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# **The Ruins of the Buddhist Temples in the Progo Valley, Borobudur, Mendut and Pawon, Described by Isaac Groneman in his Book of 1912.**

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## **Abstract**

Here we discuss the book entitled Ruins of Buddhistic Temples in Praga Talley: Tyandis Barabudur, Mendut and Pawon (available at [archive.org/details/ruinsofbuddhisti00gronrich](http://archive.org/details/ruinsofbuddhisti00gronrich)), written by Isaac Groneman and published by H.A. Benjamins, Semarang, in 1912. We discuss in particular the Groneman's observations concerning the orientation of the temples, in reference to the path of the sun, and the descriptions of the statues, in particular those concerning the mudras of Buddha. As a reader can easily see, the Groneman's book is an outstanding report about the temples of Mendut, Pawon and Borobudur. It is essential for anyone who is studying the temples, not only for the scholars, but also for those persons which are fascinated by the Javanese antiquity.

**Keywords:** Archaeology, Archaeoastronomy.

Isaac Groneman was a physician in the Dutch East Indies and Indonesia, who wrote many publications on Javanese culture and antiquity. After the medical studies, in 1858 he left his homeland for the Dutch East Indies and became the sultan's physician. Once in Java, Groneman was fascinated by the traditional Javanese culture, and by the Hindu-Javanese monuments. He became the President of the Yogyakarta Archaeological Society [1], and was involved directly in the excavation of the Prambanan temple near Yogyakarta.

Isaac Groneman had a profound interest for the religious context of Candi Borobudur [1]. He considered Borobudur as a Buddhist sanctuary, obtaining support by King Chulalongkorn, at that time on his way to Java heading to explore civilization [1]. Groneman invited the king to Borobudur and this was "the beginning of friendship on the way to understanding the ancient Javanese heritage" [1]. And then, we find King Chulalongkorn mentioned in Groneman's book of 1912, published by H.A. Benjamins, Semarang. The book is entitled "Ruins of Buddhistic temples in Prägä valley: Tyandis Barabudur, Mendut and Pawon" (available at [archive.org/details/ruinsofbuddhisti00gronrich](http://archive.org/details/ruinsofbuddhisti00gronrich)). In the title we find the word "tyandi", that is "candi", "temple".

The book is a remarkable discussion of the three temples, which are linked by a ritual relationship and by an alignment of the sites. The temples of Mendut and Pawon are thought to have been early purification temples for pilgrims going to Borobudur [2]. On the Vesak Day, a procession along the alignment of the temples goes from Mendut to Borobudur. In his book, Groneman is following the same approach, and the first temple he discusses is Candi Mendut.

Here we report only a few of the remarkable observations made by Groneman. The reader finds them quoted in the following sections. I am reporting in particular the discussions concerning the orientation of the temples, in reference to the path of the sun, and the descriptions of the mudras of the statues of Buddha. Actually, as discussed in [3-5], the Borobudur temple can be linked to the zenith passage of the sun, and to the zenith is referring a mudra of some of the Buddha's statues at Borobudur. To conclude this introduction, let us stress that the Groneman's book is an outstanding report about the temples of Mendut, Pawon and Borobudur. This book is therefore essential for anyone who is studying these temples, not only for the scholars but also for the persons

fascinated by the Javanese antiquity.

## **Tyandi Mendut**

The description of Mendut starts from an observation. "The first striking thing we see is that, in contravention to almost all other buddhistic buildings, the frontage of these ruins have not been placed opposite to the East, the sunrise, but strange enough, opposite to the Northwest". This Groneman's observation leads us to consider that the entrance of the temple is facing the processional walkway to Borobudur. Probably, the walkway started from a royal palace further east of Mendut.

The Mendut temple possesses two sculptures before the entrance. To the left, the sculpture represents a princess in a garden of fruit-trees, with a baby at her breast, and many children all round. To the right, we see "an Indian, — not buddhistic — prince with much more children in such another garden". The children have a crescent of the moon on the hind part of their heads, but, as observed by Groneman, "both the children and their parents miss everything that might have spoken of a buddhistic character". Groneman tells that there are Dutch scholars who suppose the prince to be the Buddha's father and the woman to be the Buddha's mother. However, a different explanation of the sculptures was provided by the "buddhistic king of Siam", Chulalongkorn. Before giving the king's explanation, Groneman continues the description of the gigantic images we can see in this temple.

Inside the temple we find an altar-shaped throne, and on the throne sits a colossal Buddha statue, dressed in the manner of the southern Buddhists, having uncovered his right shoulder and arm. The hands before his breast have the posture (mudra) of the Mahayanists, that is, the followers of the "Big Carriage" (Great Vehicle). Groneman explains that this is the posture that the followers "of the northern church, generally (not always) give to the first of their five Dhyani-Buddhas".

In the Mendut temple, to the right of Buddha, we see a buddhistic prince seated on a throne, which is richly decorated with nagas, lions, and elephants. He wears the monk's hood and a small Buddha image in his crown. This characterises him as a Buddhist. The other prince that we see opposite him, to the left of the Buddha, seating on an equally rich throne, doesn't wear a monk's hood. This characterises him as not buddhistic prince. The two kings wear the prabha, or disk of light, on the back of their heads. The Siam's king, who visited Mendut in 1896, interpreted the images as follow. One of the princes, who is wearing, "like he does himself, a Buddha image in his crown," was "perhaps the king of the buddhistic empire, under whose reign the Barabudur was built". Further the King supposed the other images to represent the not-buddhistic father and predecessor. The explanation of the king "became so comprehensible and logical to me – tells Groneman - that I could not but accept and defend it against others, and so I came to the hypothesis that the ashes of the two kings (but certainly the son's ashes) must have been buried in this tyandi".

## **Shailendra dynasty**

A description of Mendut is given in [6], where we find that the temple was built around early ninth century AD. Mendut is the oldest of the three temples, so it was built before Pawon and Borobudur [6]. From the Karangtengah inscription, we known that the temple was built and finished during the reign of King Indra of Sailendra dynasty. The inscription is dated 824 AD. It is telling that King Indra "built a sacred building named Venuvana". The name means "bamboo forest". Archaeologist JG de Casparis has connected the temple mentioned in Karangtengah inscription with the Mendut temple [6,7].

The Shailendra dynasty was the name of an Indonesian dynasty that emerged in 8th century Java, whose reign marked a cultural renaissance in the region [8,9]. As told in [8], Shailendras were active promoters of Mahayana Buddhism and covered the Kedu Plain, also known as Probo Valley, of the Central Java, with several Buddhist

monuments. One is the colossal stupa of Borobudur. The Shailendras are considered to be a thalassocracy, that ruled the maritime Southeast Asia [8]. But they have also promoted intensive rice cultivation on the Kedu Plain.

In [8] we can find that it is suggested that Shailendra was a native Javanese dynasty, and that the Sanjaya dynasty was a branch of the Shailendras. So the members of the Shailendra family were initially the rulers of the Medang Kingdom. As we can read in [8], the association of Shailendra with Mahayana Buddhism began after the conversion of Panaraban or Panangkaran to Buddhism. The Tale of Parahyangan tells that the King Sanjaya ordered his son, Rakai Panaraban or Panangkaran, to convert to Buddhism, “because their faith in Shiva was feared by the people in favor of the pacifist Buddhist faith” [8]. Actually, this is in agreement to the King Chulalongkorn’s observation.

### **Tyandi Pawon**

After a detailed discussion of Mendut, Groneman continues describing Pawon. Leaving Mendut behind us, we cross shortly after a small iron bridge built over the river Elo. Then, after having been ferried over the Progo river, and moving westwards, we arrive at the “little dukuh of Brajanala ... where we see the very small tyandi Pawon before our having turned into the broad kenari-avenue which leads” to Barabudur. Groneman tells that in the past this tyandi had been pulled down and afterwards rebuilt again. Its name, which means "kitchen", is “clear enough to make us understand how the Javanese would have shown the striking contrast between this small temple and the other more extensive one, as if it were a kitchen compared with a mansion or temple”. Then Groneman explains why the temple was pulled down and then rebuilt.

The small ruin that Groneman sees has some conformity to the many grave temples, which are surrounding the main temple of Candi Sewu, in Prambanan valley. “But this conformity is not a perfect one”. At Pawon, we find a small square room with a small porch, “we enter by means of some narrow treads flanked by the Garuda-Naga ornament, but this room is empty and unadorned”. Shallow niches exist in each sidewall, in correspondence of the place where “once may have stood a pedestal and image”. Like in Candi Mendut, Groneman explains that the niches may have been used to light the inner-part of the temple.

According to Groneman, this temple was a mausoleum built to receive an urn containing the ashes of a guru or monk. As in the case of Mendut, Groneman observes that “It is an extraordinary thing that even the entrance of this incontestably true buddhistic temple had not been made on the east side but to the west”. Again we find an observation on the orientation of the temple. As we have already mentioned, this temple is on the processional walkway to Borobudur.



## **Tyandi Barabudur**

“After having walked through the umbrageous kenari-avenue and the village of Bara ... we shall arrive within half an hour at the hill upon which we see stand the pasanggrahan, and the colossal ruin”. It is an “enormous mass of stone gradually developing itself in majestic lines and forms, in all the terraces, following each other in a regular range of succession till we see rise in their centre the high cupola now covered again by a cone with three sun-shades”.

It is a pilgrimage site and then “He who would approach this dagob to sacrifice his flowers to the Buddha, ... was obliged to mount all these terraces, and walk along these sculptures”. During this walk, the pilgrim can find in the temple a “revival of the Buddha and his doctrine”, which is showing how to reach the nirvana, the “infinite not-to-be as the end purpose of all life, and the deliverance of all the miseries of a sensual existence”. And then, let us follow, as Groneman did, “the way the pilgrim took, and mount the hill which carries this heavy mass of stone”. So Groneman starts the discussion of first terrace of the temple.

Then we arrive to the doorways.

Four doorways are present in the structure, which are leading to stairs, that according to Groneman are the weak points of the architecture. At the foot of the doorway, there are naga-heads, that “ended into outward turned mythical monster-heads which, at first sight remind us of elephants rather than of snake-like animals”. Wilhelm von Humboldt and other European examiners, like the Dutch scholar Leemans, considered these monstrous figures as elephant's heads, “without perceiving however, that they changed into serpent's bodies when seen on the side-posts of the doorways”. Also Groneman had been misguided himself, and defended this error against the King of Siam. But the King succeeded in convincing him, by logical argumentation, that the naga represents a power inimical to Buddhism. The monster, according to the Siam opinion, is Rahu “who also tries to devour the sun during every eclipse”. Very interesting this observation linking the temple to astronomy.

As explained in [10], eclipses are battles between Rahu and the Sun, Surya. The myth referring to these battles concerns the amrita, the nectar of immortality, produced by the Churning of the Ocean of Milk. After this nectar has been prepared, it is distributed to the gods, the devas. In [10], it is told that Rahu, an asura (semi-god), sitting among the gods, was able to drink the amrita. But this fact was observed by Surya and Chandra, the Moon, and Visnu was alerted. Visnu decapitated Rahu. Having drunk “just a bit of the amrita”, only Rahu's head was made immortal while his body died. It is the head of Rahu that attacks the Sun during the eclipses. The head swallows it, but Rahu has no body to digest the sun, and then the eclipse ends and the sun appears again [10].

After reporting the King's observation on Rahu, Groneman continues describing the first gallery. We see that the two walls of the gallery are decorated with imageries which are richly framed. An “uninterrupted band of exquisite festoons has been affixed above these sculptures under the cornice of the back-wall. ... On the back wall we see similar temple-groups, but all of them, even the small niche-temples, are crowned with dagobs and cones”. Moreover we see rosettes and guirlandes with birds. On the five encircling walls of Borobudur, “we see no less than 432 niches provided with Buddha-images ... We now turn to the left in order to begin our walk along the sculptures of the upper series of the back-wall. This wall is ... showing us a comparatively well explained row of following events which give us an idea about the life of the Buddha Siddharta, Gautama, the Shakyamuni, from beginning to end”.



Image courtesy <https://pixabay.com/it/users/reggaelooper-3002941/>

Here we find a remarkable observation. "Let us begin our walk to the left of the eastern staircase in order to return to our starting-point following the course of the sun of the northern hemisphere (29), going through the South, West and North. This order of succession regulated after this sun, we always find back on these and other Hindu ruins; more or less a witness of the northern origin of Javanese Buddhism". In the note (29), Groneman tells that he was the first (in 1887) to observe this link to the apparent course of the sun seen by the inhabitants of the northern hemisphere. "It is an important fact to those who believe the Buddha a sun-god". Let us stress that Candi Borobudur is placed in the tropical zone and therefore the path of the sun during the year is different from that observed in the northern hemisphere at latitudes above the Tropic of Cancer [3-5]. Therefore, the direction of the pilgrimage is honouring the northern origin of Buddha. For moving to reach the top of the monument, also the King of Siam followed this direction.

"For convenience' sake, and in order to assist the visitor in finding" the sculptures, Groneman counts them "from the preceding staircase or from the first till the ninth wall-angle, and begin with the eastern staircase". And then Groneman starts discussing the scenes related to Buddha's life.

The discussion of all the other statues continues in the Chapters VIII and IX.

In Chapter X we arrive at the top of the monument, where we find three circular terraces. On the first "we see stand 32 open worked dagobs or tyaityas; on the second there are 24, -and on the third and highest 16, so altogether 72. And within this circle rises the majestic middledagob as the only real dagob or stupa representing the leading idea, the final purpose of the whole ruin". We can also admire the surrounding mountainous landscape. The valley of Progo river lies westward "at the foot of mount Menoreh, ... and, to the east, of the high twin volcanoes Merbabu and Merapi, and, to the north, of the Sumbing, the highest volcano of this part of Central Java".



Image Courtesy Pandu Adnyana, Wikipedia.

### **Mudras of Buddha**

I found the book of Groneman when searching for some discussion about the statues of Buddha and the fact that they have different mudras, that is, positions of the hands, linked to North, East, South, West and Zenith, which represent the five cardinal compass points according to Mahayana. As told by Wikipedia [11], at Borobudur, "the first four balustrades have the first four mudras: North, East, South and West, of which the Buddha statues that face one compass direction have the corresponding mudra. Buddha statues at the fifth balustrades and inside the 72 stupas on the top platform have the same mudra: Zenith. Each mudra represents one of the Five Dhyani Buddhas; each has its own symbolism". The reference given for this discussion is [12].

In the Chapter XI we find what Groneman tells about the statues representing Buddha. We can see that all the statues are in a sitting posture with crossed legs, "almost in the same posture the Javanese call *sila*, but upright". The statues are dressed with a thin mantle uncovering their right arms and shoulders. They have the tiara, the round hair-knot, "on their heads all covered with short curls. Even the urna, the little tuft of hair on their fronts is still to be seen on many a sculpture, and on the other ones, less accurately hewn, they are forgotten". For what concerns the posture of all the statues, Groneman notes that it is showing resignation and peace, "and may speak of the later final dissolving in the nirvana, the joy and painless not-to-be".

About the mudras of the statues of Buddha we find a detailed discussion.

"Among the sculptures placed opposite the five zones of heaven, the East, South, West and North and the Zenith, there is to be seen a slight difference in the posture of the right hands, and something more difference in the posture of the two hands with regard to those sculptures we see on the round terraces".

All the sculptures on the five encircling walls have their left hands in their laps, with the palm on the right foot. Then Groneman describes in details the corresponding postures of the hands, the mudras. For what concerns the sculptures of the open worked *tyaityas* on the three round terraces, the statues raise their two hands before the epigastric region, "the left one with the palm and the bent finger-tips in an upward direction, the right one with the palm to the left and the fingers bent over those of the other hand". Moreover, these statues "all miss the glory".





One of the 72 statues of Buddha in open worked tyaityas on the three round terraces. Photographer Giovanni Boccardi. For the UNESCO Connected Open Heritage project.

Groneman tells that there is still another sculpture, unique of its kind. It had been found in the middle-dagob. It is a Buddha image corresponding in size to all other sculptures, but the posture of the hands "tallied with those on the eastern lower walls". After a discussion about this specific statue, Groneman distinguishes the statues into three groups: 1. 432 Buddhas in the open temple-niches on the five encircling walls, which are seated on lotus-thrones and crowned with glories. 2. 72 Buddhas in the open worked tyaityas on the three round terraces, without any glory or lotus-throne. 3. The only Buddha of the large dagob entirely sequestered, without glory or throne.

Groneman is then mentioning Wilhelm Von Humboldt, telling that he was the first who considered five of the six Buddhas, to be the representations of the five Dhyani-Buddhas. "Especially in the posture of the hands there is some conformity between five of the six Barabudur-images and the five Dhyani-Buddhas such as we see them hewed in Asia". Moreover Groneman is mentioning Alfred Foucher.

According to Foucher, there are seven groups of mudras. They are: 1) the bhunisparsya mudra (East); 2) the vara-mudra (South); 3) the dhyani-mudra (West); 4) the abhaya-mudra (North); 5) in the 64 niches on the fifth and highest wall the vitarka-mudra (the gesture of discussion); and among the 72 cupolae of the 3 circular terraces, 6) the dharma-tyakra-mudra (mark of distinction). Finally, we find the only sculpture from the wholly closed dagob, hewed in the bhumi-sparsya-mudra. After referring about these mudras, Groneman stresses that a slight difference exists between Foucher's ideas and his own ideas, which are supported by the observations of King Chulalongkorn.

Let us conclude our article on the Groneman's book - a book essential for anyone who is studying Borobudur - as he concluded his discussion on the mudras. He tells that in Borobudur, we can find Buddha hewed as preacher, "preaching the doctrine to all people, and consequently towards all the



regions of heaven". According to Groneman the fact that this preaching preacher "has been placed upon the highest wall" of the monument is easy to understand, because the preaching of the doctrine is the highest expression of Buddhism, "and possibly referred to both the world of the four zones of heaven and to the one of the celestials in the zenith".

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