

# IDENTIFICATION OF KARMAWIBHANGGA RELIEFS AT CANDI BOROBUDUR\*

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**Abstrak. Identifikasi Relief Karmawibhangga pada Candi Borobudur.** Relief yang dipahat pada dinding kaki Candi Borobudur yang sekarang ditutup merupakan adegan-adegan dari naskah Karmawibhangga, yang berjumlah 160 panel ini ditemukan kembali oleh J.W. Ijzerman pada tahun 1885. Sebelum ditutup kembali relief seluruhnya difoto oleh Kassian Cephas pada tahun 1890-1891. Relief-relief tersebut terkait dengan ajaran hukum karma, hukum sebab akibat, yang sangat penting dalam ajaran agama Buddha. Agar cerita tersebut dimengerti dengan baik oleh pengunjung, maka ajaran tersebut dikemas dalam cerita kehidupan masyarakat Jawa Kuna pada abad ke- 9-10 Masehi, semasa Candi Borobudur didirikan. Identifikasi relief telah dilakukan oleh N.J. Krom, S. Levi, dan Jan Fountain yang membandingkan adegan-adegan dengan dua naskah Sutra yang telah diterjemahkan ke dalam bahasa Cina yang dikenal sebagai T 80 dan T 81. Tujuan penulisan ini adalah mencari naskah yang dipergunakan oleh para pemahat relief Karmawibhangga. Metode yang dipakai adalah metode Arkeologi-Sejarah yaitu pendekatan yang menggunakan data artefaktual dan data tekstual berupa naskah dan prasasti. Relief yang dibandingkan dengan episode dalam naskah, diketahui bahwa berbagai episode lebih mendekati isi naskah T80.

**Kata Kunci:** *“the hidden foot” of Candi Borobudur, Naskah T.80, Prasasti-prasasti pendek*

**Abstract.** *Reliefs depicted at Borobudur’s “hidden foot” are scenes taken from the Karmawibhangga texts. These reliefs depicted in 160 panels were rediscovered by J.W. Ijzerman in 1885, and in 1890-1891 were photographed by Kassian Cephas before the reliefs were closed down once again. The Karmawibhangga deals with the Law of Cause and Effect, the Karmic Law. The doctrine was very important for the Buddhist visitors. In order they understand easily the episodes they saw, the sculptors portray many aspects of the early life in Java from the 9<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> century AD, during Borobudur’s era. The reliefs were studied by N.J. Krom, S. Levi, and Jan Fontein. Fontein studies these reliefs by comparing the episodes with two Karmawibhangga texts which were translated into Chinese named as T 80 and T 81. The purpose in writing this paper is to find out the Karmawibhangga text(s) used by the sculptors in carving the Karmawibhangga at Candi Borobudur. In this case I use the Historical-archaeology as a method; this approach seeks an equal combination of “historical” and “archaeological” data to the study of the past i.e.*

**Keywords:** *“the hidden foot” of Borobudur, T80 text, short inscriptions*

## 1. Introduction

Archaeological remains of Hindu and Buddhist sacred monuments called “candi” are several in Indonesia especially in Java. One of the most important of them is known as Candi Borobudur, a Buddhist temple. It was declared as a World Cultural Heritage by the United Nations

Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1991. Administratively it is located in Borobudur Village, Magelang Regency, Central Java Province, Indonesia.

Candi Borobudur is built on top of an elevated hill between Dagi hill and another small hill south of Menoreh hill. There is a junction

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of two rivers, Progo and Elo Rivers, about two kilometers east of the temple. The position of the temple on top of an elevated hill and near the junction of two rivers is a precise choice in accordance with a manual book for the *śilpin* (artisans) known as *Vāstuśāstra/Vāstuvīdyā* or *Śilpaśāstra*. There are several versions of the *Vāstuvīdyā* and one of them is the *Manasara* from South India which was an important manual book for the Indonesian *śilpins*. This Buddhist monument was built by King Samaratungga, a Śailendra Dynasty in the 9<sup>th</sup> Century. However, with an unknown reason, this Candi Borobudur was abandoned and became a pile of ruins, overgrown with trees and underbrush. The stone-ruins were strewn everywhere, and in many places of what remained, the walls and floors were sagging, cracked or even missing. Then in 1814 H.C. Cornelius, a Dutch engineer, was assigned by Sir Thomas Raffles to examine it, and cleaning the surrounding of the temple from trees and bushes. The preservation efforts have been done to the temple, evolving the local, National and International teams, among others was Theodore van Erp, a Dutch engineer, who was restored the temple twice in 1906-1911, and 1973 to 1983.

In 1885 a group of researchers conducted by J.W. Ijzerman the Chairman of Archaeological Vereeniging rediscovered of beautiful reliefs at the base of the monument. A whole row of reliefs altogether 160 panels were rediscovered after years of being “hidden away”. Five years of dismantled the entire processional path, revealing altogether 160 panels of reliefs. Before the stones were put back in the original place, each relief was photographed by Kassian Cephas in 1890-1891 except part of the Southeast corners. In 1943 the small part of the Southeast corners was dismantled for visitors to see small part of the reliefs. It reveals panels 021, 022, and 023<sup>1</sup> (Fontein 1989: 9).

1 According to N.J. Krom pabel p1-0117 show various actions producing one and the same result, from panels 0118-0160 demonstrate many results that can follow from one kind of act.

In 1920 N.J. Krom was of the opinion that the reliefs illustrated the story of Karmawibhangga about the Law of Cause and Effect. The Karmic Law (Krom 1920, Fontein 1989: 9), later in 1931 Sylvain Levi identified these Borobudur’s reliefs taken from *Mahakarmavibhanga* text from Nepal and Tibet (Levi 1931: 7). In 1989 Jan Fontein studied the reliefs by comparing the episodes with the Karmawibhangga texts which were translated into Chinese language known as T 80 and T 81 (Fontein 1989:13). By comparing the three texts with the episodes of reliefs Karmawibhangga, I try to find out which text(s) of the three were used by the Karmawibhanga’s sculptors (*śilpins*) carving the reliefs.

## 2. Methods

As already mentioned, the purpose of writing this article is to find out which text(s) were used by sculptors depicting the episodes of the Karmawibhangga. In this case I used the Historical-Archaeology as a method, by comparing the episodes of the reliefs with the textual data such as manuscripts and inscriptions.

Each panel usually represents more than one scenes often separates by trees or by fences or buildings. The text which illustrated by 160 reliefs giving example of the working of *karma*, the proportions results of meritorious deeds as well as the negative results of which actions and attitudes are depicted on the “hidden base” of Candi Borobudur. The first to 0123 panels show various actions producing one and the same result, while the remaining panels from panels 0124 up to 0160, demonstrate the many results that can follow from one kind of act.<sup>2</sup> Reading the reliefs we have to start from the Eastern site and moving “clock-wise” in agreement with the course of the sun. This kind of direction of circumambulation is called the *pradaksina* (*daksina*: right side).

2 Each photograph has been published by Kassian Cephas, and the entire photographs have been published by Krom in his book *Beschrijving van Borobudur* (1920).

### 3. The Results of Research and Discussion The Structure of the Monument and Relief on Borobudur

The structure of Candi Borobudur is a *terraced-stūpa*, consists of 10 pyramidal levels, the six lower terraces are square in shape, while the three uppermost stages, level 7, 8, 9 are oval terraces, and a big stupa put on top of it. The total height of Borobudur is 42 meters including its *chattra*, or 31 meters without *chattra*, the layout is 123 x 123 meters.<sup>3</sup> Borobudur is a remarkable Buddhist monument, because of its size, its sculptural and its decorative richness. The total of Buddha statues are 504, the narrative panels are 1460, and 1212 decorative reliefs which cover the facades of the walls and balustrades, and arranged as follows:

1. Karmawibhangga (160 panels) depicted on the wall of the Hidden Foot
2. Lalitawistara (120 panels), on the main wall of the First Gallery, and Jataka/Awadana (120 panels), on the main wall of the First Gallery
  - Jataka/Awadana (372 panels), on the balustrade of the First Gallery
  - Jataka/Awadana (128 panels) on the balustrade of the First Gallery

3. Gandawyuha (128 panels) on the main wall of the Second Gallery
  - Jataka/Awadana (100 panels) on the balustrade of the Second Gallery
4. Gandawyuha (88 panels) on the main wall of the Third Gallery
  - Gandawyuha (88 panels) on the balustrade of the Third Wall
5. Gandawyuha (84 panels) on the main wall of the Fourth Wall
  - Gandawyuha/Bhadracari (72 panels) on the balustrade of the fourth Wall.

(Soekmono 1976: 19-20, 32, Santiko 2014: 106).

These Karmawibhangga reliefs are depicted at the “hidden base” of the temple, consisted of 160 panels out of 1460 panels found at Borobudur. The reliefs are located on the lowest level, the *Kamadhatu*. These series of reliefs are not visible as it is covered by the broad base, which considered as a processional path. (fig. 1)

Karmawibhangga, *karma* means “action” or “deeds”, *vibhanga* is a “wave” or “flow”, so the Karmawibhangga signifies the flow of man’s life as well as in the hereafter, and it is believed that the Karmawibhangga is one of the many sermons of Buddha Himself deals with the Law of Cause and Effect, the Karmic Law. Thus, fate is determined by one’s actions (*karma*). The

<sup>3</sup> The latest report by Balai Konservasi Borobudur (2013) the total height of Borobudur (without Chattra) is 35.40 meter, 121.66 meter long, and 121.38 meter width (Santiko 2012: 16).

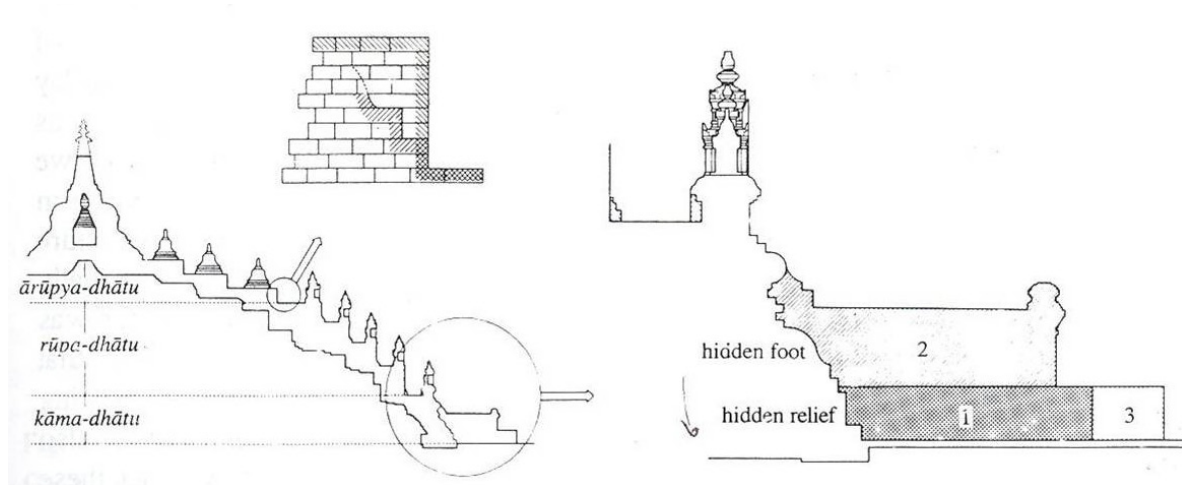


Figure 1. (Daigoro 1996, Fig. 58)

Law of Karma, or the Law of Cause and Effect, is considered applicable to everyone, whether kings, aristocrats, priests or commoners. Since it was very important for the people to obey the Karmic Law, the Borobudur's sculptors (the *śilpīns*) depicted the episodes for them to understand the doctrine easily. As a result, these stone panels reveal the amazing episodes of the early life in Java from ninth to tenth Century CE. (Kempers 1976: 235-239; Santiko 2009: 128-133).

In 1989, Jan Fontein studied the Karmawibhanga reliefs by comparing them with two Chinese Tripitaka's texts with Karmic retributions which are closely related to the Karmawibhanga from Nepal found by Levi. The first text is "the Sūtra on the Difference in Retribution of Actions as Expounded by the Buddha to Śuka Manava" (*Fu-shuo Shou-chia Chang-che Yeh-pao Ch'ia-pieh-ching*). It was translated into Chinese in 582 CE by Ch'u-t'an-Fa-chih or Gautama Dharmaprajña, the son of Prajñaruci, who had come to China from India; this translation is reprinted in the *Taisho Tripitaka as no. 80 (T 80)*. The second Chinese translation is the "Sūtra on the Difference in Retribution between Good and Evil" (*Fen-pieh Dhan-wo Pao-ying-ching*). It was translated by the monk T'ien Shi Tsai, a native of Kashmir who arrived in China in AD 980 and lived in India for more than 20 years. His translation is reprinted in the *Taisho Tripitaka as no. 81 (T 81)* (Fontein 1989: 13).

According to Fontein the Chinese translation known as T 80 is the closest to the Sanskrit text used by the sculptors of Candi Borobudur, and Fontein translated into English some paragraphs of the text that had been illustrated on Borobudur's "hidden foot". This text is divided into paragraphs, each paragraph deals with different actions, ten types of action in number, resulting in one or more specific form of karmic retribution (Fontein 1989: 13, 78-79; Gupta 2009: 213-222).

### 3.1 Karmawibhanga Episodes and the Chinese Translations

As mentioned earlier, the foot of the Candi Borobudur was covered by a broad base, so our knowledge of the reliefs Karmawibhanga is only based on the photographs taken by Kassian Cephas. The entire photographs have been published in Krom's book *Beschrijving van Borobudur* in 1920, as the original negatives of Cephas' photographs are kept at Tropen Museum in Amsterdam (Hardiati & Priyambodo 2009: 261).

In 2008 I read Jan Fountain's *The Law of Cause and Effect in Ancient Java* (1989) and at the same time I tried to compare the content of the T 80 paragraphs with the photographs of Karmawibhanga episodes taken by Cephas, which are still displayed at one of the buildings in the area of Candi Borobudur.<sup>4</sup> From the comparative study between the Karmawibhanga episodes and the content of the paragraphs T80 translated by Fontein, I incline to accept Fountain's research of the reliefs of the hidden base of Borobudur. I consider the Karmawibhanga's sculptors arranged the episodes in concordant with the Chinese paragraphs. For instance *paragraph* I mentions *10 types of actions with the result for all beings in a rebirth of short duration*:

- 1) to kill living beings with one's own hand
- 2) to instigate killing by others
- 3) to praise killing
- 4) to rejoice in seeing others kill
- 5) to wish for the death of a person one hates
- 6) to rejoice at the death of a person one hates
- 7) to cause others to have an abortion
- 8) to exhort others to commit abortion
- 9) to found temples where living beings slaughters
- 10) to incite others to fight and harm one another.

As already mentioned, one panel usually represents more than one scenes often separated by trees or by a fence or a building. However,

<sup>4</sup> On July the 1<sup>st</sup> up to 5<sup>th</sup> 2008 an International Seminar on Borobudur was held in Manohara Hotel Borobudur.



Figure 2. The Hunter Cooking Fish (*cause*) a Small Child Dead (*effect*) (Source: Krom 1920)



Figure 3. Doing Abortus to Certain Women (*cause*) a Small Child Dead (*effect*) (Source: Krom 1920)



Figure 4. To Incite Others to Fight One Another (*cause*) A Small Child Dead (*effect*) (Source: Krom 1920)

episode no. 1 (01) should be united with the second (02) episode since the result of the action, "a rebirth of short duration", is shown on the second panel. Here on the left (02) is a relief of a dead child (short life). The same results depicting a dead child or a skeleton of a child are shown on the third (03), fourth (04) and fifth (05) panels (Fontein 1989: 15).

According to Fontein, the Karmawibhangga sculptors and also the monk-supervisors had an important role in the way the illustrations were arranged (Fontein 1989: 69).

There is, however, another reason should be considered, the sculptors had to carve the episodes for visitors to understand the karmic doctrines easily. As a result these panels reveal



Figure 5. Fighting Each Others (*cause*) A Small Child Dead (*effect*) (Source: Krom 1920)



Figure 6. Rejoice to See the Victim of Famine (*cause*) Rebirth as a Person Having Few Possession (*effect*) (Source: Krom 1920)

the amazing episodes of the everyday life of the Old Javanese people from ninth to tenth Century CE (Santiko 2014: 107). For instance, the episode on 065 is one of the representations of paragraph XI mentioning “ten types of actions that result of all beings in a rebirth as a person having few possessions”, such as to steal, to incite others to steal, to rejoice at the bad fortune of others etc. Episode 065, the men on the right rejoice at the fate of the victim of famine, the result is a rebirth of a person having few possessions (Fontein 1989: 30-31).

This episode also shows that the Old Javanese people were an agrarian society. There are *paddy rice* as well as *paddy gaga* shown on some panels (Panel 0121, 0123). As they are today, rats were the enemy of the farmers. However, episodes of seedlings in paddy fields or rice pounding are not depicted in the Karmawibhanga reliefs. Besides rice there are still other crops such as bananas, mangos,

oranges, durians, corn and the important ones are the *kalpataru*, the holy trees, depicted on the panels represent heaven (*svargga*). Fishing and hunting were also popular ways of living along with animal husbandry, looking after chicken, pigs (09), and fish-breeding in ponds. The reliefs also reveal the ways and habits such as method of lighting fire, cooking in earthenware pots, nursing the sick, attending the dead etcetera (Rangkuti 1989: 26; Santiko 2014: 112).

In addition to everyday activities, work, the ways and habits of Ancient Javanese communities, the reliefs also contain information on the social structure, and religious activities. Sometimes it is not easy to recognize the class of people on the reliefs, but we can try recognizing them from the cloths, accessories they wear, and also from the things which accompanying them, including the environment shown on the panel (Citraninda 2012: 27-46, Santiko 2014: 112-113).

Besides the arrangement of the text the sculptors also took liberties to change or to add something to the text. On panel 094 we find a *garuda* and *naga* included in the paragraph XVI of the Chinese text which mentions “ten types of action that result of all beings in a rebirth as a domestic animal” (Fontein 1989: 42). For the Old-Javanese people *garuda* was an important animal as a *vahana* (vehicle) of Wisnu; we found the *garuda* relief on the Ramayana episode on the Siwa temple, Candi Prambanan, and the combination of *garuda-naga* are very popular in the story of Garudeya in East-Javanese period. There is no explanation why the sculptors chose those two supernatural animals for “domestic animals” as a rebirth for someone who was doing one of the actions mentioned in paragraph XVI.

### 3.2. Short Inscriptions and Karmawibhangga Episodes

It is interesting to note, that the sculptors who carved the reliefs Karmawibhangga knew a lot of daily life in Java, as they might be Indonesian themselves. The evidence come from the 35 short inscriptions depicted on the wall above the reliefs as a kind of information to the sculptors what kind of episode they had to carve. These short inscriptions were written in Old-Javanese scripts in Sanskrit words without the nominal case-endings. The Indonesian sculptors had no problem to understand the meaning of

the words in question. For instance when they read the word “*svārgga*”, they will carve heaven according to their imagination/knowledge. However, the other people, the Indian *śilpins* for instance, who understand Sanskrit language, would confuse whether they had to carve the people in heaven, the situation in heaven, or others (Santiko 2014: 197).

The word *svārgga* is depicted 8 times, each panel on *svārgga* related to a certain paragraph. For instance panel 0126 is related to paragraph LXV, mentioning “ten types of merit to be gained from homage to the stupa and shrines of Buddha”. In the last two lines of the paragraphs is mentioned “upon death one will be reborn in Heaven, one will soon enter into Nirvana (Fontein 1989: 55). On panel 0126, on the right side, nine people are talking politely (*gosthi*), on the left three of them sitting on a dais and two are standing. These two groups of people are separated by *kalpataru* tree flanked by *kinnara* birds, the tree and the singing birds of heaven.

The presence of the *kalpataru* flanked by *kinnara-kinnari* signifies that the situation in heaven are found on panels 0101, 0102, 0126, 0130, 0137, 0143, 0149. However there are also two panels that depict heaven with *kalpataru* flanked by *kinnaras*, both of them are not included to paragraph LXV.

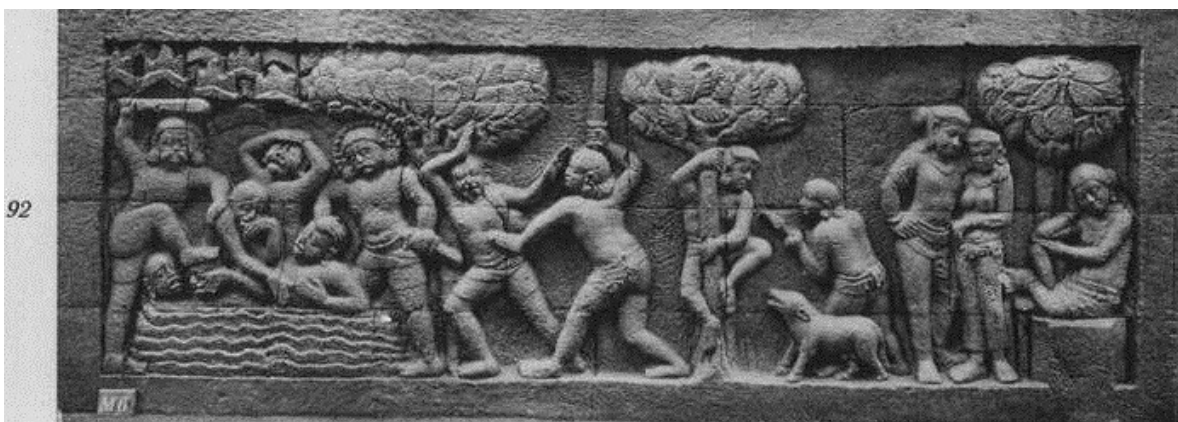
The Law of Karma contains valuable information on the religious beliefs and duties



**Figure 7.** Rebirth in Heaven, the Situation in *Svargga* with the Presence of *Kalpavṛkṣa* guarded by *Kinnara-Kinnari* (Source: Krom 1920)



**Figure 8.** Rebirth in Hell; To Boil Turtles they will have the same fate in Hell; to harm innocent women he will be thrown head first to the burning house (Source: Krom 1920)



**Figure 9.** To commit adultery (*cause*) the man is punished in the forest of sword and is thrown into a stream of boiling water (*effect*) (Source: Krom 1920)



**Figure 10.** Destroying the lamps of the temple (*cause*) the people become ugly looking (*effect*) (Source: Krom 1920)

of those who followed the Buddhist path, such as giving alms (*dāna*) to the monks, also to other holy men, or to the poor, which is one of the ten paramitas (perfections) which form mahamārga, leading to Bodhicitta.<sup>5</sup> There are

<sup>5</sup> *Bodhicittas*: a *citta* or mind firmly bent on attaining *bodhi* (enlightenment) and becoming a Buddha.

short inscriptions on “*dāna*”, i.e. *chattradāna* that means “gift of parasol” (0127), *ghantadāna* (gift of a bell, 0134), *vastradāna* (gift of clothes, 0137), *bhājanadāna* ( gift of a vessel, 0140), *patākādāna* (gift of a banner, 0141), *bojanadāna* (giving food /beverage, 0147), *puspadāna*, *maladāna* (gift of flowers, 0152) and each of these *dāna* is leading



to “upon death one will be reborn in heaven, one will soon enter Nirvana” mentioned in each paragraphs (Fontein 1989: 61-85).

On the contrary to *svargga*, there is no inscription mentioning “hell”, eventhough there are 8 panels about hell, which are panels 86-92, paragraph XV. As usual the Cause (ten types of actions) and the Effect (rebirth in Hell) are mentioned in this paragraph. In Buddhism they believe in 8 kinds of Hell with a specific type of punishment. Those are *Sañjiva*, *Kalasutra*, *Sanghata*, *Eaurava*, *Maharaurava*, *Tapana*, *Pratapa* and *Avici* (Atmojo 1989: 51-66; Fontein 1989: 34-43). There are several panels on Hell at the Hidden Foot, for instance in panel 089, on right-side for boiling turtles in a cauldron they have the same fate in hell, on the left half of the panel for harming innocent woman he will be thrown head first to the burning house. In Buddhism killing living beings known as *ahimsa* are forbidden; the spirit of *ahimsa* are also found on panels 01-05. Beside *ahimsa*, bad conduct that is also considered as a big sin is shown on panel 092. On the right side is one who commits adultery while the husband is sleeping. Later the man is punished in the “Forest of the Sword-leaf Trees” (*Asipattravana*) and is thrown into a stream of boiling water.

There are still several interesting panels related to short inscriptions, and one of them is the word *virupa* that means “ugly” depicted on panel 021, related to paragraph V, with the effect of rebirth as a person with an ugly appearance. These people with “ugly appearances” do not only occupying the left-side of the panel 021, but also panels 022, 023, 024 and 025 (Fontein 1989: 22-23). One of the bad action is “to destroy the lamps of stupas and temples”; on panel 024, figures occupying the left side and the central of the panel are destroying the lamp of a temple (the Cause), and the people become ugly looking, on the left (Effect).

#### 4. Conclusion

Research on the Karmawibhangga reliefs at “the hidden base” of Candi Borobudur have been carried out by several scholars, among others are N.J. Krom (1920), Sylvain Levi (1931), and Jan Fontein. The result of the study, each of them has a specific text related to the Karmawibhangga text which deals with the Law of Cause and Effect, The Karmic Law. In this article I intent to find out which text used by the sculptors to carve the relief Karmawibhangga at candi Borobudur.

By using the Historical-Archaeological approach, I agree with Jan Fontein that the sculptors used only one single text, which was the original Sanskrit text of T80. According to Fontein the T 80 consists of paragraphs, and each paragraph consists of 10 types of actions (*Cause*) and the result for all beings in their rebirth (*Effect*). We can see the relationship between the Cause-Effect of the paragraphs on the episodes of the relief Karmawibhangga at Borobudur, for instance in paragraph I, “rebirth of short duration” was mentioned as the Effect and we saw a small child (“short duration”) dead as a result of one of the types of action in paragraph I.

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