

PLACE AND SPACE IN EARLY BURMA: A NEW LOOK AT 'PYU CULTURE'¹

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Abstract

Ancient Burma (Myanmar) is commonly split into Upper Burma 'Pyu' and Lower Burma Mon cultures, an ethnic classification of walled site cultures in the Irrawaddy (Ayeyarwaddy) basin that began with fourth to ninth century C.E. scripts. The early Buddhist archaeology, however, points to multiple groups and spreads far beyond the Irrawaddy drainage system. The Mon typology has profitably been unravelled in Aung-Thwin's controversial study (2005), but, while his advocacy of the Pyu primacy has been questioned, rudimentary definitions of the first millennium C.E. 'Pyu culture' have remained largely unchallenged. The blinkered results of text primacy in defining ethnicity and cultural identity are addressed here, with data from recent discoveries used to identify a relational engagement between the brick walls and terracotta urns typical of early Buddhist cultures in Upper Burma. This localised integration of spatial and spiritual factors is further strengthened by a range of artefacts and indigenous texts².

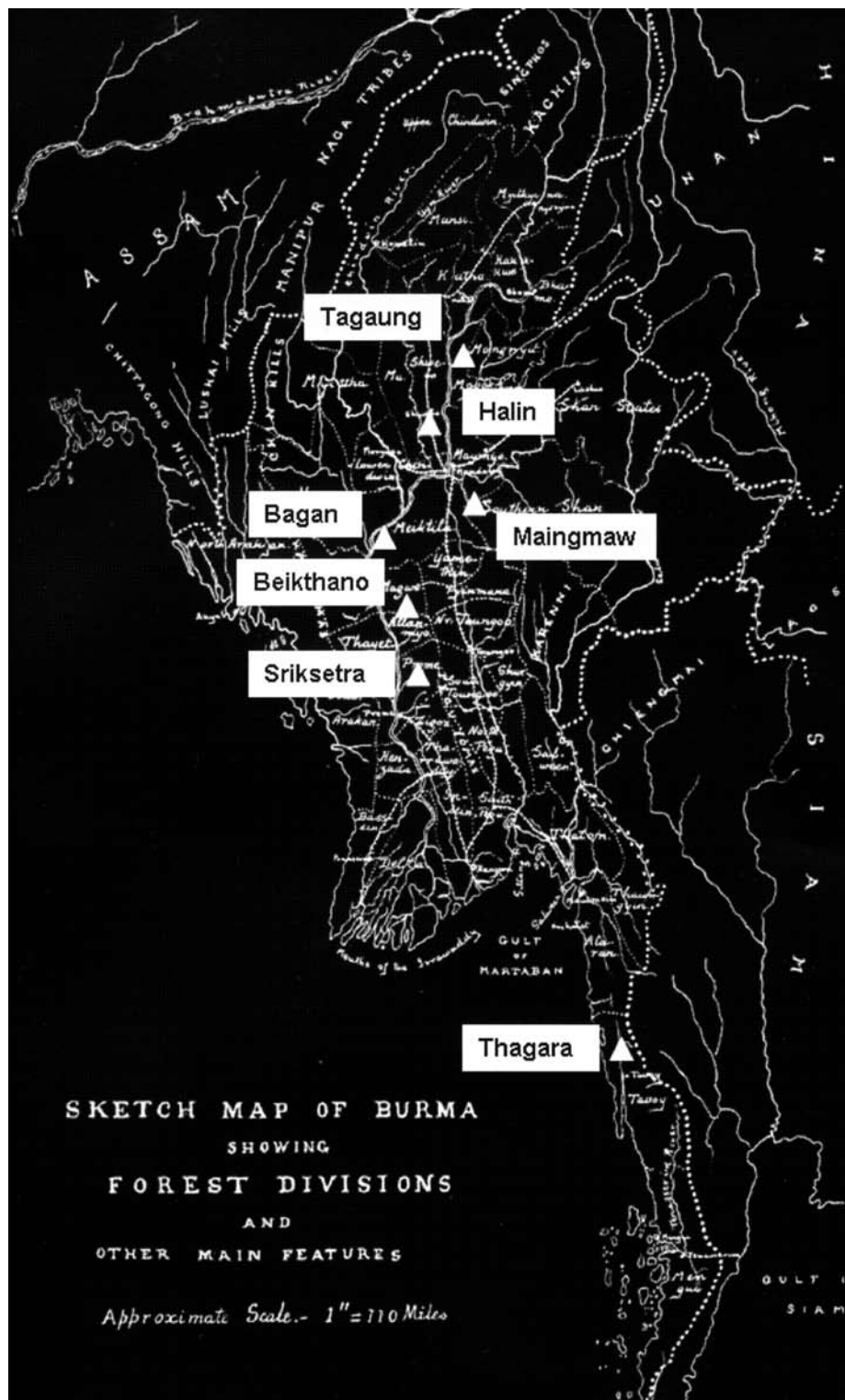
Geography, chronicles and archaeology

The Upper/Lower (*ah-che-ah-nya*) division of the Burmese language is by definition geographical: the 'region adjoining the upper reaches of the Irrawaddy River' and the 'downriver or leeward side' (Burma Commission 1993: 540, 557). This distinguishes the central arid region north of Prome (Pyay) from the Twante-Pegu (Bago) delta and the coastal Mon State³. The Upper/Lower term stems from the Irrawaddy, so many other important first millennium C.E. polities are not included in this common expression: Arakan (Rakhine), Tennasserim (Tanintharyi)

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² Data from the first millennium C.E. walled sites of Tagaung (23°30'N, 96°11' E), Halin (22°27' N, 92°23' E), Maingmaw (21°17' N, 96°12' E), Beikthano (20°00'N, 95°22' E), Sriksetra (18°48' N, 95°17' E) and Thagara (14°04' N, 98°11' E).

³ The mediaeval northern limit of the Mon was Thayet (*Sarak* in Mon) on the Irrawaddy midway between Rangoon (Yangon) and Prome (San Win, pers. comm. 03–2008).



Map 1. Map of Burma showing selected sites and features mentioned in text (after Peacock, E.H. 1933. *A Game-book for Burma and Adjoining Territories*. London: H.F. & G. Witherly)

and the Chin, Kachin and Shan regions. All these provided important economic and cultural interchange for the central basin. For example, Arakan and Tenasserim front the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea and supported significant Indian Ocean trading networks (Map 1). They were distant from subsequent Upper Burma centres of power but supplied essential ports and natural resources for the succession of royal capitals at Pagan (Bagan), Ava (Inwa), Amarapura and Mandalay.

It is the epigraphic basis of indigenous texts rather than the geography, artefacts or localised legends of these many ancient cities that framed the birth of archaeology in Burma. King Bodawpaya (r. 1782–1819 C.E.) is credited with this beginning, for he charged Twinthin with the task of collecting stone inscriptions and compiling of *The New Chronicle* (ya-zawin or 'lineage of kings') (Hla Pe 1985: 37–54–57, Tet Htoot 1961: 52–54). This was followed closely in the 1829 *The Glass Palace Chronicle of the Kings of Burma* ordered by King Bagyidaw (Khin Maung Nyunt 1992: 15, Pe Maung Tin and G.H. Luce 1960). Although these and the many other chronicle records relied on a combination of inscriptions and legends, colonial partiality for linear over cyclical history was seen institutionally in the 1902 founding of the Epigraphy Office under the Archaeological Survey of India (Moore 2008, 2009). This was changed to the Directorate of Archaeology only in 1954 and the Department of Archaeology in 1972.

Accepting the general lines of national ya-zawin such as U Kala, compiled in the reign of Taninganwe (r. 1714–33 C.E.), Twinthin and the *Glass Palace Chronicle* for the purposes of this article, Pagan was founded in the second century C.E. and known as Pugarama (Pagan) from the eleventh century C.E. (Nyunt Nyunt Shwe 2007: 288, Pe Maung Tin and Luce 1960). These chronicles record many groups moving about the upper region (Kala 1992, Tun Nyo (Twin Thin, Minister Twinthin Thaik Wun Maha Sithu U Htun Nyo) 1968). Although they are not framed in the direct chronologies of Western archaeology and rarely deal directly with culture or other subjective aspects of history, the chronicles influenced site explorations of pioneering archaeologist Taw Sein Ko (1864–1930) and his successors throughout the twentieth century C.E. (Wyatt 1997: 690). Indeed, given their focus on site lineage, the signposting of chronicles, albeit not solely the text-centred Pyu model emphasised by Luce and his followers, is generally rewarding for archaeological exploration (Moore 2007: 25).

Taw Sein Ko likewise did not see homogeneous ethnicity during the first millennium C.E. emergence of Buddhist polities. Quite the contrary, taking his cue from chronicles he describes numerous groups including Pyu, Kanyan, Burma, Mon and Arakan in pondering the origins of the word 'Burma':

It is curious that the term Burma, by which the Burmans are known, is not met with, in Burmese history, till we come to the

destruction of Śīrikhettarā, when it is recorded that the inhabitants were split up into three parties, viz: - Pyu, Kanyan, and Mranmāā... The King's nephew, Samuddarāja [Thamudarit], collected the remnants of his tribe and founded Taungnyo. [northwest of Pyinmana near Nay Pyi Taw (1968: 46 fn.2)] Three years afterwards, the Talaings, who inhabited Rāmañña, came and destroyed the newly-founded State. He then removed his capital to Thet-th-pan-daung, from thence again, after six years, he removed to Mindôn. In the third year of his removal, he was attacked by the Arakanese of Dhaññavati, and so for the third time, he removed to Yôn-hlut-kyun, and, joined by the inhabitants of 19 Pyu villages, he founded Pagan. (1913: 1)

U Kala's *Great Chronicle*, Twinthwin's *New Chronicle* and the *Glass Palace Chronicle* note the Pyu as one of several groups, not giving the 19 village heads assembled by Thamudarit a single ethnic label. The *Great Chronicle* suggests that some of the villages were Pyu, stating that after the ill-fated reign of Supaññanagarachinna and a 'great whirlwind that carried away the winnowing tray', that the Kanyans, Pyu and Burma split into three divisions. Sriksetra fell and there was an interregnum of three years at Taungnyo, six at Padaung and three at Mindon before Thamudarit brought together the headmen of 1) Nyaung-U; 2) Nagabo; 3) Nagakyit; 4) Magyigyī; 5) Tuti; 6) Kyaussaga; 7) Kokkethin; 8) Nyaungwun; 9) Anurada; 10) Tazaunggun; 11) Ywamon; 12) Kyinlo; 13) Kokko; 14) Taungba; 15) Myegedwin; 16) Tharekya; 17) Onmya; 18) Yonhlut; and 19) Ywasaik (Pe Maung Tin and Luce 1960: 29; Kala 1992: 187; Tun Nyo 1968: 46–47).

Following the record of these chronicles, the nineteen villages were distinct or competitive enough to label them separate ethno-cultural spheres. Despite this, however, as the only surviving script from the many groups is called Pyu, all have commonly been brought together as 'Pyu'⁴. However, given references in Chinese texts to eighteen dependent kingdoms and nine garrison cities, and tribes numbering anywhere from 32 to 298, it seems clear that the singular 'Pyu culture' is a term of convenience only (Luce 1985: 70–71). This caveat was recognised long ago by Blagden:

...a forerunner of the Tibeto-Burman movement into the southern parts of the Irrawaddy valley...The name 'Pyu' has merely been attached to it as a convenient label, not improbable in view of Bur-

⁴ As Luce notes, these peoples were called P'iao in early Chinese references and Tircul by Mons and Javanese (1985: 47).

mese traditional history, but by no means to be accepted as final.
(Blagden 1919: 61)

His cautions, however, were overridden, one reason being the need for a simple means to describe the abundance of first millennium C.E. artefacts. However, a critical difficulty with the usage - that *has been* often accepted as final - comes in its stifling of comparative innovative study of the available data on the different Tibeto-Burman and other ethnic groups. The alternative is retreat, stating an inability to probe further in the absence of more data. While this often the case, especially given today's conservative attitudes towards generalisation, it was not prevalent in earlier scholarship.

Ethnicity and archaeology

Beikthano

Taw Sein Ko, for instance, thought that natives of Taungdwingyi, 16 km southeast of Beikthano, identified with the Tibeto-Burman Kadu (Kanyan), a suggestion once advocated by Than Tun (1965: 12). Chen Yi Sein identified Beikthano as Lin-yang and proposed a Khmer (205/210–225 C.E.) and then 'Monized' phase until the fifth century C.E. (San Shwe 2008, Chen Yi Sein 1999: 86–87). It is not the different groups in chronicles that has and often continues to engage Burma scholars, however, but rather the origins of the *Bama* (*Mranma*) with its reference to both a 'racial' and 'national' group (Aung-Thwin 2008). This is commonly either adoption of Luce's view that Burma came via Kyaukse ('*Myanma-asa-Kyaukse-ka*') or Po Lat's advocacy of Tagaung as the root locale ('*Myanma-asa-Tagaung-ka*') (Hla Thein Tun 1997:27–28, Phone Tint Kyaw 2007: 44–45).

In the Beikthano area, the apparent simplicity of two choices, whether Upper/Lower, Pyu/Mon or Kyaukse/Tagaung, is belied by the complex local archaeology. For example, Palaeolithic and Neolithic sites have been recorded around Mya Thalun pagoda on the Irrawaddy at Magwe, 45 km west of Beikthano. At the Bronze-Iron Age cemetery of Ywa-din-gon, 80 km northeast of Beikthano, suggestion of mortuary lineage is possibly seen in sixty-seven skeletons, some in coffins made of tree trunks added to clustered burials over time. As with other Samon valley sites, the artefacts and 400–200 BC Accelerated Mass Spectrometry (AMS) results from Ywa-din-gon are comparable to bronze Dian cultures in Yunnan. Samon affinities to Yunnan fade, however, with entry of Indic-oriented Pyu artefacts, suggesting a combination of absorption or displacement perhaps by an intrusive population (Moore 2007). Such variable change is indicated by finds not totally Samon or Pyu during 2000–2001 excavations at Letpanywa (19°48'N,

95°58'E), 30 km southwest of Beikthano, where skeletons were documented inside and outside two structures, along with finger-marked bricks and iron artefacts but also two bronze bands *circa* 2 cm in diameter bearing large-nosed human faces worked in relief (Nyein Lwin 2004). In Taungdwingyi, Pyu artefacts were recovered during recent renovation of Aung Myin-zaya (Arakan Zeidi) in Taungdwingyi, while at Beikthano, indication of mortuary lineages is possibly seen in urns from a building (BTO20) discussed below. (Fig.1) In short, Beikthano did not exist only in relation to distant sites such as Sriksetra (140 km) and Halin (285 km) but within multi-period highly localised systems.

Tagaung and Pagan

Beikthano was not the only site to be dubbed something other than Pyu: Luce nicknamed Tagaung the 'eastern capital' of the Kadu (Kanyan) and honoured the Thet as the 'most numerous and cultured' peoples of Pyu times (Luce 1974: 124, 1985/1: 28, Than Tun 1965: 12). Statements such as these have been perpetuated, as have Luce's equally imaginative contrasts between Mon and Burmese ethnicity and architecture at Pagan (1969). Other beliefs surround the Thet (Sak), credited by some with disseminating Buddhist teachings via the Chindwin (Moore 2007: 234, map after Win Maung (Tampawaddy). In the absence of a writing system for the Thet, Kadu or other dialect groups vital to the rise of the cosmopolitan Pagan, verifying or discarding earlier generalisations such as these may hopefully stimulate more archaeological documentation of vital but little-mapped regions such as the Chindwin basin.

Pagan, which chronicles link to Tagaung, is also in need of further research, for it remains notably sparse in Pyu artefacts (Stadtner 2008). Despite long investigation and excavations in recent years at Yon Hlut Kyun (1999–2000), iron kilns to the east around Zi-O, eighth to the tenth century C.E. pottery production at Otein Taung (1999) and survey of the nineteen founder villages of Pagan cited in chronicles, significant Pyu finds have yet to be recorded (Hudson, Win Maung and Nyein Lwin 2002, Hudson 2004: 15, 211–212, 249).

An attempt has been made to fill the 'Pyu Pagan' gap in recent study of Paw-daw-mu (Temple 996) in the southern sector of Pagan. Although the study considers it Pyu, subsequently encased in a Burmese eleventh century C.E. structure, the majority of stylistic parallels for the distinctive stucco of the inner temple are to eighth to tenth century C.E. Dvaravati pieces. These include faces peering out of horse-shoe shaped *kudu* arches, images of the Buddha and floral details (Gutman and Hudson, 2008: 20–22; Hudson 2004: 247–248). Some parallels for the *kudu* arches can be seen at Nakhon Pathom of this period but the faces more closely resemble Nalanda styles; parallels for the floral motifs and arches include Abeydadana murals attributed to Kyanzittha (r.1084–1113 C.E.) (Department of History 1986:

43–44; Handlin images, pers.comm. 2008). Another comparison is to an arch from the eleventh century C.E. Maung Di stupa near Twante in the delta region usually placed within a 'Mon' Lower Burma (Stadtner 2008). Thus *if* any ethnic identification is given to the stucco of Temple 996, 'Mon' seems more relevant than 'Pyu'.

This does not discount earlier occupation: the base of the structures is 80 cm below present ground level and images of the Buddha on the east side are visible only above the lower torso (Gutman and Hudson 2008:20). Fragmentary reports on pre-Anawrahta artefacts likewise often indicate finds well below surface level. For example, early twentieth century C.E. note of a 'Pyu' pot at Myinpagan was eight metres below ground level (Archaeological Survey of Burma 1917: 42, Hudson 2004). However, given the vagueness and early date of the description, the attribution is open to question.

Scripts and archaeological criteria

How can we begin to map out the epigraphically-absent groups of first millennium C.E. Burma? As discussed further below in relation to China, vernaculars in the absence of a writing system often stimulate a rich material and performance culture. An example is seen in elements such as origin legends and songs of Tavoy (Dawei), where the walled site of Thagara is located (Aye Sandi 1999, Kyaw Min 1958, Moore and Than Swe 2006). Dawei, written in Burmese script, is spoken within a restricted geographical area and limited population, with local information commonly transmitted verbally and easily sheltered from cultural dilution. As an ethnographic means to at least raise questions about its ancient presence, its culture offers one way to extract Thagara from the hazardously general 'Pyu culture'. As re-iterated often above, the present-day English term 'Pyu' designates the only known local Brahmi-derived script recording the Tibeto-Burman (and other) languages spoken in first millennium C.E. Upper Burma. The various script styles are sometimes called archaic and unchanging, but elsewhere temporally mixed and in close touch with Asokan to Gupta centres (Aung-Thwin 2005: 14, Phone Tint Kyaw 2007, Tha Myat 1963, 1972). Others separate a Sanskrit-based North India-derived script on stone slabs and urns at Halin and Sriksetra, from a South India Pali-based style on the gold plates from Sriksetra, and an ability to read the early twelfth century C.E. Myazeidi inscription Pyu does not mean one is able to read Halin Pyu (San Win, pers.comm. 04.2008; San Shwe, pers.comm. 01.2008).

In short, the script styles are diverse, examples are few, and the dates span eight hundred years. What the diversity does suggest is local scholarship, an intellectual creativity seen clearly in the diagnostic artefacts of 'Pyu culture' discussed below. Prior to the defining of criteria, unidentified artefacts later labelled Pyu were mentioned in passing. Beikthano, for example, was noted by

road engineers in 1896, when they unearthed brass cups and silver coins. As many of the British officers and civil servants came via postings in India, they brought with them the antique collecting ‘passion’ of this era and considered the objects Indian (Guha-Thakurta 2004: 28). Forchhammer, Taw Sein Ko and Beylié explored Sriksetra in 1905–1907 expeditions, Halin was surveyed in 1905, and Taw Sein Ko documented two mounds in the southern part of Beikthano in 1905. However, the first systematic excavation was carried out at Beikthano only in 1959–62 when twenty-five mounds were unearthed under the supervision of Aung Thaw, Director-General from 1961–1982 (Aung Thaw 1968; Myint Aung 1970; Nyunt Han et al. 2007: 7, 9, 14; San Shwe 2006, 2008).

Aung Thaw’s Beikthano excavations, as with many subsequent ones, were aimed at documenting above-ground structures rather than sub-surface stratigraphic exploration into the origins of sites. This was the case, for example, in Tagaung excavations in 1967–1999 when twelve mounds were unearthed during six periods of fieldwork, and also in the first Department of Archaeology excavation of two mounds at Thagara only in 1999–2000. In this context, Aung Thaw’s efforts were at the time, and still remain, a benchmark in assembling sufficient data to formulate diagnostic criteria for ‘Pyu culture’ (Aung Thaw 1968: 3):

Masonry structures with massive walls made of large bricks
Silver coins
Burial urns
Beads
Pottery
Iron artefacts
Buddhist statuary and *htarpanar* (relic offerings)
Pyu inscriptions
Fort walls with massive curved gates.

Subsequent research and publications have retained these criteria to assess whether an assemblage should be called Pyu. The list has been cited time and again, for from all the ‘Pyu’ excavations, there remain only four radiocarbon dates obtained in Aung Thaw’s initial Beikthano work, along with four usable radiocarbon results from Myint Aung’s subsequent excavations at Halin. In addition, dating continues to make use of the lower calibrated range of the few dates to define the chronology. Thus generally Beikthano (second century BC to fourth century C.E.) is followed by that of Sriksetra (fourth to fifth to the eighth century C.E.), then Halin (second to ninth century C.E.) and Maingmaw (fourth to fifth century C.E.). Until the 1998–2003 excavation at Tagaung, its culture was dated to the eleventh century C.E. Pagan era but due to the presence of a number of the

diagnostic indicators is now considered Pyu. The only absolute date from Tagaung (770–900 C.E.) was obtained from in *situ* charcoal about one metre below ground level with a cluster of urns during construction of the new museum at Tagaung (Hudson, pers.comm. 2006).

Of Aung Thaw's nine traits, Luce heavily prioritized the written word of inscriptions and Chinese accounts (Luce 1985). While many others such as Aung Myint (1998), Aung-Thwin (2005), Bo-hmu Ba-shin (1998), Hudson (2004, 2008), Moore (2007), Stargardt (1990, 2003) and Win Maung (Tampawaddy) (2006) assess the walled site cultures in a structure that includes archaeology and ecology, the linguistic legacy of Luce and his colleague Than Tun has encouraged continued preoccupation with texts to define 'Pyu culture' (e.g. Than Tun 2002, Wheatley 1983). In the last fifteen years, there has been a resurgence of Pyu exploration, seen for instance in 1995–2002 C.E. excavation of eleven mounds at Beikthano. With a growing body of field data, scripts have in more recent publications been used as only one – albeit still the preferred – index of pre-Pagan habitation (Nyunt Han et al. 2007: 15–16):

Large bricks to construct walls, palace, religious buildings
 Marked bricks (circa 45 cm long, 10 cm thick)
 Entry gates
 Urns with bones and ash
 Terracotta pottery
 Silver and gold coins
 Pyu scripts used to write Pyu and Pali
 Beads
 Gold objects
 Buddha images and other Buddhist objects in silver, gold and bronze
 Enclosing walls

The eleven point list of Nyunt Han, Aung Kyaing, Chit San Win and Thein Lwin reiterates Aung Thaw's, albeit with more detailed brick and metal categories. Their article nonetheless usefully bridges early twentieth century surveys, post-Independence excavations at Beikthano, Halin (1966–1969), Sriksetra (1962–1963 and 1970–1971) and Maingmaw (1979–1982) with excavations of the last fifteen years (2007: 4–7). The article is also significant, coming from several of the Ministry of Culture staff who carried out this work, for while some excavation reports are made available informally, they have not been published. There is the additional limitation of language as the Nyunt Han et al. article is in Burmese and so not accessible to all foreign scholars. Over the past fifteen years, the majority of publications on archaeological research have come via the Universities Historical Research Centre

(UHRC), formerly under the Ministry of Education and since 2007, the Ministry of Culture. While these often include English language articles, their international circulation has been limited, and contemporary Burmese scholars remain under-represented in Western publications (Aung-Thwin 2008). These points are central to the present article, for the absence of new material and scarce citation of Burma scholars has contributed to unquestioning adoption of outmoded paradigms such as that for 'Pyu culture'.

Thus the situation today is contradictory. Pyu writing remains preferred but with the important exception of the 1979 finding of an important inscribed stone urn at Sriksetra, the body of Pyu texts has remained at a virtual standstill. On the other hand, there is an ever-growing corpus of diagnostic but little-cited artefacts. The abundance and site specific diversity is vital to bring new data on early Buddhist Burma into the English literature. It is in this context that significant elements of the Nyunt Han et al. summary are discussed below:

At Tagaung, stone, bronze, iron implements and the first 'Pyu' finds inside the walled site and at the nearby villages of Hsin Hnyat Kon and Kyan Hnyat were recovered from 1998–2004 excavation and survey. These and the related Maw Shan city of Maingmaw in the Shweli valley mark the northeast limit of documented archaeological assemblages spanning the late Bronze-Iron Age to Buddhist periods (Moore 2007: 188–191).

From Halin, only 150 km southwest of Tagaung, notably different artefacts include numerous stone tools and rings, bronze and iron implements, and inhumation burials. Four skeletons, one 160 cm in length, were documented, two male and two female in a layer of buff sand 210 cm below surface level adjacent to the southeast corner of the walled zone. The inhumations, comparatively dated to 5000 B.P., were accompanied by large and small pots, with the assemblages likened to those at Nyaunggan near Monywa and Myin-oo-hle le near Meiktila (Moore 2007: 56 (map), 78, 81, 90–99, 119–120).

At Beikthano, no below ground excavation has taken place, but 2003 unearthing of mounds substantially expands previous data of the correlation of structures and burial urns associated with the Buddhist archaeology of the walled site. Several of the more than thirty-five unexplored mounds flanking the inside and outside the north wall of the site were unearthed with numerous urns found at two of the brick buildings (BTO 19 and BTO 20). (Table 1) A nearby building, KKG 1, has multiple rooms around a central chamber with urns in all but the central room. Just south of a north gate (KKG 15) is building KKG 17, source of 588 of the 708 beads recorded during Aung Thaw's excavations. Most of the beads were terracotta, fitting well into the prominence of brick and pottery production at the site (Aung Thaw 1968, Moore 2007).

KKG 1, KKG 17 and BTO 20 are three of more than thirty-five mounds that enfold outer and inner faces of the north wall of Beikthano. The wall (2743 m long) is unusual, built on a dike of yellow clay and less sturdy than the east (3048 m) or south (2438 m) walls constructed directly on the ground surface (San Shwe 2006). This north area of the site is possibly the root settlement sector, a concentrated zone of brick buildings, beads, urns and iron. For instance, nearly 250 kg of iron objects such as nails, sockets, bosses and strips were recovered from Beikthano, many in the north sector monastery (KKG 2) and gates (KKG 13 and KKG 15) (1990: 284–285). BTO 19 and BTO 20, outside the north wall, are rectangular halls with post holes, a ritual platform and numerous urns, similar to KKG 9, KKG 11 and KKG 12 inside the north wall (San Shwe 2008). Six BTO 20 urns were decorated with two rows of auspicious birds modelled on the rim and mid-section: doves on one and others with peacocks, ducks, and *hintha* or brahminy ducks. (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3). All the birds are expressively modelled, in full flight with wings spread on betel box or drum shaped vessels *circa* 30 cm in height. They bear multiple rows of deeply incised vertical lines on the slightly rounded base (San Shwe 2008). The urns are notable for their fine workmanship and the iconographic hint of lineage in the clusters and linked decorations (Fig. 5). This does not rule out a Buddhist attribution for the birds being from previous lives of the Buddha, but equally they may have merged local and Buddhist traditions.

A bronze image of the Buddha (13 cm) seated in *pralambanâsana* or 'European position' was recorded in 2003 from a depth of 65 cm below the top of the brick mound covering another rectangular structure (BTO13) south of the north wall. Thein Lwin compares the image to an undated seated example from Maingmaw, while San Shwe gives it a fifth to sixth century C.E. date in relation to an image in Leh-myet-hna temple in Sriksetsa. Brown suggests a later dating of around the seventh century C.E. for the bulk of Pyu images of the Buddha, based on stylistic affinities to Dvaravati pieces in Thailand (2001). The author (2007) adopted this more conservative view on stylistic grounds, but these new and significant documenting of ritual structures, urns and Buddhist sculpture suggest multi-period occupation by diverse religious sects, with chronicle accounts of its 'fall' reflecting simply political struggles with Sriksetra.

Finds from Maingmaw remain tantalizing but poorly provenanced in the absence of further excavation. Seven silver stupas and fifteen images of the Buddha, in gold (seven), silver (seven), and one in another metal were reported in 2005 at Maingmaw by a local farmer. The images were similar to those from Kalagangon village just outside the east wall of Sriksetra (Moore 2007 figures). Finds from 1982 at Mya-nadi 6.4 km east of the Maingmaw walled area, include a ten-line Pyu inscription with other Pyu inscriptions in nearby Leh-dwin and Myit-tha. The inscription, unfortunately not reproduced in the summary, is written in

a South India-derived script with their distinctive ‘r’ (*ra-gauk*) and ‘i’ (*lon-gyi-tin*) similar to the script of the Sriksetra gold plates (San Win, pers.comm. 04.2008).

Only thirty-six mounds, eleven since 1993, have been unearthed within the massive walled site of Sriksetra. (Fig. 6). The largest corpus of Pyu writing comes from Sriksetra, with art history and palaeography dating this phase of the site’s occupation to the fifth to ninth century C.E. (Hudson 2008: 273). One of the recent excavations yielded the most significant find of Pyu writing in recent years, a stone urn (105 cm high and 260 cm wide) from Hpayataung (HMA-31), a pagoda adjacent to the central palace or citadel (Fig. 7). The massive stone receptacle bears four lines of script, each with a royal name ending in *-vikrama*, the first being read by San Win as Hri Vikrama (Moore 2007: 173). The large domain of Sriksetra probably extended south to Thegon, a walled satellite site where an image of the Buddha in *pralambanâsana* was recorded; no details are given of the context or size (Nyunt Han et al. 2007: 15).

In summary, at Tagaung and Halin, underground excavations have added data to the the previously little known transition from Bronze-Iron Age to Buddhist finds, while at Beikthano, Maingmaw and Sriksetra, above ground survey and unearthing of mounds has widened the extent and range of Buddhist artefacts. Many of the finds have reversed earlier hypotheses, such as the absence of surface or excavated finds of imagery to definitely call Beikthano Buddhist, and the case for a range of localised Bronze-Iron to Buddhist transitions in the Halin and Tagaung artefact differences. There is no mention in Nyunt Han et al. of ‘Pyu’ objects in other regions with like material such as Arakan, Thagara and Thaton, or their absence at Pagan. There are, however, articles in the conference volume on Arakan, Tavoy and Pagan (Aye Hla, Lè Lè Win, Nu Mya Zan, San Win and Than Swe 2007).

Ramparts and urns

The constant finds of finger-marked bricks has underlined their ubiquity at sites all over the country (Fig. 4). Nonetheless, at Tagaung, finger-marked bricks recorded in 1.7 m below surface level at site TG31, have been called ‘Pyu’, laying an Upper Burma primacy over a wide artefact distribution and giving a unified social identity to a time of numerous fluid groupings. Such use of a fraction to surmise a whole bypasses inter-relationships of local artefacts, a point underlined by Taylor in considering culture and ethnicity (1982: 7):

Because ethnicity has generally been conceptualized as an ascribed attribute with the implicit assumption of instinctive and primordial antagonisms between different groups, as has been customary in Western political thought since the rise of nationalism, rather than as a relational attribute reflecting ecological and

subcultural characteristics, a false problem has been posed on the practice and study of Burma's politics. (Taylor 1982:7)

One significant ecological and cultural relationship which appears to have been ignored is that between walls and urns. The wall form was determined by the local ecology, a man-made perimeter often presumed to mark the site domain. The existence of urns both within and immediately outside walls, however, belies this sense of boundary. At Beikthano, for example, 357 urns that have been documented from inner as well as outer sectors (San Shwe 2008). Of these, 193 are in the north sector with the remaining 164 in the centre and south (Table 1). As at other sites, there has been as yet little documentation of their contents, clustering or stratigraphy, let alone consideration of how variations might reflect the synthesis of lineage traditions as mentioned earlier. This is discussed further below along with other issues raised by the wall-urn association, from the management of natural resources to the role of astrology and alchemy in the rise of Buddhist rule.

The urns, ritually gathered and embedded in building foundations, possibly for the consecration of rulers, contain different types of artefacts in addition to ash and bones. At Tagaung, one urn contained six types of iron objects, as well as beads and gold (Chit San Win 2005: 100–101). At Sriksetra, urns were often buried alongside alchemically potent iron artefacts, a practice documented on the upland area outside the Sriksetra's southwest walls. These hills are also a rich source of fossilised wood, favoured for production of black and white line design beads, a process that imbues the beads with 'hot' and 'cool' properties (Moore and Tan 2008). The use of local resources for production such as this was integral to the long development of the highly localised astrology of Burma. Taking the black and white beads as an example, monks and laypersons adept in the alchemic techniques of [HYPERLINK "http://en.wiktionary.org/wiktionary: transmutation"](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiktionary:transmutation) to "wiktionary: transmutation" changing common into precious metals may well have provided a skill that encouraged the growth of monastic communities. In addition to objects in and around urns, the timing and positioning to deposit urns and erect buildings may well have had alchemic or astrological parameters (Moore 2007a, Moore and Tan 2008). The urns, understood in these contexts, become both agent and mirror of a changing relationship between man and his environment and, in the author's opinion, consequently in his epistemology and spiritual beliefs.

The population of religious communities would in these circumstances have included various learned figures, all represented in the urns at 'memorial halls' such as BTO20, at stupa-like structures and other buildings on both sides of the walls (San Shwe 2006: 272). The southwest Sriksetra hills, for instance, are terraced and contain numerous urns. This proximity to the walled area has been emphasized by Stargardt in suggesting a purposeful integration of urns with structures and water

flow around the walled area (Stargardt 2003). While the author (Moore 2007) has elsewhere questioned this, if urns are understood in relation to various lineages, retaining an active presence in ways not easily assessed becomes more plausible.

Mortuary custom elsewhere follows similar patterns of abundance and proximity: at Beikthano in ‘countless low mounds which are urn graves’ (Aung Thaw 1968:2) and at Thagara where the cemetery is immediately southeast of the walled site (Fig. 8). In nearby Quangxi among the Dong, ‘grave mountains’ are documented within and nearby the settlement (Ruan 2006: 19, 65, 72, Figure 2.49). Tagaung provides a different example, where Vessel 11 was repeatedly stamped with a four-armed crowned, possibly ancestral figure, with a large face and prominent eyes, flexed knees and flanked by an elephant and bull (Fig. 9). The pot contained bones of a entire human skeleton, bronze rings and coiled wire, as well as terracotta, bronze, quartz, carnelian and black stone beads (Chit San Win 2005: 75). The urns, when understood not just as vessels for the deceased but as relic-like objects potentially related to local contexts, could easily have integrated with Buddhist practices whereby certain relics guaranteed authenticity (Trainor 1997: 134).

The walls of Pyu sites are strong features often seen to mark an ‘inside’ and ‘outside’. This is a logical surmise when considering their girth, for they are often 2.5 metres wide. While many walls are now eroded or had their bricks taken for road construction, they are still often 1.8–4.5 metres in height (Moore 2007: 133). Shallow moats around the wall perimeter managed water scarcity and excess, provided plant and animal food, and were probably brick production areas. At Tagaung and many other sites, local streams and *in-gyi* (seasonal water bodies) were maximised to boost cultivation. Although *in-gyi* were vital for habitation during all periods, the construction of ramparts may reflect a heightened need for water control analogous to Northeast Thailand where construction of earthworks responded to a particular hydrological phase of increased water availability unique to the Iron Age (McGrath 2008). In a manner also recalling recent data from Northeast Thailand, the Bronze-Iron Age to Buddhist transition in the Samon valley of Upper Burma saw a ‘brief starburst of social display’ (Higham 2008). To date, however, Samon artefacts and sites have not yielded diagnostic traits tying the Samon culture into the urns and ramparts of the emerging Buddhist era (Moore 2007: 130).

The complex rampart-urn relationships sketched out here highlight a locale-specific pattern re-iterated in even the few groups such as the Thet and Kadu worthy of note in national chronicles. Luce (1985) investigated remnants of these languages, and there are ethno-archaeological insights to be gleaned from Thet and Kadu vernaculars in the Arakan, as well as the Arakan and Tavoy peoples. Related questions of text and visual culture can be seen in the Tai-Kadai Dong groups mentioned earlier and dominant Han peoples (Ruan 2006:14):

... Without a written language, the development of material culture has as a result flourished... Since their culture has never been made into a 'text' (*sic*) it has developed into oral literature, music, dance and variety of artifacts, the most dominant, and indeed the most instrumental of which are rituals and architecture. The Dong possess a meaningful and understandable relationship with their built world.

This acknowledges the importance of language yet seeks 'text' in the objects and rituals of the material culture. Similarly, ceremonies to embed urns and erect walls were likely to have been essential in continued processes to commemorate and reconstruct lineage (Aung Thaw 1968: 22, Ruan 2006: 70).

Conclusion

Text has been given precedence over a meaningful reading of the archaeology of bygone relationships between places and people (Leoshko 2003:7). The walled sites in this sense may be construed as waypoints, signposts in local and regional narratives, where ramparts and urns honoured and validated domain for diverse lineages and dialect groups (Tilley 1994: 32–34). The many styles of Pyu script likewise suggest its purposeful creation to embed new elites within local belief and effect social change. The role of ancient elders (*poranas*) was critical in this process, with social memory of ancient honourables evoked today by life-size depictions of monks, hermits and tutelary and other figures at many walled sites. Examples range from locally prominent monks such as the Pauk Sein *Sayadaw* in the Shweyaungdaw monastery at Beikthano, to the Gawinanda hermit at Shin Zalun pagoda at Thagara and within the material culture in the richness of local astrological calculations to distinct custom among the Thet, Kadu, Arakan and Tavoy peoples. (Fig. 10, Fig. 11, Fig. 12) With a new generation of Burmese archaeologists, historians and anthropologists emerging, it is time to open up long-standing compartmentalizations of academic disciplines. To realise fully the heritage of the country's Buddhist landscape, room must be made for the present and for new types of data in mapping out not one but many cultural meanings.

The ethnic and linguistic homogeneity of 'Pyu culture' has become entrenched in Burmese archaeology, spawning many misconceptions. To discuss, as done here, alchemy, astrology and charismatic *Sayadaws* or monks in the context of ramparts, water management and urn burial at Beikthano, remains heretical. Yet there is much to justify innovative review when Tagaung has been enshrined as the first Pyu capital but has no Pyu inscriptions, and Thagara has possibly the earliest Pyu urns and other artefacts but no Pyu texts and lies far from the putative Pyu sphere

of Upper Burma. Finally, at Pagan, King Thamudarit is credited with assembling nineteen village headmen in 107 C.E. (Win Maung (Tampawaddy) 2006) and while the headmen are often called Pyu, this is not the case in all chronicles and there are as yet virtually no Pyu artefacts. There is clearly cause for a wider definition of Pyu culture, not least to recognise the multiple Tibeto-Burman groups of chronicles and more empirically the striking diversity of artefacts at walled sites from Tagaung to Thagara. The commemorative norms invoked in the mortuary custom differ at each of these sites, from the large-eyed crowned figure stamped on the Tagaung urn, to the delicate birds in flight modelled on the Beikthano vessels and the *Vikrama* rulers interred in their enormous stone urns. Only the Sriksetra urn inscription justifies an ethno-linguistic classification, for there is no ethnic indicator in the Tagaung or Beikthano artefacts. Indeed, if chronicles and earlier scholars are recalled, these could just as well be Thet and Kadu as Pyu.

The peoples of ancient chronicles travelled past many places before choosing sites to construct ramparts and manufacture burial vessels. The wall-urn relationships resulting from these activities do not resolve into one or even three orderly groups. All the walled sites connect in one way or other to the Irrawaddy, but beyond that, given that movement was along the smaller watercourses, the homogeneity is lost. Tagaung for instance, maps out along the Uru and Shweli Rivers, Beikthano reaches east to the Samon, and Sriksetra south to the delta, with its lineage only latterly pulled north to legitimate the new rulers of Pagan. Just as local beliefs and materials, from rubies and gold to clay and stone, brought meaningful form to the material cultures that informed chronicles, all should contribute to our interpretation of that past.

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Table 1. Urns from Beikthano (data courtesy San Shwe 2008)

Structure	Urns	Sector
BTO- 15	4	South
BTO- 5	73	South
	77	
KKG- 12	80	North
BTO- 19	41	North
BTO- 20	41	North
KKG- 11	11	North
KKG- 1	7	North
KKG- 14	5	North
BTO- 16	3	North
KKG- 18	2	North
BTO- 9	1	North
KKG- 17	1	North
BTO- 10	1	North
	193	
BTO- 6	25	Central
BTO- 7	10	Central
KKG- 9	40	Central
KKG- 24	9	Central
KKG- 6	2	Central
KKG- 21	1	Central
	87	
	357	

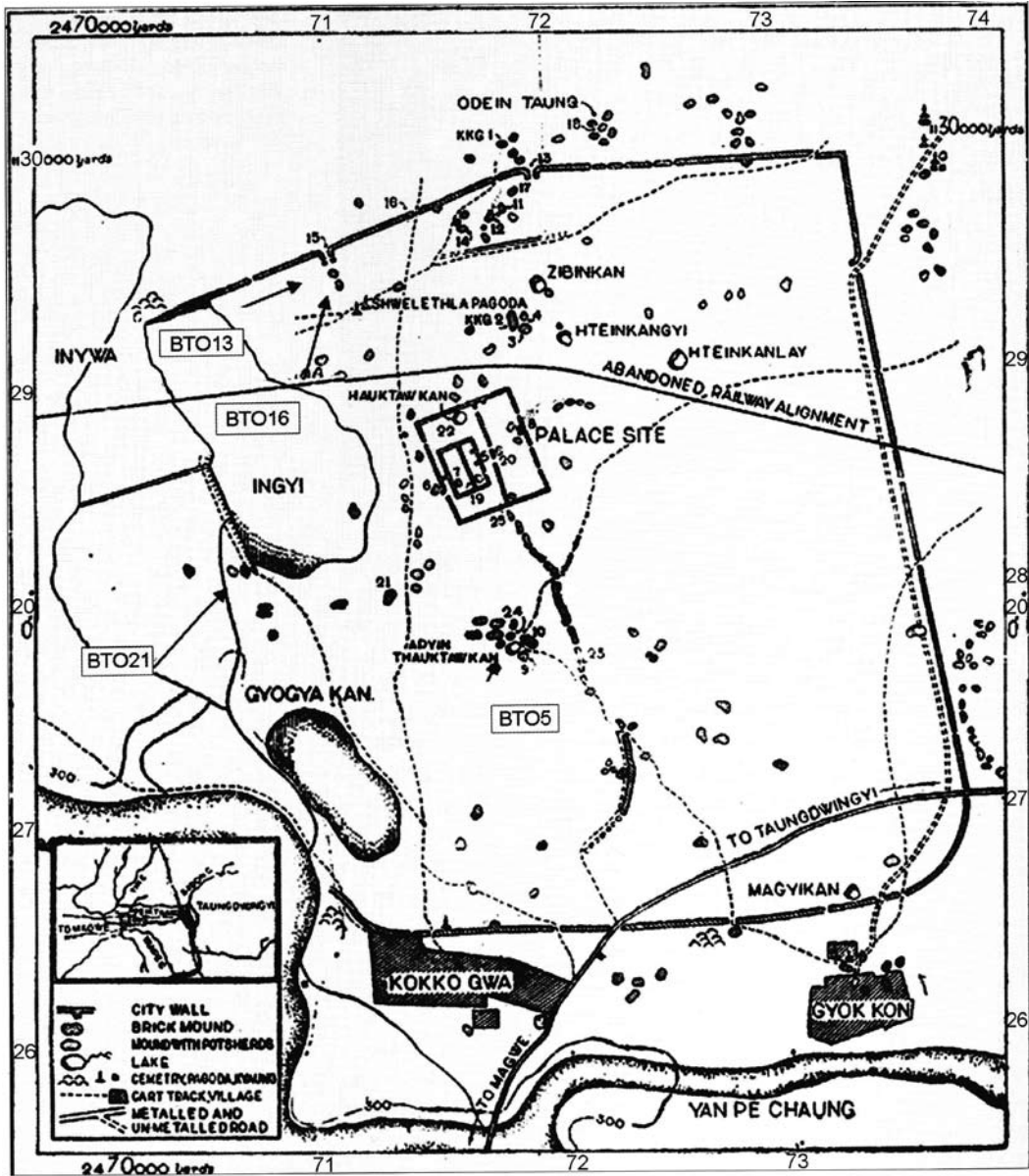


Fig. 1 Beikthano Map after Aung Thaw's excavation of KKG mounds (Aung Thaw 1958)



Fig. 2 Two *in situ* terracotta burial urns at structure BTO 20, north Beikthano (courtesy San Shwe)



Fig. 3 Urn with birds from structure BTO 20 at Beikthano (courtesy San Shwe)



Fig. 4 Finger-marked bricks at Beikthano structure BTO 16 adjacent to BTO 13



Fig. 5 Group of three *in situ* urns at BTO 16 during 2003 excavations

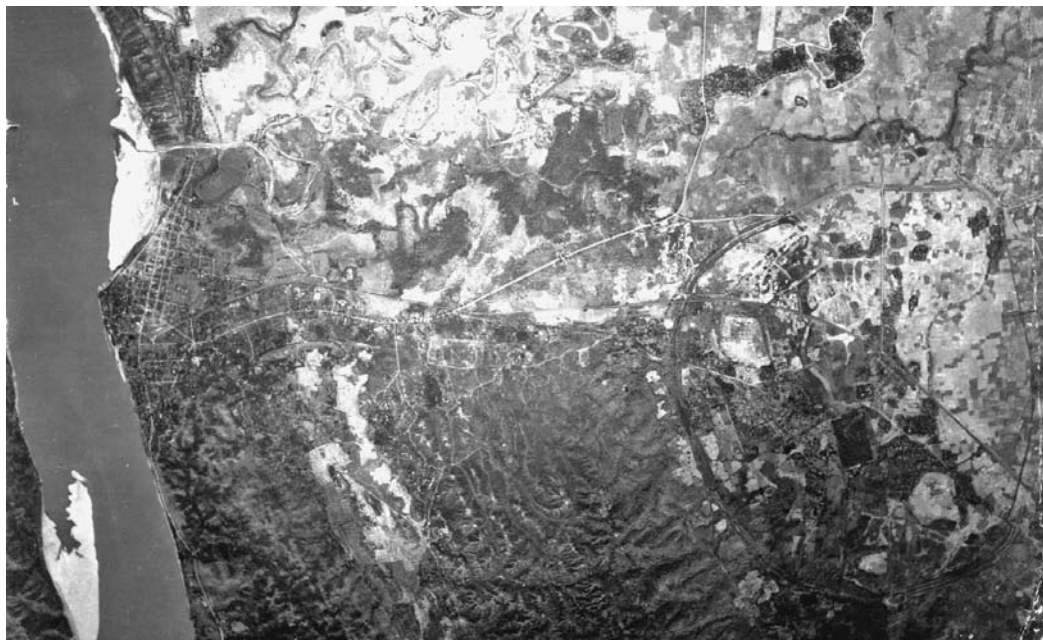


Fig. 6 Aerial photograph of Sriksetra taken at the end of World War II showing overview of upland area on southwest of the circular walled site and proximity of the Irrawaddy River on the west (Williams-Hunt Collection, SOAS)



Fig.7 Detail of Figure 6 showing circular walled area of Sriksetra with rice fields in the north sector and the rectangular enclosure of the palace-citadel in the centre. Hpaya-taung pagoda is to the northeast of the palace-citadel (World War II Williams-Hunt Collection, SOAS)



Fig. 8 Thagara terracotta burial urn at Hpayay Gyi Museum, Tavoy



Fig. 9 Stamped Vessel 11 from Tagaung, after the drawing by Win Maung (Tampwaddy) from Chit San Win 2005



Fig. 10 Scene from Konbaung horoscope (Pe Nyan Collection) (Moore 2007a)



Fig. 11 Pauk Sein Saysadaw's room at Beikthano walled site



Fig. 12 Gawinanda image at Thagara near Tavoy