

The Temples of Java

Borobudur & Prambanan



Temples of Java: Borobudur & Prambanan

Version 1.1

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Introduction

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In Central Java, two massive temples rise as witness to the greatness of two empires – one Buddhist and one Hindu. Borobudur, the main temple site of the Buddhist Sailendra Dynasty (760-830) sprawls horizontally, in deference to its stupa-mound inspiration. Prambanan, built by the Late Sanjaya (830-1016) Hindu empire that displaced the Sailendras, on the other hand, soars vertically, resembling the Hindu architecture of South Indian dynasties. We have created this Approach Guide to help travelers understand these two world-class sites, as well as Java's broader architectural tradition.

Java's rich architectural legacy

This Approach Guide offers an overview of Javanese temple architecture from its origins in the fifth century until 1527. In doing so, it traverses a vast landscape that spans many Buddhist and Hindu Empires, including the Early Sanjaya / Mataram (732-760), Sailendra (760-830), Late Sanjaya (830-1016), Singosari (1222-92), and Majapahit (1292-1527).

As each empire advanced its own architectural style, Java is left with an **extremely rich and varied temple legacy**. This guidebook charts this legacy by exploring what makes each empire's temples unique. For each empire, it provides a brief historical background, insight into its religious worldview, a framework for appreciating the defining features its art and architecture, and our picks for its best, most well-preserved temple sites.

Finally, this Approach Guide concludes with a comprehensive discussion of the two most iconic structures in Javanese architecture, **Borobudur** and **Prambanan**. Profiles include **high-resolution images and floorplans** that highlight salient features with color highlights to ease identification.

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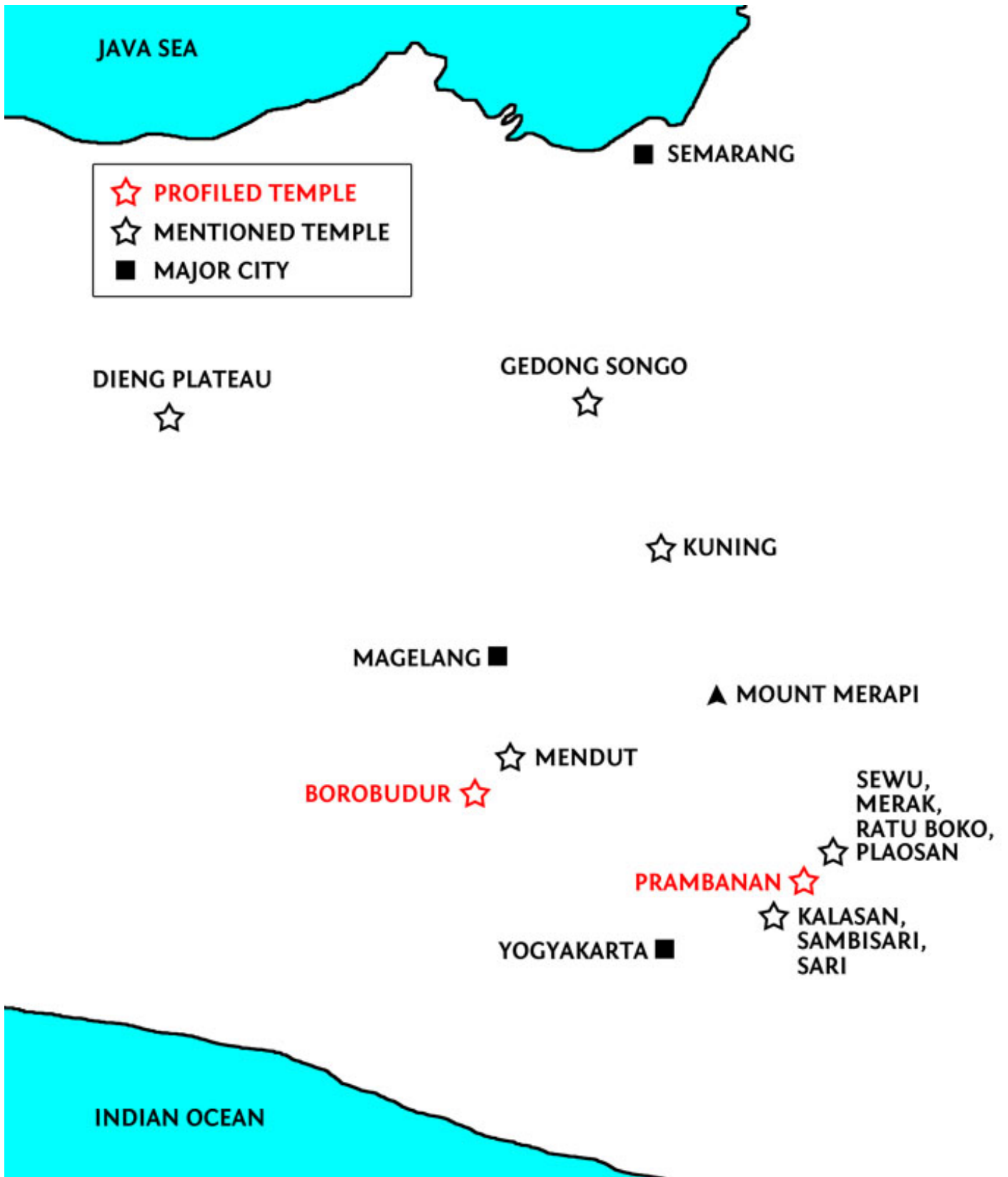
We hope you enjoy what we believe is a totally unique cultural guide to some of the best temple sites in Java.

Have a great trip!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David Raezer". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "David" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Raezer".

David and Jennifer Raezer
Founders, Approach Guides

Map of Central Java's Temples



tower) intersects man's horizontal alignment directly at the site of the god's cave-sanctuary, where god and human can connect. The entire world emanates from this intersection, as unity with god is the goal of every person's earthly existence.



Fig. 1. Temple, Gedong Songo. Highlights added.

Temple Characteristics

Direct contact with India increased in the late 7th century — specifically with the powerful Pallava and Chola Empires of South India — bringing Indian styles and methods of temple design to bear

on building projects. Accordingly, **this period's architecture most closely resembles that of India**; when Hindu architecture re-emerges in a later period after a 100-year break it takes on more of a unique Java flavor (see section entitled "Central Java Architecture: Hindu Temple Resurgence").

This contact served to create the following features characteristic of Hindu temples of this period:

- The temple is raised on a molded **platform** (see dark blue highlights in [Fig. 1](#)).
- The structure consists of a **single-cell, square shrine** (see red highlights in [Fig. 2](#)) aligned with the cardinal directions.
- The walls divide into alternating and receding elements, the transition between being demarcated by pairs of shallow pilasters.
- The shrine is entered from the west through a **entranceway** with a round arch pediment and a kirtimukha face (red and yellow highlights, respectively, in [Fig. 1](#)); it is flanked on either side by niches for statuary (green highlights in [Fig. 1](#)).
- The other three other sides of the temple have **shallow niches** (yellow highlights in [Fig. 2](#)).
- It is capped by a **roof or tower of two or three diminishing storeys** (see light blue highlights in [Fig. 1](#)) that form a pyramidal outline as they proceed to the summit. This roof form is a direct borrowing from South India.
- **Thick horizontal moldings** (light blue highlights in [Fig. 1](#)) afford these structures a squat appearance. That said, attempts were made to lessen the horizontal orientation of the structure by dividing the walls of the temple with vertical bands or pilasters that serve to create space for statuary.

Central Java Architecture: Hindu Temple Resurgence

History

With the resurgence of the **Sanjaya Dynasty** (830-1016), Hindu building returned.

Temple Characteristics

A syncretic style

While Hindu in orientation, the Sanjayas were religiously tolerant. In fact, the Sanjayas probably had to be, because they were controlling a population whose majority religion was Buddhism. This led the Dynasty to incorporate many Buddhist architectural elements in its constructions. So, while the pure South Indian-inspired precedent set in the earlier period of Hindu temple building (680-780) was respected, it was infused a new Buddhist architectural aesthetic.

The stylistic fusion that emerged in this period served to create a distinctive style for Hindu architecture in Java, a style that reaches its highest expression at Prambanan. This syncretism will be continued in the later Hindu empires of East Java.

Cruciform floorplan remains

The cruciform plan of the earlier Buddhist structures — profiled in the prior section — was maintained, although repurposed for Hindu iconography:

- The cruciform plan **satisfied iconographic/cosmological needs** associated with the placement of the Hindu deities' images within the temple itself: An image of Shiva was placed in the center (red highlights in [Fig. 7](#)); Agastya, a local Java-derived form of Shiva on his right/south (yellow highlights); Ganesha, Shiva's elephant-headed son, behind/east of him (green highlights), and Parvati/Durga, Shiva wife, on his left/north (light blue highlights).
- **A cruciform plan is unique for a Hindu temple.** No cruciform-shaped temples appear in India until the Hoysalas in the 10-13th centuries. Remember that this cruciform plan emerged in Java as part of the early Buddhist structures, from 775-790. This apparently Java-invented cruciform plan was transferred to other locations within Southeast Asia, most notably in the Buddhist structures of Pagan (Burma), Cambodia (Angkor), and Southern Thailand.

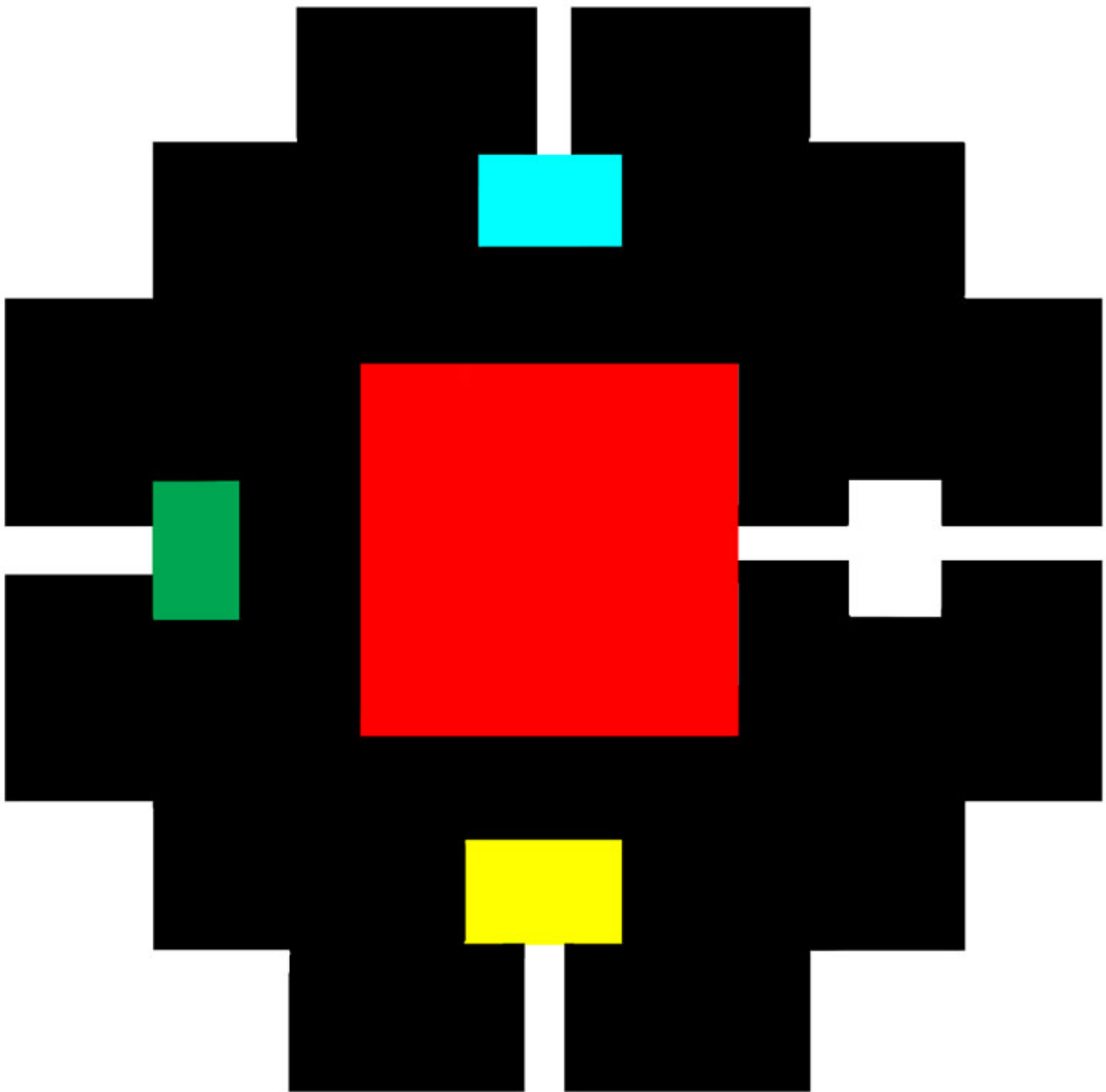


Fig. 7. Floorplan, Shiva temple, Prambanan.

Distinctive temple crowns

Temples were crowned for the first time with a **highly syncretic element: a stupa** (a Buddhist form in the shape of a mound; see red highlights in Fig. 8) or a form highly resemblant of a stupa **topped with a linga** (a Hindu symbol for Shiva in the phallic shape of cylinder; see yellow highlights in Fig. 8). It appears Buddhist stupa's central pillar (that supports the chattra) was repurposed and reimagined as a Hindu Shiva linga.

This crowning element is unique for the following reasons:

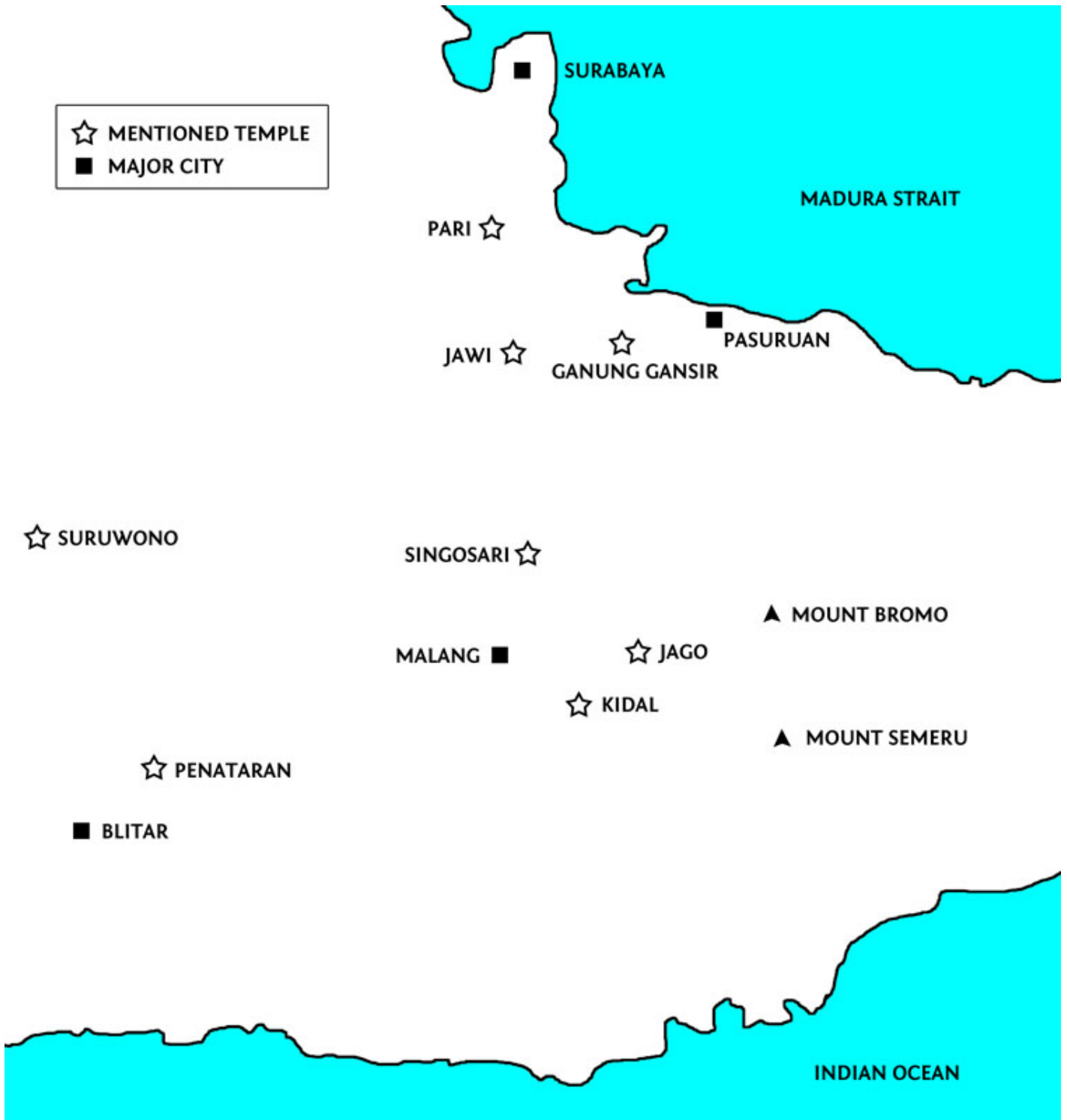
- In other parts of the Hindu world, the Shiva linga is generally reserved for sacred, internal areas within the temple itself. It is not used as an external decoration.
 - The Buddhist stupa form is also not used explicitly on or around Hindu temple complexes.
- The blending of these two forms again demonstrates the syncretic nature of the Sanjaya Dynasty.



Fig. 8. Unique roof form (mound-shaped stupa topped by a linga), Prambanan.

Decoration: Bas-Reliefs

Map of East Java's Temples



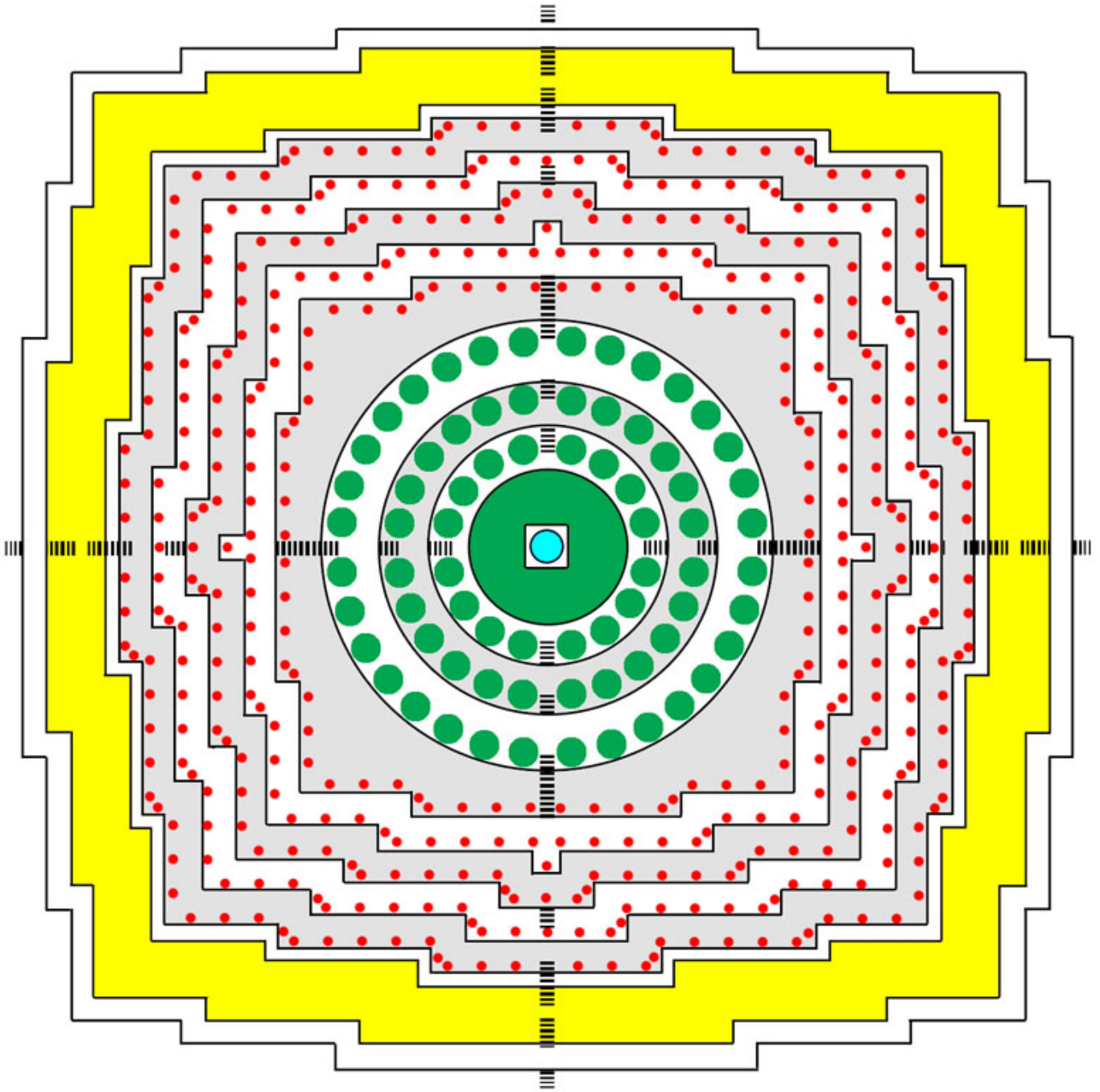


Fig. 17. Floorplan, Borobudur.

Hierarchical arrangement with cosmological foundation

Borobudur's **nine ascending levels** are arranged into three discrete units:

- **The bottom terrace level** (yellow highlights in Fig. 17 and Fig. 18) is square in plan and symbolizes the mundane, human world.
- **The middle five terraces** are also square in plan, and symbolize the celestial world. They are ringed with miniature stupas (red highlights in Fig. 17 and Fig. 18) and house the site's

Buddhas on the middle five terraces

There are 432 Buddha images displayed on top of the railings encircling the five square galleries (red highlights in Fig. 17 and Fig. 18). The 368 Buddhas on the lowest four galleries correspond to the four directional Buddhas (Jinas) of the Vajrayana Buddhist faith. Each is associated with a direction and sits on the appropriate side of the temple:

- **Aksobhya** (eastern direction; east side of temple). This Buddha performs the *bhumisparsa* mudra, that is, the “calling the earth to witness” or “enlightenment” mudra: The left hand rests palm upward in the lap; the right hand, hanging over the knee, palm inward, points toward the ground below.
- **Ratnasambhava** (southern direction; south side of temple). This Buddha performs the *varada* mudra, that is, “the granting of wishes” mudra: The right hand is directed downward, with the flat palm exposed to the viewer.
- **Amitabha** (western direction; west side of temple). This Buddha performs the *dhyana* mudra, that is, the “meditation” mudra: The back of the right hand rests on the palm of the left hand such that the tips of the thumbs lightly touch one another; both hands rest in the lap. See Fig. 19.
- **Amoghasida** (northern direction; north side of temple). This Buddha performs the *abhaya* mudra, that is, the “have no fear” mudra: The right hand is held upright at shoulder level, the palm toward the viewer; the arm is bent.

760-800; its control was not shaken off until the rise of the Khmer.

Interestingly, **Java and Angkor display a similar artistic aesthetic that supports the possibility that the Sailendras exerted discernible, long-term influence on the Khmer style.** Despite the passing of 400 years between their respective constructions, there are some similarities between the reliefs at Borobudur (built 795-820) and Angkor Thom's Bayon (built approximately 1200, under King Jayavarman VII, who ruled 1181-1220).

Similarities between Borobudur and Angkor Thom's Bayon include:

- **Increased shadow and depth.** Although the reliefs are certainly deeper (and display a greater attachment to Indian prototypes) at Borobudur, both invoke shadow and depth to convey three-dimensionality.
- **Everyday focus.** Both contain frequent scenes of everyday life.
- **No scene framing.** At both Borobudur and Bayon, historical scenes flow together in a continuous narrative, in which identifiable characters can be tracked from scene to scene.
- **Small blocks.** The overall aesthetic is similar, given the usage of smaller-sized stone building blocks at both; at both sites, the visible spaces between stones meaningfully impact the impression of the depicted images.

See [Fig. 24](#) and [Fig. 25](#) for a visual comparison.



Fig. 24. Apsaras relief, Bayon, Angkor Thom (Angkor, Cambodia).



Fig. 25. Apsaras relief, Borobudur.

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