BOROBUDUR
Majestic Mysterious Magnificent

presented by

PT. (PERSERO) TAMAN WISATA CANDI
BOROBUDUR, PRAMBANAN & RATU BOKO
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A masterplan for Borobudur’s development balancing archaeology, tourism, and development of the local economy was proposed as early as 1973. Ir. Rooseno, chairman, at the second meeting of the Consultative Committee for the Safeguarding of Borobudur, after discussion with the Regent of Magelang in whose territory Borobudur was located, and Prof. I Bagus Mantra, expressed the “profound conviction that the surroundings of Borobudur should be in full harmony with the monument and maintain its high cultural values, with its serenity and tranquility of the surroundings, which is important to spiritual enhancement. To this end, the area should be strongly protected against the polluting effect which may result from mass tourism. There should be a full integration of the present local population with the development of the surroundings of Borobudur. Other aspects of cultural development (performing art, handicrafts, etc.) should also be part of this planned development” (Pelita Borobudur Seri CC no. 2, 1982, p.10). After further technical studies, the Indonesian government in 1981 established a structure for managing Borobudur by dividing the temple and its surroundings into five concentric zones. This plan was reaffirmed in Presidential Decree Number One of 1992.

PT. (Persero) Taman Wisata Candi Borobudur and Prambanan (TWCB) was formed in 1979 as a government-owned business upon the recommendation of a study conducted by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). Later a third site, Kraton Ratu Boko, was added to the TWCB’s responsibilities. A Presidential Decree of 3 March 1980 set forth the purposes and objectives of the TWCB as covering preservation of the sites and their environments, increasing tourism, and conducting informal education to enhance appreciation of national culture. A Board of Directors was appointed, and a Board of Commissioners to supervise them. The first President Commissioner was Lieutnant-General Achmad Tirtosudiro, who was then Director General of Tourism. Two of the other three commissioners were also military officers; the other was the Director General of Culture, Prof. Dr. Harijati Soebadio.

Zone I encompasses 44 hectares, including the temple and the rest of the hill on which Borobudur stands. This zone, under the authority of the Borobudur Heritage Conservation Office, covers an irregularly-shaped plot extending between 25 and 200 meters from the temple, though the Directorate of History and Archaeology had requested that it extend as far as 300 meters in order to incorporate Bukit Dagi, a hill near Borobudur. Zone II is a supporting area of 80 hectares allocated to tourism and conservation. This zone is under the control of the TWCB. It constitutes a buffer zone, a garden and fence protecting the archaeological site. It contains the ticketing area, museums, and souvenir shops. The next three rings are owned by local communities but subject to special government regulations. Zone III, consisting of 932 hectares, is used for agriculture and dwellings of the local community. Zone IV, with a radius of 5 km, encloses at least 30 archaeological sites, including both Buddhist and Hindu remains. Zone V, with a radius of 10 km, is a preservation zone. Within this zone, no buildings may be built which may destroy archaeological remains.

Originally Borobudur was supervised by the Minister of Education and Culture. In 1998 after reformation of governmental structure, PT. Taman Wisata Borobudur Prambanan Ratu Boko came under the Ministry of State-Owned Enterprises (Badan Usaha Milik Negara). The Directorate General of History and Archaeology (Sejarah dan Purbakala) under the Minister of Tourism and Culture has operational control over the monument itself.
We know almost nothing of Borobudur except what can be seen. No written record survives to tell us who built it, when, or why. We can only use the monument itself as a basis on which to construct theories, which may never be provable. Borobudur is very different from all other Buddhist monuments, so that comparison with other buildings yields only vague conclusions. The carving of the reliefs and other decorations is consistent with the style used in central Java in the first half of the ninth century. A few words inscribed on the base use letters in an alphabet called early Kawi, also popular during that period.

Inscriptions tell us that Buddhism was the favorite religion of the Sailendra family which ruled central Java between about 780 and 832. Probably the construction of the monument began around 800, on a hill where terraces may already have been laid out for another project, either Hindu or megalithic. Mathematical calculations and decorative styles show that the work probably was finished around 850.

We do not know where the Sailendras’ capital was located. During this half-century, the Kedu plain where Borobudur stands is one possibility, but the Sailendras also built several other large Buddhist complexes 50 kilometers to the east, including Kalasan, Sojiwan, Sewu, and Plaosan. Borobudur in contrast stands almost alone, though archaeological research shows that numerous small temples, mainly Hindu, were also scattered over Kedu.
During this half-century there were two major kingdoms in Indonesia. One of these, later known as Mataram, governed central Java. Srivijaya in south Sumatra was the other. Both kingdoms possessed large ships which sailed to China and India, bringing back trade goods such as textiles and porcelain. They also carried passengers including Buddhist monks. Some of these were Chinese who went to India to procure Buddhist scriptures, but many more were Indonesian. Inscriptions in Nalanda and Nagapattinam record that monasteries were especially built in these places for Indonesians. Buddhist remains from the Borobudur period have also been discovered on Borneo, Bali, Sulawesi, and Karimun Island near Singapore.

Borobudur was built at a time when Buddhism was thriving in Southeast Asia, but was gradually declining in the land of its origin. Srivijaya was known as a major center of Buddhist scholarship. Though no descriptions of Javanese monasteries survive, Borobudur’s scale and complexity, and the few inscriptions on stone and metal which have survived from this period prove that Javanese monasteries were also actively involved in the development of Buddhist philosophy.

Buddhism was already over 1,000 years old by this time, and as it expanded, various schools of thought developed. The form which became popular in Indonesia is often termed Mahayana, but this label implies a simple two-fold dichotomy in which the alternative was Hinayana. In fact there was a whole spectrum of belief systems, which the Hinayana-Mahayana model does not adequately describe. The Javanese called believers in Buddha sogata. The essence of Indonesian Buddhism was a search for enlightenment, an endeavor which could be assisted by beings called bodhisattva. This type of Buddhism enjoyed wide popularity from China to Tibet as well as Nalanda and other parts of India.

Borobudur’s reliefs depict many bodhisattva, particularly in the upper three galleries. It has been suggested that Borobudur may symbolize the ten stages through which in some doctrines the devotee had to ascend to attain Buddhahood.
Several theories attempt to explain the meaning behind Borobudur’s basic plan, which consists of four square levels and three round levels, with a stupa (symbolic of the mound under which Gautama Buddha’s relics were buried) at the pinnacle. One of these suggests that the reliefs on the exterior of the temple foot symbolize the world of desire, or kamadhatu; the square terraces which bear the reliefs represent the world of forms, or rupadhatu; and the round terraces with Buddha images inside stupas represent the world of formlessness or arupadhatu, symbolized by the central stupa inside which an unfinished Buddha statue was discovered.

Another theory holds that the concentric circles and squares with the various Buddha images on them depict a mandala, a sacred diagram meant to enable believers to attain enlightenment. Scholars have noted that Sewu and Plaosan may also have been designed as mandalas. The word mandala appears frequently in Indonesian inscriptions of this period, but in contexts which show that it had a wide range of meanings, from areas of political control to ascetic communities. Six “Perfected Buddhas”, deities who never lived as humans, are depicted on Borobudur: Aksobhya on the east, Ratnasabhawa on the south, Amitabha on the west, and Amoghapasa on the north. On the round terraces the statues are believed to depict Vairocana. The identity of the sixth Buddha is unknown; he is represented by statues in the vitarka mudra, symbolizing the preaching of the first sermon, on the top of the wall which separates the square and round terraces. This makes it impossible to specify which mandala if any is represented at Borobudur.

Other important Javanese symbols include the mountain, associated with ancestral spirits. Javanese inscriptions often refer to temples as mountains. Their multistoried roofs depict the various levels of heaven on Mount Meru, a sacred mountain to Hindus and Buddhists, and the chambers in them symbolize caves in which hermits meditate to attain spiritual power. Buddha is said to have preached important sermons on mountains. In the pre-Buddhist period Javanese built terraces on mountain peaks, at such locations as Mt. Padang in west Java.

Another theory argues that Borobudur’s huge size is meant to symbolize the royal power of the Sailendras. It required considerable political and economic organization to build. Inscriptions at other temples such as Plaosan and the Hindu complex at Prambanan show that they were built by ruling monarchs. It is highly unlikely that any person or group except the king would have had the resources to build Borobudur.
The temples of Mendut and Pawon seem to have been built in conjunction with Borobudur. Both lie squarely on a line running due east from Borobudur. Pawon’s name comes from the Javanese word awu, meaning “ashes”. It is possible that offerings were burnt here; similar rituals termed homa are still practiced by some Buddhists in Japan and Nepal.

Mendut’s symbolism and function are more obscure. Eight bodhisattva are depicted on the exterior, while inside are images of Gautama in the center, Avalokitesvara on his right, and another on his left who may be Vajrapani or Manjusri. According to Dutch scholar J.L. Moens, Mendut and Pawon were components of a ceremony in which Buddhist rulers of central Java were consecrated as cakravartins. In this theory, the principal images of Mendut and Pawon depicted the rupa forms of the Nisyandabuddhas Maitreya and Manjusri. The ruler would have undergone abhisheka (consecration) at Mendut in front of a Maitreya image, then to Pawon. Although Moens’ theory is high speculative, it is probable that visitors to Borobudur went to Mendut and Pawon first as part of a ritual pilgrimage.

ABOVE: Candi Mendut today. This temple, three kilometers due east of Borobudur, formed a pilgrimage route together with Pawon. Its staircase walls and unusually long vestibule depict Buddhist legends. The roof has been considerably restored, but the uppermost portion is still missing.

OPPOSITE: (Above) Candi Pawon, two kilometers due east of Borobudur. The Javanese name, meaning “ashes”, suggests that offerings may have been burnt here. Such rituals are still practiced today in Nepal and Japan, where they are called homa. (Below) Pencil drawing of Candi Mendut, by Dutch visitor O.G.H. Heldring in 1884, showing the state of the monument before it was restored.
The “Great Exposition of the Law of Karma” is a Sanskrit Mahayana text which describes the causes and effects of people’s actions. A series of relief panels was accidentally discovered in 1885 when the broad platform surrounding Borobudur was disassembled. It was soon determined that these 160 panels illustrate this text. These were covered up again by 1891 in order to prevent the monument from collapsing. Four of these panels were uncovered again by Japanese officials during their occupation of Java during World War II. Five are now exposed for public viewing. Old Javanese inscriptions above a few of these reliefs still exist; they describe the themes of the panels. These inscriptions may have been brief instructions for the sculptors, which would have been erased later. Words still legible include “heaven”, “bell”, “village chief”, “king”, “covetous”, “evil speaking”, and “false creed”. One caption still visible is the word “ugly”, and the relief depicts the punishment for slandering others, which is to be reborn in this form.

One theory proposed that the reliefs were intentionally covered up because of their rather gruesome appearance, but this is unlikely. Depictions of the tortures of the damned in various Buddhist hells are still popular subjects for sculptures in Buddhist countries today. Well-known examples found in Thailand, Bali, and the Ten Courts of Hell in the Tiger Balm Gardens of Singapore, built in the early 20th century, expound the same general theme, with Chinese adaptations. The French architect Jacques
Dumarçay who participated in the restoration of Borobudur between 1973 and 1983, concluded that the reliefs were covered because the monument was unstable, and to rectify that design fault the base had to be expanded. This had the benefit of providing a raised path on which visitors could perform the ritual of circumambulating (walking around) the monument.

Dumarçay further speculated that the height of the balustrade on the first enclosing wall of Borobudur was increased at the same time, in order to enable sculptors to add another series of relief carvings there. This would make sense if the designers were required to equip Borobudur with 10 relief series, possibly corresponding to the stages of achieving bodhisattvahood. It does not however explain why they decided to carve more Jatakas instead of replicating the Law of Cause and Effect. Perhaps it was though inappropriate to depict hell on the same level as the life story of Buddha, shown on the opposite wall.

The reliefs like the Sanskrit text depict punishments found in different hells. People who fight each other are punished in Sanjiva hell; murder in Raurawa hell; murder of mothers in Avici hell. Other hells were reserved for killers of animals: one for bird hunters, another for those who catch fish and turtles, another for flaying sheep, even one for smoking rats from their holes. Punishments include walking on spears or through burning water, trampling by elephants, or rebirth as birds, four-footed animals, ghouls, or ugly people. The heavens in contrast are shown as being nearly identical, where wishing trees and kinnara, heavenly musician-birds with human heads, and flowers abound.

It seems that in Borobudur’s original design, visitors would first have been shown the most basic teaching: the rewards of virtue and the punishments of sins. People could have seen these lessons in stone without entering the monument’s sacred space. Perhaps for many people this was the closest they could get to the stupa at the pinnacle. We do not know who was allowed to ascend the staircases and view the more exalted reliefs. No doubt entry to the monument was not free for all; there must have been conditions attached for those progressing to each succeeding level.

Jacques Dumarçay has pointed out that Borobudur was modified several times. One modification consisted of adding doorways to the staircases on each level. This suggests that perhaps divisions between levels were more rigorously emphasized as time passed.