



# Preserving the Integrity of Borobudur: Defining the 8th–9th Century CE Nusantara Stupa Vernacular

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# I. THE STUPA IN THE BUDDHIST WORLD

- The Buddhist world features diverse stupa typologies with varying components. In some places, the *anda* (the hemispherical dome) is dominant; in others, the *yasti* (spire) takes center stage. Some designs include a *harmika* (square pedestal) or a *chattra* (parasol), while others do not.
- Although the Buddha encouraged the veneration of stupas, specific architectural components remain unmentioned—with the exception of two cases in the *Minor Vinaya* involving very specific contexts. Even then, these brief guidelines were not adopted as a standard for stupa construction.
- Stupa design is deeply shaped by regional aesthetics and local genius.

## II. COMPATIBILITY

### The hierarchy of evidence

Evidence must be prioritized in the following order:

1. **Internal evidence:** Data from within the monument itself.
2. **Domestic evidence:** Contemporary sites from the same region and era.
3. **External evidence:** References from other regions may be used for comparative analysis but should not be treated as a primary authority, particularly when internal and domestic evidence is abundant.

**Principle of validity:** Comparative analysis carries the highest validity when the subjects share a similar geographic context and time period (contemporaries), or when a historical connection can be established between them.

## II.1. Evidence Within Borobudur



Borobudur was a planned monument with high design consistency. The stupas integrated into the architecture—including the 72 stupas on the circular terraces and those atop the railings (totaling over 1,500)—consistently lack a *chattra*.

## II.2. Domestic Contemporaries and Vicinities

- 8th–9th century Shailendra-era *candis* near Borobudur—such as *Candi Sewu*, *Lumbung*, *Bubrah*, *Plaosan*, *Mendut*, *Pawon*, *Ngawen*, *Kalasan*, *Sari*, *Sojiwan*, *Banyunibo*, *Dawang Sari Stupa*—reveal a consistent absence of *chattras*.
- Stupas built as part of *candi* architecture show a uniform design: a bell-shaped *anda*, a *harmika*, and a *yasti*.
- Even "free-standing" stupas found on the ground, which show more variety in form, are found without *chattras*.

Internal evidence and regional consistency support van Erp's ultimate decision to remove the reconstructed *chattra*, as he recognized its installation was inconsistent with Borobudur's original aesthetic and the architectural vernacular of the 8th–9th century CE.

### **Note: Indirect Domestic Compatibility**

Parallel drawn from site like *Goa Gajah* (Bali) are less compatible. Although domestic, it belongs to the 10th century—a different era, dynasty, and geographic context than the Shailendra period.

# BOROBUDUR & ITS CONTEMPORARIES: STUPAS WITHOUT A CHATTRA



















Stupas on the ground





BANYUNIBO



STUPA DAWANGSARI



## II.3. External Comparisons

Foreign stupas can serve as references but should not be the primary standard due to differing cultural and historical contexts.

- In South Asia—for example India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka—stupa designs are highly varied; while some feature *chattras*, others do not, making these examples inconclusive for Borobudur.
- In Southeast Asia—Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos—comparisons are incompatible, particularly when the stupas were built much later than Borobudur.

**Principle: External variety cannot override local consistency.**

### III. A NATIONAL CULTURAL SIGNATURE

Contemporary *candis* and stupas from the same era show a remarkably uniform design language. Despite minor variations, they form a cohesive “Indonesian style” intentionally developed during the 8th–9th century CE. This period represents a peak of art and architectural achievement that stands distinct from any other Buddhist monument in the world.

Borobudur is a world-renowned symbol of Indonesian cultural heritage. Its specific silhouette, particularly the summit, is its defining characteristic. Altering this profile would inevitably change the monument’s unique “signature” of the nation’s art.

## IV. CONCLUSION: PRESERVING INTEGRITY

- Indigenous and localized data from the 8th–9th century consistently show that the Central Javanese stupa reached its aesthetic completion without a *chattra*. External styles from different eras or regions should not override these clear, localized art and architectural patterns.
- The spiritual value and living heritage of Borobudur are not dependent on the physical presence of a *chattra*. Devotional and spiritual practices remain profound and complete without altering the monument's form.
- **Safeguarding the Signature:** Preserving Borobudur in its intended form honors the “local genius” of the ancient Indonesian architects. This architectural signature is an irreplaceable part of Indonesia’s history and must be respected and preserved for future generations.