



MODEL OF THE WAT CHANG PAGODA IN THE NATIONAL MUSEUM

## THE WAT CHANG PAGODA OF BANGKOK, SIAM

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The Wat Chang ("great monastery") pagoda, of which the United States National Museum possesses a model in wood, is considered the most magnificent one in Bangkok, the capital of Siam. It is an octagonal brick structure rising in three elegantly tapering stages upon a quadrangular platform, the whole conveying the idea of a gigantic bell (plate XLV). Staircases lead up from one stage to the other. Upon the last rests the dome, which, however, is more in the form of a cone or an octagonal prism with a rounded, dome-like top, than of a hemisphere, terminating in a metal tree-shaped spire. Four smaller domes, likewise surmounted by spires, surround the principal one. Underneath each of these are rectangular niches which formerly held images of Buddha. Rows of sculptured images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas (candidates for Buddhahood, or future Buddhas, and saints), seated on mythical animals, surround the octagon at various stages, and the whole building is lavishly adorned both in color and carving. Its outside plastering is wrought into a mosaic by means of porcelain of different colors set in it so as to form figures of elephants, griffins, demons, flowers, etc. It is assumed that the pagoda measures, from the base to the tip of the spire, about 250 feet in height. It is surrounded by an ornamental carved rail, at the four corners of which are small pagodas of a design similar to the central one, and in the niches are still seen the Buddha images riding elephants. In the center of each side is a kind of decorative gate, joining by platforms with the main pagoda, the whole thus constituting a cruciform plan. Inside the enclosure are dwellings for the monks in attendance on the sanctuary, flower and fruit gardens, ponds, grottos, and various stone images.

Pagodas<sup>1</sup> are religious structures which originated with Buddhism in India and are characteristic of Buddhist countries. Their original purpose was to receive the relics of Buddha, or the remains of such of his disciples as distinguished themselves by piety or learning. Thus, according to tradition, the remains of Buddha, after cremation of his body, were divided into eight portions and distributed among his followers, who erected pagodas over them, and legend makes

<sup>1</sup>The word *pagoda* is probably derived from the Singhalese *dagoba* or *dagaba*; in Sanskrit *stupa*, Pali *thupo*, whence Anglo-Indian *tope*.

King Asoka, the patron and propagator of Buddhism in the 3d century, B. C., build 84,000 stupas all over India in commemoration of the same number of discourses supposed to have been delivered by Buddha, or in honor of the number of atoms of which Buddha's body consisted. But already in the early periods of Buddhism stupas were constructed *ex toto* either for marking some important event in the life of Buddha and the history of Buddhism, or for decorating the monasteries and temples. At present pagodas are built chiefly as an act of devotion on the part of some pious person desirous of acquiring merit. In keeping with the original purpose of the pagoda, its earliest architectural style was derived from the tomb or tumulus. The earliest stupas are simple cupolas or hemispheres raised on a low basement, about half the diameter in height. With the exception of the small chamber for the ashes or relics, these shrines were solid masses of bricks or stone. One of the most important surviving structures of this kind is the Sanchi stupa, also known as the Bhilsa tope, in central India, which is a solid dome of stone, 106 feet in diameter and 46 feet in height, and which Cunningham would ascribe to the 3d century B. C. Gradually the plinth was increased until it rose from one to two diameters in height, of which the finest existing example is the great stupa of Dhamek at Sarnath, Benares, which was built about the 6th century A. D.<sup>1</sup>

The apex of the dome was usually surmounted by a disk placed horizontally, on which rose, as a terminal, an opened umbrella, the most common emblem of royalty and state among Eastern nations, or perhaps to symbolize the wandering mendicant monks of Buddhism. Ferguson<sup>2</sup> surmises that the umbrella, or *tee*, in its earliest form was, or at all events represented, a relic box, assuming that originally the relic was very likely not placed in the tope but on its top. Later the number of umbrellas was increased to 3, 7, 9, 11, and even 13 (always on odd number), placed one above the other.

In Tibet, and more especially in China, the terminal has frequently become the whole monument, the dome being wholly omitted. The most magnificent example of this style is the porcelain pagoda of Nankin, China, generally called the "Temple of Gratitude," which in its nine stories rises to a height of 236 feet.

The pyramidal shape observed in the Wat Chang pagoda is the most common for these religious edifices of Buddhism, and in this respect they recall the terraced Temple Towers in Babylonia, a model of which can also be seen in the National Museum.

<sup>1</sup> Compare A. Cunningham, *Mahabodhi, or the Great Buddhist Temple under the Bodhi Tree at Buddha-Gaya*, London, 1892, p. 47.

<sup>2</sup> *Handbook of Architecture*, London, 1859, p. 19.