



## The tunālas of Itum Bāhāh

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Fig. 51 (opposite, left). Already in a deplorable state when photographed in 1969 or 1970, this exquisite early carving, radiocarbon dated 770–970, was soon allowed to disintegrate under a collapsed roof. Itumbāhāḥ, strut 1. The presence of a child is unique among the earliest struts.

Fig. 52 (opposite, right). As with Itumbāhāḥ strut 1, all that remains of strut 2 is a photograph from 1969 or 1970.

Fig. 53 (left). For Itumbāhāḥ strut 3, there is not only a photograph, but most of the yakṣa support (fig. 54) found in the rubble when the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust began the restoration of Itumbāhāḥ.

Fig. 54 (above). By 2004 all that physically remained of the three old Itumbāhāḥ struts was this mutilated yakṣa crouched on a fragment of rock motif, but it was the key to dating them, through radiocarbon analysis, to 770–970.

Source: *The Antiquity of Nepalese Wood Carving, A Reassessment*, Mary Shaphered Slusser, (page 62–63).



## The *tunālas* of Itum Bāhāh (Kathmandu):

Iconographic study in the context of a restoration program

David Andolfatto

The vihāras of the Kathmandu Valley are depositaries of a rich iconographic tradition. These elaborate repertoires are found on different parts and supports of the Buddhist institutions, e.g., caityas, maṇḍalas, exoteric and esoteric shrines. Our interest will focus here on carved wooden struts (nep. *tunāla*) and the information it carries concerning the building and its community. The first part of the study mainly describes all the quadrangle's carvings while the second part gives an interpretation of settings and tries to reconstitute their history.

Since very few monasteries have kept their architectural unity and the divine cohort that usually adorns it, it is rather difficult to study a complete set of struts. Van Kooij produced a very interesting analysis of the Kathmandu Chusya Bāhā's struts (1977) and more recently Slusser published a precious survey about ancient Nepalese woodcarvings that were enriched by very helpful radiocarbon testing (2010). The case of Van Kooij study is very rare in Newari Buddhism for the Chusya Bāhā presents the oldest and most complete group of struts. Other sites like Uku Bāhā and Kwā Bāhā (both in Patan) show more or less complete sets.

Though it is hazardous to pronounce whether an iconographic ensemble is complete or not, a group of carvings may reflect the community's choices in matters of ritual texts and symbolism, as the following lines will seek. The great difficulty resides in the fact that most of the items are often un-contemporaneous and their origins may be doubtful.

## History

The monastery was founded, or at least rebuilt during the second-half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Prior to that may have been a Licchavi structure (5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century). The supposed antiquity of the complex ranks it among the main and oldest monasteries of the Kathmandu Valley. As is usual in such structures the compound received various additions like the caturvyuhacaitya (1551) or the magnificent wooden pinnacle of the entryway (1627, removed to another location after theft attempts).

Various incidents in the history of Itum Bāhā have also modified its aspects and art. In 1663 and 1861 the structure was reconstructed. But the most sadly famous event is the massive Nepal-Bihar earthquake of 1934 that shook the Valley (magnitude 8.1) and levelled numerous constructions to the ground. As in many other sites this event severely modified the quadrangle's architecture: only the ground floor remained at Itum Bāhā.

## Architecture

Itum Bāhā retained most of the classical elements of the architectural type that is the bāhā. It consists in a quadrangular structure of four two-storied wings made of bricks. The entry to the compound is made from the east and, placed in the centre of the courtyard is a square construction housing a svayambhū (self manifested) caitya. The main shrine, that of Akṣobhya, occupies the central part of the western wing. Tiles now cover the restored roofs, except for the eastern part, still covered by sheet steel. Plain and sculpted struts support the overhanging roofs.

The whole complex, with the surrounding courtyards seemed to have served as a fort (kot) during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, as the narrow passageways leading to the large court would confirm. This wide space hosts other



Drawing of one of the Itumbāhāh strut's mutilated *yakṣa*. Drawing Bijay Basukala



Existing struts of Itumbāhāh East Wing courtyard facade. *Photographs October 2013*



shrines, caityas, smaller bāhās and nanīs (courtyards) and constitutes a real centre of activity.

Fairly rare, pictures taken before the 1934 earthquake are of valuable help. Such is the case of a photograph of an "International Buddhist Conference" held in front of the monastery. This precious document reveals that the eastern wing has a central door, surmounted by a tympanum (that of "Buddha's Victory over Māra") and that the roof is supported by struts. We can count twenty-height struts: sixteen seem carved while twelve are plain. Sculpted and plain elements are alternated. Among the sixteen carved pieces, two are occupying the corners.

Nowadays, before the completion of the restoration work by the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust, five sculpted tūnalas remain, located to the eastern façade.

Inside the courtyard, the eastern wing counts five struts as well, all carved. To the opposite side, adorning Akṣobhya's shrine are six sculpted and painted struts. The southern wing has four recently restored struts and one at the junction with the western wing. Thus, to allow a better understanding of the present complex scheme of Itum Bāhā's struts it is preferable to first consider the shrine's tūnalas.

### **Akṣobhya's shrine**

As others already stated in a previous restoration report, the painting of struts was probably initiated by the end of the nineteenth century, by the occasion of major celebrations such as kings' coronations. Painters known as Citrakāras perform this specific work. Their arrival in the Valley is certainly due to the Ranas who hired craftsmen from India. After the 1934's earthquake, the monastery was reconstructed and its completion in 1939 is supposed to mark the painting of the struts. It was decided to keep the colour scheme of the Akṣobhya

shrine's struts and to restore it in 2004.

The common feature of exoteric shrines is to visually (not to say iconographically) indicate the presence of the deity (new. kwāḥpāḥ dyah), by placing sculptures of Buddha's disciples (Śariputra and Maudgalyayana) on each door-jamb, sculpted pinnacles (skt. toraṇa) representing the enshrined god (traditionally Akṣobhya-Śākyamuni Buddha) above the entrance. Carved struts supporting the overhanging roof would usually have images of four Jinas (transcendental Buddhas), sometimes completed by a fifth Jina and Vajrasattva. These images ordinarily show the Buddhas in their "tantric aspects" (the expression covers a wide range of interpretations and is here understood as a non-human aspect, i.e. with multiple arms and faces and elements like skull garlands).

Here the shrine's door is surmounted by a fine wooden toraṇa depicting (Mahā)Vairocana seated on a lion throne. Two couples of lions (one in metal, the other one in stone) and mounted bells are placed on each side of the entry.

Instead of the five usual Jinas and Vajrasattva, six goddesses are magnificently carved on the roof's supports. The nature of the divinities was subject to some very contradictory identifications. Rau for instance saw four of the seven Hindu Mātṛkās, i.e. Mahālakṣmī, Indrāyanī, Vaiṣṇavī, Kaumārī and two central Bhairavas. Gutschow and Schrom identified (Mahā) Akṣobhya and (Mahā) Vajrasattva in the centre, surrounded by their female partners. The first assertion obviously shows an erroneous Hindu reading for the Saptamātṛkās are always seen all together and the supposed Bhairavas are more or less of an unclear gender, as the following lines will demonstrate. The latter interpretation leads us to see Akṣobhya and Vajrasattva, each accompanied by two Prajñās.

In tantric Buddhism the gods are often depicted with

their female counterpart and as such the feminine aspect is known as the *prajñā* while the masculine is the *upāya*. As a *Prajñā*, the goddess is the reflection (skt. *svābha*) of the described deity and she consequently carries the same attributes. The Jinas may sometimes hold a *Prajñā* with specific features, as is the case for *Ratnasambhava* with *Māmaki* or *Amoghasiddhi* with *Locanā*. Thus it is tempting to identify here a group of *Prajñās*. However, their colours are different from textual prescriptions and that brings us to another iconography.

This iconography was illustrated in Van Kooij's short study. The author identifies five *Pañcarakṣās* and *Akṣobhya* (third strut from the left). This assumption correctly relates the feminine aspect of the deities with their *vāhanas* (animal mounts) and bodies' colours.

When looking at the texts, we notice that the god's colours are followed, though with slight variations for the side faces. Most attributes were missing before the restoration. Arms and new features were added, with more or less liberty or distance towards the texts. In the image of the first strut for instance, attributes are taken from different texts describing the deity (*Pratisarā*).

These quick considerations may be extended to many sites in the Valley and this leads us to the fact that carvers (skt: *Mūrtikāra*) and painters follow their own illustrations contained in their model books (new. *thyasaphū*, skt. *kalāpustaka*).

At the same time craftsmen probably jumbled up different textual sources (and their adjoined painted illustrations) and added their own inspiration to create original images.

The *Pañcarakṣās* are five apotropaic mystic prayers (skt. *dhāraṇī*) personified as goddesses associated to the five Jinas. Their colours on carvings are the same and their attributes correspond to the texts (*Sādhnamāla* 201, 206

and *Niṣpannayogāvalī* 18). Therefore there might be no doubts for this identification since it explains unusual attributes of the "Jinas" like the trident (skt. *triśūla*) and the axe (skt. *paraśu*) that holds "Vairocana" (*Pratisarā*), absent from its descriptions.

Nevertheless, the two central struts show two rare depictions of the same pot-bellied deity, the originality of it lying in the setting of the two images side by side. The third strut from the left represents (*Mahā*) *Sāhasrapramardiṇī* as a fierce goddess wearing the traditional implements of irritated deities (bone apron, skull garland, etc.). It is related to the four other *Pañcarakṣās* by the *vāhana* it stands on, i.e. the elephant, *Akṣobhya*'s emblem and the objects handled. Indeed, the attributes carried in the eight hands are, with the exception of the jewel and the bell, found in the depictions of a white and appeased *Sāhasrapramardiṇī*. Paired to the goddess is another fierce-looking divinity standing on two human-like bodies. To our knowledge these two bodies are only encountered in manuscripts paintings where *Sāhasrapramardiṇī* is blue and sits directly on them. The objects found in the hands are described in the *Sādhnamāla* 206 only, the text depicting a fierce goddess of black appearance with "vampire" teeth.

As evoked above, most shrines possessing carved wooden struts (an obvious sign of wealth) present the five Jinas and *Vajrasattva*, the Buddhas' teacher. It would therefore have been expected to see the same layout repeated here. In that case the image on the fourth strut would thus be identified as the *Vajrasattva prajñā*, *Vajrasattvāmikā*. Van Kooij sees *Sāhasrapramardiṇī* pairing *Akṣobhya* standing on his elephant.

It has to be noted here that the femininity of the two sculptures involved is not explicit, i.e. the breasts are not as developed as in the other carvings, but merely suggested by few folds. It demonstrates how sculptors were able to play with iconographic patterns.

Therefore we suggest that two different conceptualisations of Sāhasrapramardiṇī drawing in different sources (textual and pictorial), are placed above the shrine's entryway, the access to the cella (skt. garbhagrha) housing the statue of Buddha-Akṣobhya. While the right image follows the Sāadhanamāla 206, the left image is a hybrid of the Niṣpannayogāvali 18 (for the objects handled) and the Sāadhanamāla 206 (for the black colour and the fierce aspect). The fierce aspect of the two Sāhasrapramardiṇī undoubtedly recalls the fact that the goddess is the personified prayer (skt. dhārani) against demons. The two idols thus double this apotropaic nature. Likewise, the relation between the present layout and the text of the Pañcarakṣā is emphasized by the order in which the goddesses are placed. The Pañcarakṣā manuscripts invoke the dhāraṇīs in the following order: Pratisarā, Sāhasrapramardiṇī, Mahāmāyūrī, Mantrānusāriṇī and Sītavati (the two latter being interchangeable). The logic followed at Itum Bāhā is very similar to that of the text, still recited nowadays in bāhās, and highlights the close relation between architecture, iconography and texts. Together they create architectural maṇḍalas that devotees may physically explore and experience.

The blue colour (instead of black in Sāadhanamāla 206), the ardhaparyāṅka pose, the skull garlands and the bristly hair on the two central struts, recall the shrines protectors' images of Tibet and other irritated deities of tantric Buddhism. Instead of fierce faces the gods show appeased expressions.

Tantric literature created Buddhist versions of the Astabhairavas (eight Bhairavas) named Krodhas. Their aspect evokes some features of our present carvings and even if there are few doubts about their identification, the propitiatory location above the shrine's door and the association with the Pañcarakṣās is notable.

Pañcarakṣās and Krodhas are found together in Guṃ Bāhāḥ (Sankhu) and Chusya Bāhāḥ (Kathmandu) .

According to D. Bangdel the tradition of displaying the Dhāraṇīs together with the Krodhas reflects “the complex Tantric Buddhist soteriological methodologies of sixteenth-century Newar Buddhism.” Without saying that the two dancing Jinas were considered as Krodhas by the original image-makers, it is tempting to suggest that the iconography is exploiting a nexus of visual and symbolic correspondences. Though the present setting is probably posterior to the 16th century, it shows the continuity of the pairing of Pañcarakṣās and Krodhas-like subjects until more recent times.

Pañcarakṣās and Jinas are related, and that allows us to compare the iconographic setting of kwāhpāḥ dyah shrine with others from the Valley. Though none of the schemes are the same, they share similarities enlightening a general organisation. Jinas of the southern and eastern quarters of the maṇḍala are largely placed to the left side, those of the northern and western quarters occupy the right side while the central and supreme Jinas (Vairocana and Vajrasattva) are often placed to the margins or the centre . At Itum Bāhā the presence of the enshrined Buddha-Jina is marked by images of two variations of its Pañcarakṣā manifestation.

## East Wing

### East wall

Few struts remain in the façade of the monastery's entryway. As stated above, sixteen carved tūnalas were supporting the overhanging roof. Five remain to the northern corner and to this number we shall add three stolen pieces.

Except for the corner strut, they all depict three-headed gods standing on lotuses. No arms remain. Thus only the lower registers with carved Mahāsiddhas (“Great Accomplished Ones”) may bring some light to the subject. From the left to the right:

A seated character holds a dog in the right hand and a bowl in the left one. He wears large earrings and has pearly Buddha-like hair. An inscription below indicates; Kukuripā. This Kukkuripa, an ex-Brahmin, is famous for having fed a Ḍākinī disguised as a starving bitch for twelve years.

The second strut presents the Siddha Nāgarjunapā seated in padmāsana, executing the dharmacakra-mudrā and surmounted by nāgas. Only the gesture differentiates Nāgarjunapā from Amoghasiddhi and the inscription running below confirms his identity. Former Brahmin, he is the alchemist Siddha.

The next sculpture depicts a character riding a tiger. His right hand holds a sword while the left one is broken. The inscription below the rider reads “kuvū[...]”. The tiger identifies Ḍombi Heruka (or Ḍombipa), a king of Magadha who lived between the 8th and 9th centuries and took a twelve-year-old outcast girl as a tantric consort. Ḍombi is famed for practising woman worship (skt. strī-pūja).

The lower part of the fourth tūnala shows a Siddha seated in a yogic posture: right leg folded, left one raised, his foot slightly touching his upraised left forearm. The left hand grips a bell topped by a vajra while the right hand holds a bowl. The yogic asana somehow recalls some Ḍāikini's postures. Below the scene, in foliage, an inscription reads “gathā[...]” and this leads us to recognize the siddha Ghaṇṭāpa, the bell-ringer. He also united himself with a twelve-year-old girl, the daughter of a prostitute. A large inscription runs at the basis of the strut and may be translated as: “In the name of dead father, Dhanadeva (his) son Jayadeva offered height “struts” and two corner “struts”.

The corner strut represents a classical ithyphallic hippogriff (new. mala or mola) with a monkey climbing on his penis. The lower register shows a musician.

The five struts all belong to the same period and show identical iconographic features.

### **The three missing śalabhañjikās**

During the 1960's three struts showing yakṣīs-śalabhañjikās (forest demon/nymph) were placed above the entryway of the monastery. Following the collapse of the roof in 1972, the three sculptures were stolen . These very rare struts were among the oldest and finest wooden sculptures of Kathmandu Valley. By chance, and thanks to M. S. Slusser, we have pictures of the tūnalas before the event corresponding to Slusser's. The only remain of the sad incident is the yakṣa support of one of the struts. This was enough for a radiocarbon dating who gave the dates 770-970, placing these productions in the continuity of Bhelacē capāḥ (660-860) and Uku Bāhā's (Patan, 690-890) carvings . According to the author, and we agree with it, the struts most probably originated from somewhere else or from a former structure, as it is ascertained by traces of truncating.

Slusser describes the struts as following :

“Sculpted almost in the round, the yakṣīs are very tall and, compared with other early śalabhañjikā figures, exceptionally slender. They are represented in the bloom of youth, with improbably narrow waists but ample hips and opulent breasts whose weight creates a fleshy roll below them. All wear the towering, side-swept chignon as described for the Bhelache archetype, and all are ornamented with the same complement of jewellery and with the same restraint; a single crest diadem, large earrings, a short necklace, and a wide girdle. A shoulder scarf and a transparent ankle-length skirt clothes them and defying time, engraved textile patterns still can be faintly discerned on the skirts depicted on struts 2 and 3. On one, small rosettes between sets of paired engraved lines are favoured, while on the other large Sassanian-like roundels are featured.



[...] On struts 1 and 3 the supports are yakṣas, almost identical carvings that must have been by the same hand. They are heavyset and clearly equal to their task, although the strained expression and bulging eyes reflect the effort. They have curly hair, and a beard rings their faces. Although they appear to be nude, one of them at least, wears a dhoti, which when photographed in the 1970s still bore an engraved pattern of rosettes between sets of paired lines. The third support is a rather obese kneeling woman with pendulous breasts and bloated abdomen. She smiles or grimaces, her eyes bulge, and in her right ear she wears a long, cylindrical ornament. Unlike the majority of early support figures, which are generally just small ordinary folk, she qualifies as grotesque.

[...] Most of the rock motif on these struts has been sawn off: what remains serves as a platform for the supporting figures. Most noteworthy however, is the naturalistic treatment of the foliage in the upper register. Despite the stylization of the leaf clusters, the branches that bear them appear as living things as fertile as the beautiful yakṣis who grasp them.”

#### West wall

The five struts found inside the compound show features similar to these from the eastern wall. The major difference lies in their state of conservation, way worst to the western wall. Here also the three-headed gods ornamenting the tūnalas have lost the attributes they use to carry in their multiple hands and only the lower parts of the struts are exploitable.

Starting from the left, the first strut, cracked, shows a seated yogi that an inscription identifies as Indrabhūti. The right hand touches the right knee while the left hand is broken (we can guess that it was raised to the chest). The dedication at the lower part states: “Bekhasiṃhadeva, a resident of Okochen devotionally offered “strut(s)” to thrice venerable Akṣobhya on the second day of the bright half of lunar month of Jeṣṭha

in NS 837”.

The image of Indrabhūti, the tantrika king, is therefore dateable from 1717 AD. A problematic issue remains in the fact that we don’t know if this Bekhasiṃhadeva donated a single strut or a set.

On the second strut is a seated siddha, holding a flame-like item in his right hand and a skull-cup in the other. An inscription reading “Samādhipā”, the “Master of Samādhi”, identifies the character.

The main figure of the third strut may be identifiable as the Jina Amoghasiddhi, characterised by the two Garudas supporting his lotus pedestal. Below are found four sitting Jinas or Bodhisattvas set on two registers. Their attributes are: jewel and manuscript, abhaya-mudrā and jewel, a piece of fabric (?) and eventually the anjali-mudrā.

The fourth strut shows a seated emaciated Siddha eating entrails. To the right flank of the holy man is a stick topped by a jewel. The inscription reads “Rohinipā”, another name of the Mahāsiddha Lūpa, the “Fish-gut Eater” and the first of the eighty-four great yogis.

Finally the fifth strut, probably the best preserved in this row, presents a main image of Akṣobhya standing on two elephants. Exceptionally, six arms remain, but only a skull-cup and a bell are preserved. Below are four characters similar to those from the third strut. Some of their attributes are damaged and are as follows: a jewel (?) and a bell, unidentifiable, a manuscript and a bow (this clearly identifies Mañjuśrī) and a double abhaya-mudrā.

The central parts of the Mahāsiddhas’ struts were undoubtedly hosting tantric aspects of Avalokiteśvara, as it is the case in many viḥāras. Thus we would have three Avalokiteśvara-Mahāsiddhas couples. The third and fifth struts yet belong to another set of sculptures probably composed of four to six Jinas.

## South Wing

The southern wing was restored by the KVPT in 2003. It contains, to the inner side of the compound, a group of four well-restored struts. A fifth strut is found in the south-western corner.

Two corner struts showing a mala figure (hippogriff) are framing the centre of the building. In both cases the basis of the strut has a Kubera-like atlantes displaying a double abhaya-mudrā. The tūnala at the south-western corner shows the same features. The only difference between these pieces is that the second strut, starting from the left, is partly resorted. The two others are new sculptures. Identical sculptures are found at Bhote Bāhā (Kathmandu) and numerous sites of the Valley.

The first strut after the left side mala, shows a goddess presenting the dharmacakra-mudrā (or the anjali-mudrā) and standing on a lotus. Below is a seated Siddha, abhaya-mudrā in the right hand and the left hand raised, palm to the top. To the basis runs a carved inscription: “Jaya Dhana Siṃha offered (“the strut”) on the 8th day of bright half of the lunar month of Gūlā (Śravan) in NS 838 (1718 AD)”.

It is relevant to note that the strut is the only one in the compound to show a goddess with (only) two hands and a single face. This figure evokes the eighteenth century Grahāmātrkā strut of the Chusya Bāhā (Kathmandu), and it is probably the same goddess that is represented here. Besides, the Siddha is not identified, contrarily to the other representations.

Following is another interesting strut. It shows as a central figure the image of a finely carved three-headed goddess standing on a blossomed lotus. None of the eight original arms remains. The stylistic features of the goddess are in all points similar to those of the shrine’s façade. The lower part of the carving broke itself as the recent restoration

of the feet shows. The strut was assembled with another one of totally different origin as the differences of wood and width attest. It shows two smaller images. The upper one represents a dancing goddess with four hands. Though the wood is very damaged, according to some saṅgha members, the remaining right hand holds a damaru (double drum) while the lower left hand makes an abhaya-mudrā. Under the dancer is a character sitting in rajalilasana. He holds a lotus in his left hand and a probable incense burning pot. The most striking element of this latter representation is certainly the Tibetan hat belonging to the Dge-lugs-pa or the earlier rNying-ma-pa sects. This is probably the image of a Tibetan or Indian hierarch, siddha or paṇḍita like the 12<sup>th</sup> century Śrī Śāriputra.

The presence of a carving that is stylistically and iconographically (for what remains of it) identical to the struts indicates two possible schemes. Either the strut is coming from another monastery or it was first meant to stand on the shrine, amidst the Pañcarakṣās. With this in mind we may suggest that the sculpture initially represented one of the Pañcarakṣās, as explained below. The two evoked struts hence display sculptures having three different origins.

## North Wing

The northern wing contains no carved struts. It was restored by a separate gutthi (association or trust in charge of a religious building) between 2005 and 2006. Metal plates depicting parts of the Guru Mapa tale are placed on the courtyard’s façade.

Different levels of iconographic reading  
From Jinas to Pañcarakṣās

If the study of Newar Buddhist iconography is often a problematic task, the situation at Itum Bāhā is complicated by the fact that out of twenty-four struts,

at least half of it is not in its original position. There may be no room for doubts concerning the Pañcarakṣās/Jinas on Akṣobhya's shrine as it shows graphic unity and corresponds to usual settings of the same type. In a similar case, at the Gum Bāhā of Sankhu, Bangdel indicates: "[...] the goddesses are represented both as fully Enlightened Buddhas and as female emanations of the Pañca Buddha ". The Pañcarakṣā text is nowadays still in use at Itum Bāhā as it was at the time of the struts installation . Besides, the Pañcarakṣās are masters of three maṇḍalas described by the Sādhnamāla (201 and 206) and the Niṣpannayogāvalī (18) and the elders of the monastery may have used a version of one of these texts. Afterwards craftsmen may added their own touch to the textual prescriptions and the ritual needs.

Considering their art, the six shrine's struts may be attributed to the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century and their iconography assimilated to the one at Pinche Bāhā (Kathmandu) .

The strut 13 is particularly puzzling as we have three parts of different origins. The main goddess is exactly similar to the four painted Pañcarakṣās (struts 1, 2, 5 and 6). In the foliage is an acrobatic monkey playing with a horse or a donkey. This kind of scene is also found in the six shrine's struts and the goddesses share the same features: a thin necklace falling between small breasts, same crown topped by a caitya and same jewelleryes. The arms are missing, as well as the original lotus basis (recently restored).

As seen above the strut 3 is a hybrid deity combining elements of the appeased and of the fierce Sāhasrapramardīṇi. Moreover it is our opinion that the strut 13 was supposed to be an image of Sāhasrapramardīṇi as well. In that scheme a first image of Sāhasrapramardīṇi was carved, in the same appeased fashion as the four others, to be placed on the shrine. At some point it was decided to create a more fierceful aspect of it that would pair the other Sāhasrapramardīṇi image (strut 4). Even if

one considers that the carving broke at that time already, the subject was anyway changed, in a rather short time, since the replacing sculpture has the same style. The carving at the basis remains unidentified.

Struts 8 and 10 are classical Jinas depictions dateable to the late 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> century and probably contemporary to the Mahāsiddhas. This is based on similarities in the motifs of jewelleryes, crowns and clothing. There is no bāhā where Jinas are placed opposite to the kwāhpāḥ dyah shrine. According to a copper-plate inscription on the left side of the kwāhpāḥ dyah shrine entrance and dated NS 983 (1861 AD) the roof collapsed to the point that the "pinnacle fell down to the worshipping room ". The copperplate marks the reconstruction of the roof and I suggest that (two) remaining struts were eventually placed to their current location and a new group, that of the Pañcarakṣās was installed . Indeed, it is a common use in viharas to relocate old adornments when new ones are produced. That is particularly the case with pinnacles. With regard to the above elements it appears that the images of the gods at Itum Bāhā are movable components open to be relocated, replaced or stored. This depends on environmental and historical events. Similar though different in origin is the instability of pantheons in some tantric texts, as the revisions of the Cakrasamvara Tantra show.

### The Mahāsiddhas

An interesting element of the studied iconography is the presence of Mahāsiddhas on eight struts. The carving offered by Bekhasimhadeva and dated 1717 AD presents a subject and a style in all points identical to the other struts of the eastern wing. Hence it is possible to date the other pieces of the same period (first quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century). The supposed Grahamātrkā-Mahāsiddha image is dated 1718 AD. It is therefore contemporary to the Avalokiteśvara- Mahāsiddhas carvings and the Grahamātrkā of Chusya Bāhā, dateable of the early 18<sup>th</sup>



century .

We earlier said that according to a picture taken before 1934's earthquake, there must have been fourteen carved struts (exception made of the two corner elements) supporting the eastern wall of the oriental wing. If the set of Saptavaras-Mahāsiddhas was complete and the Avalokiteśvara-Mahāsiddhas were at least seven and all placed together, we thus would have fourteen struts (seven Saptavaras-Mahāsiddhas + seven Avalokiteśvara-Mahāsiddhas). This is an ideal and very hypothetical reconstitution and it is certain that more struts took place inside the quadrangle (the strut 13 is the echo of other iconographic arrangements). Besides, Mahāsiddhas are often depicted by groups of height, as is the case in many thangkas. At Chusya Bāhā the saptavaras are located inside the quadrangle, in complement of other groups of struts and probably for ritualistic purposes (initiations, astrological practises, etc.). Hence we would suggest a second scheme: fourteen Avalokiteśvara-Mahāsiddhas's adorning the eastern wall of the entry-wing, seven Saptavaras inside the quadrangle combined to lost groups of gods and four Jinās on the shrine.

The yogi support of the supposed Grahamātrkā induces an iconographic unity between the Saptavaras and the supposed Avalokiteśvaras. Mahāsiddhas (Rohinipā, Nāgarjunapā, Ghaṇṭāpā and Kukkuripa) are also found in the roof supports in and outside the compound of Pinche Bāhā (Kathmandu). These sculptures of superior quality may be dated to the 18th-19th century as well and this would indicate common soteriological aspirations. Besides, the recurrent identification of the depicted characters on Chusya, Pinche and Itum Bāhā 18th century's struts reveals a didactic intention. Moreover, as Linrothe brilliantly demonstrates, Mahāsiddhas are functioning "as a totality, not as an agglomeration of individual (representations)". Since they did not have the necessary place to represent the eighty-four holy men, the artists and/or the recipients chose easily recognisable

figures like Kukkuripa feeding his dog or Lūipa eating fish-gut. The characters are identifiable by typical attributes and this attests of the functionality of their teachings.

Each one of the eighty-four Mahāsiddhas is "a symbol for human potentiality, and it is thus similar to (the roles) of the bodhisattva in the Mahāyāna and the arahant Theravāda and nikāya Buddhism". Apart from using unorthodox ways to attain spiritual insight, these Indian Buddhist saints are coming from all the fringes of the society of the 8th-12th centuries. We thus find monks, kings, servants, young girls, etc. Dākinis, the "embodiment of female principles and awareness", are their spiritual teachers and sexual partners. The presence of Mahāsiddhas in a Newari bāhā may be a surprise, for they are in clear opposition against ritualism, monasticism and caste-system. Kukkuripa's song emphasises the siddhas' paradigm: "Ritual worship is futile, concealing the truth", and increases the strangeness of our iconographic setting. Hence why would one present non-monastic and anti-establishment personae in front of a monastic institution, especially when one knows the complexity of Newari ritualism?

Of course the siddhas are represented at the lower registers of the struts, like in Pinche Bāhā. The bases of the sculptures are therefore, in these cases, working as subtitles. The yogis are here as models of achievements, regardless of their anti-monastic/ritualistic methods. In a way it is a very "tantric mode of acting"; using symbols, even paradoxical, to serve a greater purpose and accentuate the teachings' performability.

The saṅgha organisation and iconographic choices Though the organisation of Newar Buddhist institutions is well known through different ethnological works it is essential to shortly evocate it here. The saṅgha of Newari viharas is divided in two groups of members: the Sakyas and the Vajracharyas ("Vajra Masters"). While the

Sakyas outnumber the letters the Vajracharyas receive a more intensive initiation (dikṣā) to the tantric mysteries . They supervise the exoteric rituals (generally in the courtyard) and the secret esoteric ceremonies (performed in the āgam shrines). They are family priests, executing rites solicited by their “clients”.

At Itum Bāhā, ten (or eleven) historical lineages are represented by the elder man (new: thāypā, skt: sthavīra, thakālī) of each lineage. These lineages are said to date back to the foundation of the monastery and originated at Sankhu. To the head of the elders body is the mū sthavīr or mū thāypā, the main elder, a Vajracharya. This responsibility is hereditary. The other elders are known as sthavīras. The seventh elder may take his charge after he received Vajracharya instruction. During rituals the main elder is assisted by the second sthavīr who is sitting to his left.

The board of elders is the highest authority within the saṅgha and is responsible for most of the decisions regarding the monastery’s matters.

### **The “art nexus”**

The mū sthavīr’s role is very significant to the institution’s life, for whenever devotees wish to offer statues, adornments or any element of the traditional monastic decorum, it is made upon his consultation. His knowledge of religious texts will make him able to decide whether the desired subject is adequate or not. This is one of the moments where texts are consulted. The vihāra possess an exemplar of the Pañcarakṣā book, and it was probably used by the mū sthavīr of the time to decide the setting of the Akṣobhya shrine. A similar process may have been observed when one had to decide for the installation of struts depicting the Mahāsiddhas . The Legends of the Eighty-four Mahāsiddhas was known in Tibet (where it encountered a great success) after the 12th century as the Grub thob bryad cu rtsa bzhi’I lo rgyus, part of the bsTan’gyur . Whether the sangha possessed this text, an extract, or a Sanskrit version of it

is yet unknown.

In any case, the mū sthavīr acts as a sensor. He is thus an intermediary between the donators, seeking apotropaic help by “adorning” the compound he is related to , and the artists, creating images following their proper rulings.

The relevant and widely commented last work of Gell (2009) partly focuses on the study of the art nexus. He describes pieces of art as “index” and considers them (to draw a quick sketch of his theory) as resulting from a nexus of agencies . The social agents (the “index” is also perceived as an agent) express their respective agency whether it is active or passive (or even both like in our scheme).

Since we here too have what may be called an “art nexus”, it appeared interesting to develop the author’s concept in order to observe the intricate organisation responsible for the creation of artefacts.

While the offering of statues or else, to religious institutions are perceived as a propitiatory/apotropaic gesture in the present context, the act of the donation constitutes a worldly activity. The bāhā, the gods’ dwelling, is thus the place of interpenetration of these worldly interests and the local soteriology.

When looking at the art-making-process one has to notice the more or less constant presence of secrecy. Hence is there a nexus of secrecy? The mū sthavīr undoubtedly is the most prominent “secret-holder” of the scheme. He, and the elders’ body, have a great deal of keeping tantric teachings secret (this follows the belief that these teachings, if in the hands of the wrong person, may be fruitless or even devastating). Additionally the artists are holding their iconographic prescriptions “secret” and the final opus may assume esoteric meanings. This question and the different issues it underlines are too vast for the present paper and I hope that the subject will find an

extended interest for the Himalayas in general.

As an effect of the described situation we have a partially incomplete-looking iconographic program resulting of un-contemporaneous gifts from donators, elements of various subjects, dates and probably origins; these factors being all tributaries of external conditions (earthquakes, humidity, thefts, “loans” from other institutions, etc.). That the iconographic program of Itum Bāhā is incomplete is rather obvious, especially when compared to other structures like Chusya Bāhā (Kathmandu) or Kwā Bāhā (Patan). Comparatively, what makes these programs complete is the relative contemporaneity of the arts and/or their rational arrangement as a whole locus symbolicus. The present case does unfortunately not show what I dare call an iconographic harmony: struts seem to be constantly moved from one place to another and there are doubts about the origin of some carvings. Interestingly, the saṅgha has a different view about it, and particularly stresses the original setting of most struts and their all-time presence in the quadrangle.

### **The emic conception**

Seeing their bāhā from the inside, the saṅgha members have a specific approach of the structure, somehow different from the scholarly depiction. Whereas the bāhā is clearly perceived as a maṇḍala, a symbolically organised dwelling of the gods with soteriological meaning, the struts are conceived as mere adornments. According to them, the tūṇalas have no ritual purposes. This is emphasized by the fact that no worship is given to them, but as valuable as this testimony may be it is a short-term historical consideration. If the struts ever had a ritualistic aim and were worshipped it is yet impossible to ascertain.

The Pañcarakṣās are visualised as Śaktis of the Buddhas. They thus play a double role as Śaktis representing Jinas and as protective goddesses, the anthropomorphised dharanis.

Where the emic view totally differs from ours on the anterior location of the struts. For most of the members Pañcarakṣās always adorned the shrine's façade (while we propose four Jinas) and the struts 14 and 16 - two Jinas - have always been placed on the western wall of the eastern wing. As stated above we propose that these two carvings were at first among the four initial Jinas.

According to the saṅgha it is impossible to give away the monastery's belongings. If this was always the rule it is not known, but it explains for the informants that the three missing Yakṣis-Salabhañjikās always belonged to the institution. For Slusser, the Śalabhañjikās, “[...] if original to the vihāra, imply a correspondingly early foundation. However, the struts must have been moved more than once and may have originated elsewhere. For one relocation within the monastery they were shortened by truncating the rock motif registers, and in their final location they were lengthened with supplementary wood blocks.” This opinion that the struts “originated elsewhere” does not meet a great adherence among the saṅgha for the reason cited above.

### **Restoration proposition**

The restoration project led by the KVPT proposes to rebuild the eastern wing, and the struts locations may be considered to give the façade its original aspect back (prior to 1934). Since, as we saw it, different hypothesis may be drawn about the original settings, it is rather tricky to propose a scheme. Nevertheless some elements have to be underlined.

Following the above survey, the three Avalokiteśvara-Mahāsiddhas of the western wing (struts 12, 13 and 15) could be relocated to the east and complete the four others already there. Seven new struts would have to be carved; with images of seven aspects of Avalokiteśvara to the central part, and seven Mahāsiddhas to the basis. That would recreate the supposed setting of the eastern wing's outer facade. Considering that the depicted siddhas are



already the most famous, the easiest to recognize, and are working as a totality and there is no record of any original setting, I would advise, if that is the community's choice, to choose seven new characters. If possible these new Mahāsiddhas have to be identified by their specific features and by epigraphic annotations.

This nevertheless poses a new problem; the choice of the images (here Mahāsiddhas and Avalokiteśvara's aspects). It will be an interesting thing to observe how Mūrtikāras would deal with the task of completing a given set and giving new attributes to existing carvings.

To the western façade would remain two Jinas (struts 14 and 16), punctuated with plain struts, Akṣobhya to the left and Amoghasiddhi to the right side. Here also carving two (Amitābha, Ratnasambhava) to four other Jinas (+ Vajrasattva and Vairocana) and placing them **according to the fig.39 may reconstitute a new set**. But, since this group would have no historical validation to my opinion (such a setting is unseen in other bāhās), it would be more accurate to place plain struts with the two existent Jinas.

### Conclusion

The present study has tried to give a better understanding of the rich iconography of the Newari struts. If some aspects remain in darkness (like the provenance and the subjects of the basis of strut 13), it is hoped that it brought some light to the evolution of the carvings' locations. Like most religious structures a bāhā is subject to various changes. These vicissitudes are perceived with more or less accuracy by the users, and it is my belief that iconographic studies in such a living context have to consider both scholar and emic views.

The proposed restitutions cover over three centuries of earthquakes, soteriological and iconographic evolutions (or fashions?). It shows that the present state, especially to the eastern wing's western façade, is not truthful. Well-

preserved iconographies such as Chusya Bāhā's show that iconographic programs were often conceived as a whole. It is certain that Itum Bāhā's carvings had a completely different history. Aware of the limits of a comparative study, the observer may nevertheless infer that in the present case, the iconographic unity is fractionated in the concerned wing.

The restoration to come could consider relocating some of the struts in order to recreate an original design, additionally to the carving of new struts (eastern façade). On the other hand, fantasist restitutions based on absent evidence have to be avoided. The two Jinas (struts 14 and 16) once probably adorned the main shrine, it would therefore be useless to reconstitute an inexistent group and locate it in a place (east wing–west façade) dictated by both historical and architectural events, and empiric choices. To judge the pertinence of these considerations is the saṅgha and the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust's relevancy.

In the light of the considered facts the Itum Bāhā of Kathmandu presents a rich iconography, particularly (but not only) emphasised on the carved struts. Bāhās were supposedly inhabited by monks or householder-monks until ca. 12<sup>th</sup> century. The development of the struts iconography may follow the progressive abandonment of the structures as dwellings. The Yakṣis-Śalabhañjikās (nature demons or “spirits” converted into protective entities by the Buddha's Dharma) constitute the earliest subjects carved on Newari struts. They are still found adorning few Buddhist shrines like that of Yatkā Bāhā (Kathmandu, ca. 9th-11th centuries). It would appear that Jinas gradually replaced nature-related apotropaic agents. A kind of flashback was operated in course of time by the development of the Pañcarakṣās iconography (also apotropaic entities), especially after the 12th century, as the numerous Pañcarakṣās manuscripts attest. The period of ca. 12th century marks the establishment of a textual basis, as major texts like the Sādhnamālā and the

Nispannayogāvali were compiled around that time. After that the foundations were laid for the blooming of a rich tradition of carved struts, pinnacles, etc.

As a consequence the bāhās became visualisations of an assembly of the gods (skt. sudharmā), whose conception and layout follow the concepts of maṇḍalas creation. The vicissitudes of time often disfigured the original design and we have to consider bāhās, as well as other types of constructions, as organic structures, prone to various changes.

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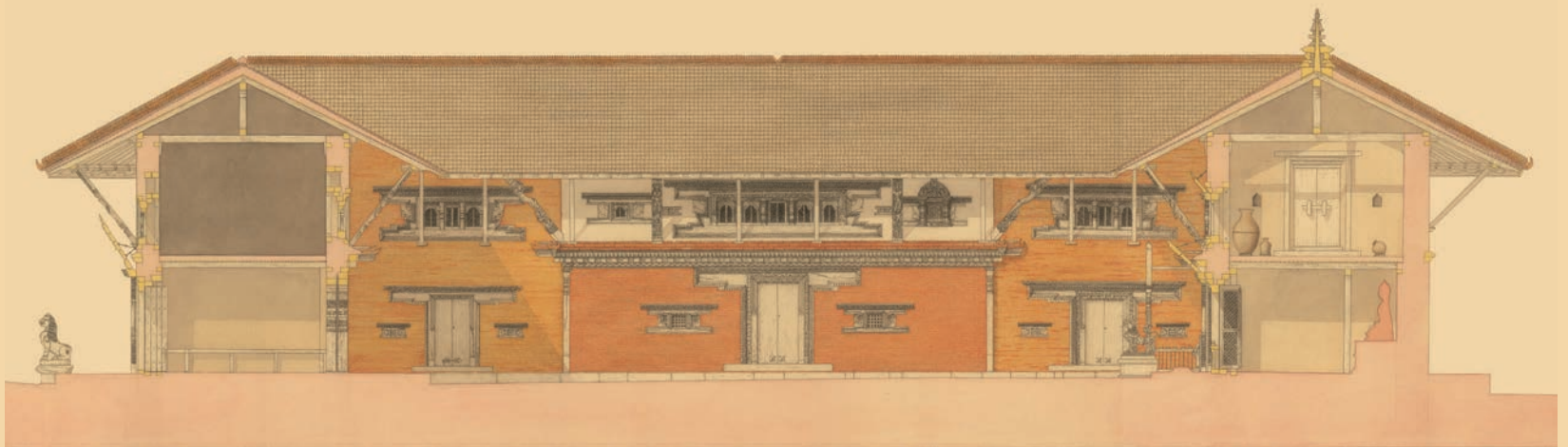
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Existing struts of Itumbāhāh North Wing courtyard facade after cleaning.  
*Photograph Rohit K. Ranjitkar, July 16, 2005*



# RESTORATION OF ITUMBĀHĀ



## **BUDDHIST KATHMANDU CAMPAIGN – ITUMBĀHĀ INITIATIVE 2002-2016**

A CAMPAIGN FOR ARCHITECTURAL PRESERVATION INITIATED BY THE KATHMANDU VALLEY PRESERVATION TRUST  
IN COLLABORATION WITH THE KATHMANDU METROPOLITAN CITY AND THE DEPARTMENT OF ARCHAEOLOGY (DOA)

### PROJECT FUNDING:

THE GERMAN EMBASSY (KATHMANDU) | ROBERT W. WILSON CHALLENGE TO CONSERVE OUR HERITAGE UNDER THE AUSPICES  
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KESHACHANDRA MAHAVIAHARA CONSERVATION SOCIETY, ITUM BAHĀ

KATHMANDU VALLEY PRESERVATION TRUST



# RESTORATION OF ITUMBĀHĀ





# RESTORATION OF ITUMBĀHĀ

Report by Dr. Niels Gutschow, Thomas Schrom and Dr. Rohit Kumar Ranjitkar  
Contributions by Prof. Dr. Alexander Rospatt, Nutandhar Sharma, David Andolfatto and Mathias Beckh  
All photographs by Niels Gutschow / Thomas Schrom unless stated otherwise.

Kathmandu, March 2023



Blind window from south wing courtyard facade.  
*Drawing Bijay Basukala, 2002*



KATHMANDU VALLEY PRESERVATION TRUST

Cover illustrations: Front, Itumbāhā south wing restored courtyard facade elevation; back, Itumbāhā south wing existing courtyard facade elevation. *Drawings Bijay Basukala, 2002*

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### **Itumbāhā Restoration**

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*opposite:*

View of Itumbāhā towards the North from a neighboring structure across the courtyard. The southern wing is covered by tarpaulins for emergency protection against monsoon rains.

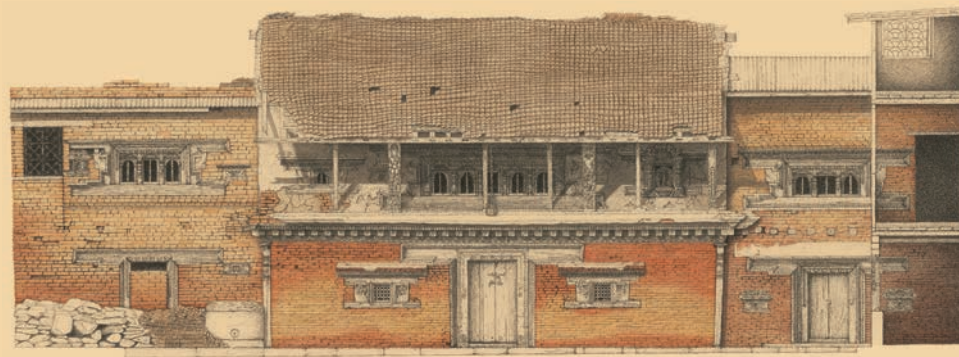
*Photograph Stanislav Klimek, August 25, 2002*











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