by Bodhisattva Maitreya on what kind of wheel constitutes the *dharmacakra*, which was set into motion by the Buddha (Dharmachakra Translation Committee 2022: 25.57-26.240). The *Lalitavistara* sets an exemplary life aimed for the highest and most complete awakening (Dharmachakra Translation Committee 2022: Chapter 22, 23, 26).

On this panel about turning the Wheel of Dharma, one would expect the Buddha in *dharmacakramudrā* (the hand-gesture of teaching), but at Borobudur the Buddha is represented with *vitarkamudrā* (the hand-gesture of “investigation” or “inquiry”). As a result, this panel provides a perfect transition to the *Gaṇḍavyūha* on the main wall on the second level which also begins with the *vitarka-mudrā* (Fontein 2012: 19-20).



Fig. 4 Ia.120 (first level, main wall, upper row, panel 120). The last panel of *Lalitavistara* in which the Buddha addressed his teachings to the five monks seated on the left and bodhisattvas seated on the right (viewer's perspective). Source: Courtesy of Bumi Borobudur, 2022.

The *Gaṇḍavyūha-Bhadracarī* is carved in 460 panels divided into five registers: 128 panels located on the second level of the main wall, 88 panels on the third level of the main wall, 88 panels along the balustrade, 84 panels along the fourth level balustrade, and 72 panels on the main wall. The *Gaṇḍavyūha* begins with an illustration showing how the Buddha, at the request of his audience, demonstrated the highest potential attainable by manifesting different qualities of an Awakened One, followed by his encouragement to the bodhisattvas to guide sentient beings. The story continues with the meeting between Mañjuśrī and Sudhana (the seeker), a merchant's son, serving as the point of departure of the long spiritual journeys in the *Gaṇḍavyūha*. Noticing that Sudhana was equipped with sufficient roots of virtue and upon his questions about bodhisattva conduct and practices, Mañjuśrī advised him to embark on a journey to acquire them from *kalyānamitras* (virtuous friends). Following the advice of Mañjuśrī and the subsequent virtuous friends, Sudhana travelled from one place to another to learn with 53-54 virtuous friends, the last three being the bodhisattvas Maitreya, Mañjuśrī, and Samantabhadra. On the visit to Maitreya Bodhisattva, Sudhana entered Maitreya's *kūṭāgāra* and witnessed the entire career as a bodhisattva of this future Buddha. After that, Sudhana and Mañjuśrī briefly meet for the second time, where Mañjuśrī teaches Sudhana infinite wisdom, *dhāraṇī* (retention), eloquence, *samādhi* (concentration), *abhijñā* (higher cognitions), and good conduct. At the end, Sudhana was able to meet Samantabhadra, witnessing various miraculous events in countless realms, allowing Sudhana to attain the perfection of knowledge and achieve his full potential - the highest and complete awakening and the experience of reality as is. This is then followed by reliefs that outline the vows to live in good conduct (*bhadracarī*) by Samantabhadra (Figure 5) (Cleary 1993: 1135-1532; Dharmamitra 2022: 1641-2256; Roberts 2022).



Fig. 5 IV.72 (fourth level, main wall, panel 72). The last panel of *Bhadracarī* with Samantabhadra (in the middle of the lower row, hands folded and holding a flower) and Sudhana (behind Samantabhadra, also holding a flower) and 17 Buddhas pervading all directions (Fontein 2012: 198). Source: Courtesy of Bumi Borobudur, 2022.

By examining the narrative reliefs, including their key and recurrent themes, it becomes evident that the reliefs on the first, second, third, and fourth levels – which depict *Jātakas-Avadānas*, *Lalitavistara*, and *Gaṇḍavyūha-Bhadracarī* – do not discuss *rūpadhātu* (the form realm) or represent its characteristics. Instead, these reliefs narrate the extensive activities for benefitting others while aiming for *anuttarasamyak sambodhi* (the highest and complete awakening).

The Latticed Stūpas on the Three Circular Terraces and the Central Stūpa

The simplicity and spaciousness of the three circular terraces with the latticed *stūpas* as well as the central *stūpa* prompted Stutterheim to associate them with the formless realm: “... finally everything above this (the three round undecorated terraces with *dagobs* and the main *dagob*) ... the *arupadhatu*, the sphere of formlessness, where one has left behind both desire and form ...” (Stutterheim 1956: 37-38).

The concern with associating the latticed *stūpas* on the three circular terraces and the central *stūpa* with *arūpadhātu* (the formless realm) is that it implies that the latter is the attainment aimed at in the Buddha’s teaching. Notwithstanding, there are textual records which attest that the formless meditative absorption was not the attainment sought by the Buddha. The *Lalitavistara* and the *Mahāsaccakasutta* both recount parallel episodes when Śramaṇa Gautama (prior to becoming the Buddha) studied under prominent meditation teachers of his time but found that these attainments did not lead to the ultimate goal. After being trained by Ārāḍa Kālāma in Vaiśālī and mastering the attainment of nothingness (the third stage of formless absorption), Gautama realised that this would not lead to liberation from suffering, and decided to go on his quest (Dharmachakra Translation Committee 2022: 16.5). Likewise, after being instructed by Rudraka (Uddaka Rāmaputta in Pali sources) in Rājagṛha and mastering the attainment of neither perception nor non-perception, the fourth stage of formless absorption, he realised that this attainment, too, did not lead to *viraga* (dispassion), *nirodha* (cessation of suffering), *upasama* (peace), nor to direct knowledge, self-awakening or *nirvāṇa* (Ñanamoli and Bodhi 1995: 332; Anālayo 2011: 232; Dharmachakra Translation Committee 2022: 17.5). He left the two teachers to continue his search for the ultimate.

The same applies to Borobudur that the formless realm does not constitute the intended aim. Gómez argued:

“If we assume the simpler view of Stutterheim, according to which the basic structure of the monument represents the three *dhatu*s, it takes no time to discover that it is even less tenable, for the identification of the realm of formlessness (*arupadhātu*) with the *dharmadhātu* and the ultimate goal of Buddhism is manifestly impossible” (1981: 180).

As Gómez (1981: 192) has cogently argued, if the ultimate goal of *Gaṇḍavyūha* were the formless realm, then Samantabhadra would have guided Sudhana towards its attainment at the conclusion of *Gaṇḍavyūha*. However, on the contrary, Samantabhadra directs Sudhana towards the realm of the bodhisattva’s conduct.

Scholars who have delved into the study of the *Gaṇḍavyūha-Bhadracarī* have attested that the latticed *stūpas* of the three circular terraces and the central *stūpa* symbolise the realm of the mind, which is the central theme of this sūtra. Gómez proposed that Borobudur represents *Gaṇḍavyūha*’s vision of the realm of reality in *kūṭāgāra* (Maitreya’s tower) (1981: 182), although he himself acknowledged the weakness of this proposition, as Sudhana’s vision in Maitreya’s *kūṭāgāra* is not the pinnacle of the depiction in Borobudur or in the *Gaṇḍavyūha sūtra* itself. Instead, the climax of Sudhana’s journey is his encounter with Samantabhadra, culminating in the vow and dedication to live in good conduct. Highlighting the issue of concluding the entire Borobudur monument as Maitreya’s *kūṭāgāra*, which he considers too specific, Douglas Edward Osto offered an alternative view. He suggested Borobudur as a whole can be seen as a plastic representation of the realm of reality (not as a specific *kūṭāgāra* of Maitreya). In this perspective, the central *stūpa* may symbolise *Dharmākaya* (the Dharma Body) or the non-differentiated *dharmadhātu*, while everything outside the central *stūpa* (the relief galleries and the *stūpas* on the circular terraces) may represent the differentiated realm of reality (Osto 1999: 73-74).

Salim Lee, a Buddhist scholar and a researcher on the sūtras of Borobudur, conveyed a similar point, asserting that the 72 latticed *stūpas* – 56 *stūpas* with diamond-shaped (*jala*) perforations and 16 *stūpas* with square (*aṣṭāpada*) perforations – of three circular terraces represent *dharmadhātu* (the realm of reality), the space of mind, the realm where all experiences appear and disappear; meanwhile the central *stūpa* represents the *Dharmākaya*, the pure nature of awareness, the ability to know, immanent and transcendent, empty and free from all concepts, the expressions of great compassion (Lee 2020: 217-218).

Thus, the studies conducted by those scholars conclude that the *stūpas*, both on the three terraces and the central *stūpa*, are a continuation of the narrative reliefs of *Gaṇḍavyūha*. These *stūpas* communicate *dharmadhātu* (the realm of reality) and the mind of the awakened one. Consequently, it becomes apparent that the *stūpas* on the three circular terraces and the central *stūpa* do not exemplify the formless realm. In summary, there appears to be no correlation between the themes of the narrative reliefs, the latticed *stūpas* on the three circular terraces, and the central *stūpa*, with the characteristics of *kāmadhātu*, *rūpadhātu*, and *arūpadhātu*.

Conclusion

The division of the three *dhātus* is not supported by the narrative reliefs, their referencing sūtras, nor does it constitute the goal intended on *Candi* Borobudur. The three *dhātus* are the divisions of *sattva-loka* (the realms or worlds of beings) or *gati* (the realms of rebirth); however, they are not divisions of Borobudur.

The interpretation of the three *dhātus* does not align with the Buddhist notions depicted at Borobudur either in terms of goals or the approach used to achieve these goals. The intended and ultimate aim at Borobudur, as testified by its depictions and sūtras, particularly the *Lalitavistara* and *Gaṇḍavyūha-Bhadracarī*, is the highest and complete awakening (*anuttara samyak sambodhi*, *anuttara-abhi samyak sambodhi*) or Buddhahood, not the formless meditative absorptions. The approach to achieve this goal is through the cultivation of extensive and boundless bodhisattva conduct and practices. Based on the visual depictions, textual references, and the underlying philosophical thoughts, what is represented by Borobudur go far beyond the three *dhātus*.

As observed by Dumarçay, despite the construction of Borobudur being carried out in several stages with numerous modifications and harmonisations of different components, ultimately the monument appears to convey a single concept, maintaining a sense of unity as a whole (1978: 62). In line with this view, Borobudur seems to embody an integrated idea as a roadmap (Lee 2020: 126, 141, 192, 235), depicting a path within a gradual framework, starting from foundational teachings and progressing towards more advanced ones. The *Karmavibhaṅga* contains fundamental teachings with an emphasis on ethics, abandoning harmful actions and instead promoting wholesome deeds. The *Jātakas-Avadānas* narratives emphasise altruism, reminding individuals of the consequences of their actions and intensifying virtuous deeds as essential gateways for spiritual progress, including the development of *bodhicitta* (thought of awakening) and the cultivation of perfections (*pāramitās*). Subsequently, the *Lalitavistara* portrays the extensive activities of an advanced bodhisattva, who is on the verge of attaining Buddhahood, demonstrating the actions undertaken by each future Buddha in the final birth before turning *dharmacakra* (the Wheel of Dharma).

In the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, the Buddha initially demonstrates the highest potential that one can reach and the pre-requisites needed to attain it. The narrative follows Sudhana's journey as he visits virtuous friends, primarily aimed at accumulating the two collections: *puṇyasambhāra* (the accumulation of merit) and *jñānasambhāra* (the accumulation of knowledge) – both aspects required for realisation of the ultimate goal. The accumulation of knowledge culminates in Sudhana's attainment of perfect knowledge which is *yathābhūtaṃ* (in accordance with reality; as is), or *yathābhūtaadarśana* (seeing reality as is).

However, the attainment of this goal does not lead the Buddhas to dwell in peace, as their perfect knowledge is imbued with *mahākaruṇā* (great compassion). Compassion towards sentient beings bound in cyclic existence prompts the Buddhas and bodhisattvas to not abide in peace but to guide and teach beings until the end of the cycle of existence. Therefore, the depiction at Borobudur does not conclude with Sudhana's realisation that is on par with Samantabhadra and all the Buddhas, but continues with the *Bhadracarī* reliefs depicting the Good Course of Conduct grounded in *bodhicitta*, post-awakening activities to guide others to achieve a similar state.

The latticed *stūpas* of the three circular terraces represent the entry into *dharmadhātu* (the realm of reality), the central theme in the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, with its culmination symbolised by the central *stūpa*

representing the *Dharmākaya* of the Buddha. Thus, Borobudur can be seen as depicting *mārga* (the path), serving as the foundation for achieving the goal, the means of attaining it, and the milestones marking the spiritual journey towards the highest and complete awakening within *bodhisattvayāna* (the bodhisattva vehicle).

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