

THE MON OF LOWER BURMA

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Abstract

Researchers have long suggested that Mon culture centered in Lower Burma contributed to the formation of Pagan in Upper Burma. However, a recent thought-provoking book by Michael A. Aung-Thwin, *The Mists of Rāmañña: The legend that was Lower Burma*, has argued that Mon were not only absent from Lower Burma before the rise of Pagan, but that Pagan owed far more to the Pyu, whose first-millennium centers are located in Upper Burma. Such far-reaching thinking about early Burma requires a fresh examination of previous assumptions about the sources for Pagan civilization.

This article describes the rich range of cultural artifacts found in Lower Burma in the first millennium, indicating that Lower Burma was equal to Upper Burma, inhabited by the Pyu. It then connects this cultural activity to the Mon; this second objective is more challenging, primarily because the early Mon epigraphic record in Lower Burma is far less rich than for the Pyu in Upper Burma.

The Mon presence at Pagan, according to later Burmese chronicles, was triggered by the conquest of Thaton in Lower Burma by the ruler Aniruddha, or Anawrahta (c. 1044 – c.1077).¹ The purpose of capturing Thaton was the seizure of the Pali canon, which became the basis of the introduction of Theravada Buddhism upon the return to Pagan by Anawrahta. A simple version of this event was recorded first in the Kalyani inscription of King Dhammazedi (1470–1492) in Pegu, but it was later included, with many embellishments, in the major Burmese chronicles. For example, Anawrahta is said to have proceeded from Thaton with “the thirty sets of the *Piṭakas* on the king’s thirty-two white elephants”, together with Mon “skilled in carving, turning, and painting”. Among the captives were even “forgers

¹ The most influential chronicle for the Mon Paradigm was the *Hmannan Mahayazawin-daw-gyi*, a portion of which was translated into English and is known by the title of *The Glass Palace Chronicle* (Pe Maung Tin and G.H. Luce 1923). Other “histories” treated the events in slightly different ways. See the *Vamsadīpanī*, translated and discussed by Patrick Pranke (Pranke 2004, 145–146).

of cannon, muskets and bows”, suggesting how later compilers conflated history (Pe Maung Tin and Luce 1923: 78). Such a role for the Mon at Pagan, however fanciful or exaggerated, became the basis for what has been labeled the “Mon Paradigm” in Aung-Thwin’s *The Mists of Rāmañña...*, being a view fostered by colonial-era historians who championed the Mon as the founders of Pagan’s culture to the neglect of the Pyu or Burmese.

If it can be shown that the Pyu occupied Lower Burma, and not the Mon, then the Mon could scarcely have contributed to Pagan’s civilization. That the Pyu have been vaulted into prominence at the expense of the Mon is suggested by the title of an opening chapter in Aung-Thwin’s book, “The Pyu Millennium.” In sum, a fresh “Pyu Paradigm” has replaced a discredited “Mon Paradigm”, as one reviewer, Pierre Pichard (2006: 203–6), poignantly phrased his objections.² Earlier generations of historians apparently overlooked the formative influence of the Pyu. Indeed, the former scholarship that advocated the Mon Paradigm served up a cornucopia of “Orientalism” ripe for debunking.

The Mon Paradigm, however, was scarcely the repressive monolithic juggernaut that has been suggested by Aung-Thwin. The fabled fall of Thaton in 1057 was adopted in some quarters but never accepted literally by the audience to which Aung-Thwin’s book was designed to appeal. Even G. H. Luce and Than Thun, two major figures in Burmese history, openly challenged much of the traditional account offered in the chronicles (Luce 1969–1970: I. 26, 43; Than Thun 1978: 6). These scholars and others have recognized that the flamboyant conquest of Thaton and the king’s sudden infusion of Theravada Buddhism to Pagan can be rejected while at the same time affirming Mon influence at Pagan. However, Aung-Thwin is so dedicated to disproving the specifics of this conquest that he propels himself unwittingly into the labyrinthine tempest of the later chronicles.

The Pyu Millennium?

The Pyu Paradigm hinges on the premise that the Pyu inhabited Lower Burma.

The Mon Paradigm continued unabated despite the fact that throughout the same years archaeological data suggested that another culture, an ethnolinguistic group of Tibeto-Burman speakers popularly known as the Pyu, had been present earlier and found throughout most of the country for an entire

² Other reviews include those by Michael Charney (2006), Jacques Leider (2006: 199–203), and Victor Lieberman (2007 : 377–383). Forthcoming reviews include Robert Brown (*Journal of Asian Studies*) and Tilman Frasch (*Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenlaendischen Gessellschaft*). This paper was summarized at a conference, “Discovery of Ramanya Desa: History, Identity, Culture, Language and Performing Arts”, 10–13 October 2007, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok.

millennium. They had been centered in Upper Burma, *with settlements also in Lower Burma* [italics ours]. But the influence of the Mon Paradigm was so pervasive and dominant that scholars acknowledged the information in the most perfunctory manner and continued as if the Pyu evidence had little or no bearing on their concerns (Aung-Thwin 2005: 4).

Aung-Thwin's single cited source for the "settlements also in Lower Burma" is a well-known monograph by Janice Stargardt (1991), *The Ancient Pyu of Burma – Vol. 1, Early Pyu Cities in a Man-made Landscape*. Nowhere in Stargardt's work, however, is there the suggestion that Pyu civilization extended south of Śrī Kṣetra (near Prome), or indeed anywhere in Lower Burma. In fact, Stargardt (1991: 147) characterized the ancient Mon and Arakanese as "urbanized communities", sharing Burma with the contemporaneous Pyu.

In addition, there is not a single Pyu inscription south of Śrī Kṣetra. The absence of Pyu inscriptions in Lower Burma does not by itself prove that the Pyu never populated Lower Burma, but this striking omission is probative.³ Nevertheless, that many Mon inscriptions have been found in Thaton and in its vicinity argues strongly for a Mon presence in Lower Burma.

Aung-Thwin (2005: 81) has also noted "Pyu fingermarked bricks" in Lower Burma, even at Thaton, the traditional Mon capital. Archaeologists, however, have cautioned that the find-spots of finger-marked bricks per se have no predictive value, since they have been recovered over such a wide area, from locations in India, central and northeast Thailand and at scores of sites in Upper and Lower Burma (Moore 2007: 134). Elizabeth Moore observed, "Finger-markings can be used as a rough guide only, but provide valuable evidence of first millennium AD habitation..." (2007: 135–6). That finger-marked bricks occur throughout southeastern Burma, or the Mon homeland, is yet one more indication of first-millennium brick architecture.

Aung-Thwin's contention that Lower Burma during the first millennium was relatively backward, compared to Upper Burma, is crucial to the Pyu Paradigm. If Lower Burma had little to offer, then how could it possibly contribute to the great civilization of Pagan? A dichotomy between Upper and Lower Burma is therefore set out by concluding that before the

conquest, pacification and settlement of Lower Burma by the kingdom of Pagan, much of it was probably a swampy, frontier area, sparsely inhabited, with only a few coastal towns and villages, remnants of the early Pyu state...Lower Burma, in other words, did not yet possess the geographic, demographic, economic,

³ A short stone inscription preserved in the Śrī Kṣetra museum from the village of Thegone is the most southerly findspot for a Pyu inscription. Thegone is approximately 32 kilometers south of Śrī Kṣetra.

political and cultural wherewithal to have supported any kingdom or polity, much less to have been the source of civilization for another in Upper Burma, the size and scope, and scale of Pagan (Aung-Thwin 2005: 66–67).

Civilization was somehow stunted in Lower Burma, although the region was in the hands of a Pyu state. Aung-Thwin declined to explain why Pyu culture never flourished in Lower Burma, but the reader is left to identify the culprits as too few Pyu and too many swamps (“swampy, frontier area” and “sparsely inhabited”). But for whatever reasons, Pyu culture failed to flower in this vast region and by the time of Pagan’s conquest of Lower Burma in the eleventh century there were simply the “remnants of the early Pyu state”. In this view, little took place in Lower Burma in the first millennium, both quantitatively and qualitatively, compared to Upper Burma. Indeed, the glaring paucity of material from Lower Burma is a leitmotif in Aung-Thwin’s book, with a concomitant flow of civilization from Upper to Lower Burma. It is a seductive argument, especially for those unfamiliar with the hard evidence on the ground. This view of Lower Burma, however, also ignores a fundamental theoretical and practical consideration: If the entire coastline of mainland Southeast Asia was engaged in a sophisticated material and religious culture during the first millennium, especially after c. 500, why was Lower Burma so excluded from this broad development that stretched from Arakan to Vietnam?

Even “swampy” Arakan created large walled-habitation centers and craftsmen there fashioned stone sculpture and bronzes in this long epoch. Indeed, among the six largest walled cities in Burma, two are in Arakan (Hudson 2004: fig. 81). In neighboring Thailand and Cambodia similar civilizations arose along the coast. Each of these early societies adopted Indic scripts for Pali and Sanskrit or for transcribing indigenous languages. These same cultural and economic changes also took place inland, and the Pyu in Upper Burma rivaled their counterparts in the south during the course of the first millennium. It would therefore be reasonable to expect that Lower Burma participated in this extensive development that overtook all of coastal Southeast Asia during the first millennium.

Another critical issue neglected by Aung-Thwin is southeastern Burma’s contiguity with the “Dvāravatī Mon” in the lower and central Chao Phraya basin, where stone records in Mon from the first millennium indicate that the “dominant ethnic group was the Mon” (Skilling 2003: 105). While mountain ranges separate Burma from Thailand, we must remind ourselves that speakers of the same or a similar language, or even related dialects, generally inhabit contiguous areas. For parallels, there are the Shan-Tai speakers ranging today over Burma, Thailand and Yunnan, or the Chin, who are spread between the hills dividing western Burma and Mizoram, India. These peoples, despite natural boundaries, are linked at least linguistically, a connection reflecting close and ancient origins. This suggestion,

however, in no way diminishes the numerous differences that surely separated the early Mon in Lower Burma from the “Dvāravatī Mon” in the first millennium.

The Gulf of Martaban Coin Series

Coins were minted over widely separated parts of Burma in the first millennium. A number of types have been associated with the Pyu in Upper Burma, while another separate single series has been identified in Lower Burma. This series is comprised of coins found in and around Pegu and throughout a wide arc facing the Gulf of Martaban, reaching to Muttama (Fig. 1). This special group, marked by the conch and *śrīvatsa* on either side (Wicks 1999) and a single denomination, has long been noted. Moore (2007: 144) labeled the group the “Bago type”: “This Bago-type of conch coins is not found at Pyu sites but seen at other sites near Kyontu [north-east of Pegu] and Kyaikkatha [at the mouth of Sittaung] and also Dvaravati sites in Thailand”. Pamela Gutman (1978: 16) also highlighted this series and labeled it a “Mon type”. Robert Wicks (1992: 110–121) also attributed this group to the same region and dated the series to as early as possibly the fifth century.

A study by Dietrich Mahlo (1998) labeled the same series “Gulf of Martaban type”, or “Group 5”, which he attributed to the ninth-tenth centuries. Referring to this series, Bob Hudson (2004: 126) concluded : “Finally, the concentration of the Group 5 coins around the Gulf of Martaban suggests that whether they were produced early in the first millennium A.D. by small maritime polities in contact by sea with India, or as Mahlo suggests, much later, in the ninth or tenth centuries, they belong in either case *to a system separate from the Upper Burma Pyu / Early Urban system*” [italics ours] .

Moreover, Wicks (1992: 112) maintained that this Gulf of Martaban series from Lower Burma later inspired the Pyu series of Upper Burma, together with other coinage of mainland Southeast Asia.

If Hudson, Gutman, Mahlo, Moore and Wicks are correct and this special class of coins is confined to southeast Burma (from Pegu to Mottama), then this is highly suggestive of significant cultural continuity in what is considered the Mon homeland. The minting of coins and their distribution over such a wide area in Lower Burma also directly conflicts with the picture of Lower Burma as backward and without the “demographic, economic, political and cultural wherewithal to have supported any kingdom or polity...” (Aung-Thwin 2005: 67), especially in light of Wick’s conclusion that Pyu coinage derived from the earlier series in Lower Burma. Why coinage is omitted in Aung-Thwin’s volume is unclear, but it needs to be addressed in order to understand Lower Burma.

Winka, Zothoke, Kyaikkatha and the Maung Di Stupa

Monasteries, stupas, artifacts, inscriptions, and large walled enclosures reveal that the Mon in Lower Burma participated fully in the transformation of mainland Southeast Asia during the first millennium.

Winka is located about 28 km to the northwest of Thaton. Excavations in the 1970s uncovered monastic brick residential units and at least one octagonal stupa base faced with laterite (Myint Aung 1977, 1999). One ruinous brick stupa mound produced 127 votive tablets of various types. One category is identical to those found elsewhere in Burma, Thailand and Indonesia (Moore 2007: 212; Pattaratorn 1997: fig. 7; Guy 2002: 23, fig. 3.5). Four plaques of a different variety bear incised Mon inscriptions of four lines (Fig. 2). The inscriptions were identified as Mon and dated paleographically to the sixth century (Myint Aung, 1999: 52–53; Nai Pan Hla 1986: 6), but a more recent reading and translation, reinforcing the identification of the language as Mon, appears below.⁴ These inscriptions are therefore additional evidence for associating the Mon with Lower Burma.

Mon Text	Translation
1. _____	
2. (pa?) sarva _____	(do?) all
3. _____ [...] wa ḃār kyāk	two, holy object
4. _____ 67 wo?	67 this

Aung-Thwin (2005: 198) acknowledged the existence of these inscribed tablets but concluded :

But the tablet [one of the inscribed examples from Winka] is not dated; nor has it been shown to have been unearthed in a scientific excavation process that stratigraphically placed it in a pre-Pagan level. So its provenance and chronology are unclear and unknown. In fact, there is some question as to the date of Winka [sic] itself since the most recent thermoluminescence analysis of two Winka shards date to the very late fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, which were actually not coincidentally the glory days of the late Mon Kingdom of Pegu.

The inscribed plaques were in fact found in the course of scientific excavations, with an exact provenance, namely, within brick stupa WK 6. To dismiss Winka as fifteenth or seventeenth century evades the evidence in the published reports. Other early votive tablets with Mon inscriptions in Lower Burma have been recovered from near Thaton and Syriam (Luce 1985: I. 174–75).

⁴ This reading was provided by Dr Mathias Jenny, University of Zurich (personal communication, December, 2007).

Also excavated at Winka was a large terracotta panel that relates directly to a well-known group of plaques at Kyontu (Luce 1985: II. figs. 79-81), only 20 km northeast of Pegu (Fig. 3).⁵ That the style, size and mode of manufacture of this tile are almost identical with those from Kyontu strongly argues for a homogenous culture zone uniting a major section of Burma's coastline, that is, from Kyontu near Pegu to Winka close to Thaton (Fig. 1). It is also no coincidence that this arc bending around the Gulf of Martaban matches the same range as the coins series. Since the Pegu area adjoins nearby Yangon, it is also likely that the Yangon-Twante region belonged to the same cultural zone. The Winka finds therefore provide valuable physical evidence for the presence of sophisticated Mon Buddhist communities in the Thaton region, with connections to Kyontu and nearby Pegu and the modern Yangon-Twante area.

Also, near Winka in the village of Zothoke is a large stupa base attributed by scholars to the first millennium. The height of the square plinth measures at least two meters and is faced with large laterite blocks. Nearby is a massive laterite wall sculpted with elephants and lions (Luce 1985: I. 160-162). Omitted in Aung-Thwin's *Mists*, these published examples are further indications of impressive first-millennium monumental architecture in Lower Burma.

Another related first millennium site is Kyaikkatha at the mouth of the Sittaung, between Pegu and Thaton, excavated between 1986 and 1998 (Moore 2007: 203-206 ; Moore and San Win 2007: 208-213). This is the largest of the walled cities in Lower Burma, encompassing 375 hectares (Hudson 2005: fig. 81). Brick monasteries were also found here, together with a huge cache of coins belonging to the Gulf of Martaban series. Nearby is Kunzeik, the find-spot of an early stone inscription incised with a passage from the *Paṭicca-samuppāda*, the "Chain of Causation", passages of which are found in Śrī Kṣetra and in Dvāravatī Mon Thailand (Skilling 1997: 95-96). Kunzeik is located on the east bank of the Sittaung and belongs within this arch defined by coins and similar artifacts.

Close to Yangon is the Maung Di stupa (Fig. 4), some 11 km east of Twante, west of the Yangon River. The stupa's large square base is surmounted by two wide octagonal terraces capped by three or possibly four narrow circular terraces (Fig. 7). The exterior is faced with laterite blocks. The stupa drum was composed of large bricks, suggesting its ancient manufacture (Duroiselle 1915: 14-16; Luce 1969-1970: I. 259-260, III. 79b).⁶ Placed against two of the circular terraces were

⁵ Each square tile measures about 50.8 cm and is about 11.43 cm thick. They were found set into a low brick wall, probably in their original positions.

⁶ The Maung Di pagoda is described by Ch. Duroiselle (1915: 14-15). The votive tablets are the largest in Burma, measuring 68.58 cm in height; the tablets, with some bricks, are preserved in a godown adjacent to the pagoda. Each brick is 40.64 cm long, 20.32 cm wide and 10.16 cm thick.

once a number of large terracotta tablets inscribed individually with the name of Anawrahta. The stupa itself was therefore either constructed at the time of Anawrahta or during an earlier stage when the region was under Mon control. This large stupa belonging as to the early Pagan period, or before, suggests that monumental architecture had long been part of Lower Burma's traditions. Some of Yangon's pagodas today probably had similar origins but were rebuilt, like the Botataung, or refurbished so greatly as to have lost their identity, such as the Kyaikkasan, the Kyaikkalot and Kyaikkale.

Near Maung Di a handful of Buddhist bronzes have been discovered which can be dated to the middle of the first millennium and which also have strong affinities to a bronze from Thaton (Moore 2000: 201–02; Luce 1985: II. fig. 76b–c) (Fig. 5). The bronzes and the hundreds of well-known first-millennium objects deposited in the relic chamber of the Botataung Pagoda in Yangon suggest that this entire region was rich in material culture (Luce 1985: II. figs. 72–73).⁷ How far this culture extended west of Twante has not yet been determined, but the Yangon-Twante region probably belonged to the same Mon cultural zone witnessed in nearby Pegu and Kyontu. During the early Pagan period, the Yangon region came under the control of Upper Burma (Frasch 2002).

Thaton

To establish a date for Thaton that is post-Pagan is important for the “Pyu Paradigm”, since if Thaton did not exist at the time of Anawrahta then his invasion of the city could scarcely have taken place. Aung-Thwin tackles the problem of Thaton's universally-accepted first-millennium date by attempting to prove that its “largely rectangular shaped plan resembles the cities that arose after Pagan” (2005: 82). To this end, Aung-Thwin cited a number of ancient cities with rectangular plans in Burma and even throughout Southeast Asia that came into existence after the Pagan period. Overlooked, however, was the well-published *rectangular* plan of a major first-millennium Pyu site named Halin in Upper Burma. Moreover, Thaton's walls, made of earth and brick, contain finger-marked bricks throughout their lowest levels, emblematic of first millennium habitation throughout Burma and Southeast Asia (Moore and San Win 2007: 222).

⁷ Over 700 objects in the relic chamber of the Botataung Pagoda were exposed after debris was cleared following the stupa's destruction in the Second World War. The relics vary greatly in age, from the second half of the first millennium to probably the fourteenth or fifteenth century, suggesting repeated refurbishment (Luce 1985: II. pls. 72–73). Some votive plaques resemble those in the Mon region (Luce 1985: II. 73a), while others are in the style of Pyu plaques common to Śrī Kṣetra (Luce 1985, II. 73e). An image of the “fat monk”, possibly identified as Gavampati, probably dates to some time in the second millennium, especially since it revealed traces of lacquer on its exterior (Luce 1969–1970: II. 75).

Bolstered by discrediting Thaton's first-millennium date, Aung-Thwin claimed that there is no evidence to suggest that the ".....Thaton of legend is older than Pagan, or that it was inhabited by Mon speakers during the first millennium" (2005: 82). For this assertion it is necessary to examine the inscriptions at Thaton.

Mon Inscriptions at Thaton

A number of Mon stone epigraphs have been noted in Thaton and its environs, all belonging to the opening of the second millennium. Two important examples, labeled by Luce *trāp* and *paṇḍit*, were issued by a ruler named in these records as Makuṭa, styled "king of kings", or *rājānāma rājādhirāja* (Luce 1969–1970: I. 24) That there is no mention of an overarching suzerain suggests that Makuṭa was an independent ruler. The *paṇḍit* inscription provides a list of all 28 Buddhas of the Past and the last ten *jātakas*, probably the earliest reference to these two concepts in Burma (Luce 1974: 133). H. L. Shorto (1971: xxxviii) dated both epigraphs to the eleventh century, while Luce (1956: 295) placed them approximately in the middle of the same century. This Makuṭa is often identified as king Manuha of the chronicles, who was forcibly removed to Pagan. This particular incident may be legendary, but it is entirely possible that this king was the last independent Mon king ruling at Thaton.

The approximate dates of these Mon inscriptions at Thaton are important in establishing a Mon presence in Lower Burma. Whether they belong before or after the alleged conquest by Anawrahta in 1057 is by itself of no consequence, since they were composed by Mon speakers in Thaton long before the end of the Pagan period. Since discrediting the attributed dates of these inscriptions is a crucial underpinning of the "Pyu Paradigm", Aung-Thwin (2005: 106) concluded :

The stones [*trāp* and *paṇḍit* at Thaton] were written partly in Old Mon and partly in Pali, but since the Old Mon language in Burma remained basically unchanged from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries, while its script remained the same for an even longer period of time, there is no certainty that the language and script on the stones are necessarily eleventh-century Old Mon rather than, say, fifteenth-century Old Mon.

These Thaton inscriptions therefore could be eleventh century, as Luce and Shorto suggested, or, as Aung-Thwin suggested, belong to the fifteenth century when the Mon, ruling from Pegu, are known to have inhabited Lower Burma. To explain why the language and script "remained basically unchanged" for nearly half a millennium, the reader is directed to the following endnote:

Shorto, *Dictionary of Mon Inscriptions*, x. Shorto does not explain this linguistic continuity, but I guess that early written Old Mon was relatively isolated, and that only later in the sixteenth century, when Pegu became the capital of the Upper Burma Toungoo Dynasty, did Old Mon make the kinds of contact with the dominant language in the country, Burmese, which may have produced the first noticeable changes [in language] (Aung-Thwin 2005: 354).

After claiming that the Mon language “remained basically unchanged from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries”, Aung-Thwin *inferred* that that there were also no changes in the Mon script during the same long period. However, a careful reading of Shorto (1971) reveals that there were in fact significant changes during this long period. Indeed, the standard nomenclature, Old Mon, c. sixth-thirteenth centuries, and Middle Mon, c. fourteenth-sixteenth centuries (Bauer 1991: 78), was devised to recognize such progression in the language. These important inscriptions (and others mentioned below) are too easily dismissed, with no convincing analysis.

Another Mon inscription at Thaton recorded the dedication of an ordination hall, or *sima*, whose boundary stones depict the last ten *jātakas*. Two shorter inscriptions are incised on two sculptures, one in Thaton and the other now in the Kawgun Cave, about 41 km north of Moulmein (Gutman 2004). All of these epigraphs have been attributed to the eleventh century (Luce 1985: I. 172, 174, 176; Shorto 1971: xxxviii).

Kyanzittha's Inscriptions in Thaton

While Anawrahta himself perhaps did not invest Thaton to seize the *tipiṭakas*, King Kyanzittha (c. 1084–c. 1113) was in Thaton, or at least his representatives were. Two of his Mon inscriptions were located near Winka and both recorded repairs, one to a *cetī* (stupa) and the second to a temple, “the *prāsāda* of the great relic or *mahādhat*” (Luce 1969–1970: I. 56). Duplicates of these inscriptions are found in Thaton itself, one on the hill overlooking the town and the other “two furlongs” south of the hill. One of the inscriptions is dated to 1098.

Were there no Mon in the Thaton region in c. 1098 , or only “the remnants of the Pyu state”, then there was scant reason for Kyanzittha to inscribe these four records in Mon in Thaton and nearby. Also, that Kyanzittha elected to erect duplicates of his inscriptions in Thaton is yet another indication of the long-standing importance of Thaton as a regional center.

Jātakas at Thaton

Thaton's Thagya Pagoda is a square-based stupa comprised of three receding concentric terraces faced in laterite.⁸ Some 60 large terracotta plaques were once in niches in the middle terrace, illustrating the last ten *jātakas* (Fig. 4). The sequence in which the *jātakas* plaques are disposed matches the order found in the *paṇḍit* epigraph at Thaton (Piriya 1974), and also agrees with the standard sequence for the last ten *jātakas* at Pagan, found in the rarely used set comprising 550 tales and the far more common collection of 547 (Luce 1969–1970: I. 40). This order for the last ten is still in use in Burma and Thailand and differs slightly from the one found in Sri Lanka.

Luce suggested that the ordering of the last ten *jātakas* witnessed at Thaton was introduced to Pagan, seen first among the tiles at the East and West Hpetleik stupas. In these two stupas, the order of the last ten conformed to the sequence found at Thaton in the *paṇḍit* inscription and the *jātakas* embedded in the terrace of the Thagya Pagoda (Fig. 6). At the Hpetleik stupas the number of each *jātaka* was deeply incised on the top of the plaque, together with the name of the *jātaka*. To refute Luce's suggestion that the Mon system of ordering influenced early Pagan, Aung-Thwin claimed that all of the numbers were incised during a later repair to the West Hpetleik stupa, which is suggested to have occurred in the late nineteenth century. Aung-Thwin concluded that "We cannot know, therefore, if the Hpetleik *Jātakas* plaques, their total number, or their sequence (if that is even a significant issue) were original to the temple" (2005: 25).

This conclusion implies that residents in nineteenth century Pagan were able not only to identify all 550 *jātakas* but also to replicate the style and orthography of eleventh-twelfth century inscriptions, a replication that presumably eluded epigraphers for decades. That Luce recorded plaques at the West Hpetleik bearing numbers 549 and 550 renders this conjecture moot in any case. Additionally, Aung-Thwin overlooked the fact that 14 long Mon-language captions were incised in the original plaster placed over the brick separating the two horizontal registers of *jātakas* in the West Hpetleik (Luce 1969–1970: I. 266; Stadtner 2005: 200–201).

Finally, recognizing the necessity to substitute Pyu for Mon influence, Aung-Thwin (2005: 254) claimed that "The *Jātakas* probably arrived [in Pagan] well before the Pagan period" and cites Duroiselle's claim that a terracotta panel at Śrī Kṣetra represented the *Mūghapakkah Jātaka*. Luce disputed this identification, and his appraisal has remained unchallenged. That no *jātakas* have been noted among the Pyu must throw into question the assertion that Pagan derived its set

⁸ For a photograph of the stupa before its many refurbishments, see O'Connor (O'Connor 1907: 337).

from the Pyu. The sources were also not in Pala, India, where *jātakas* were not an important tradition.

The Hindu Images at Thaton

Three stone Hindu images were discovered in Thaton in the late nineteenth century. One depicts Śiva and Pārvaṭī, while two feature a theme found widely in Indian and Khmer art, Viṣṇu recumbent upon a serpent. A related Viṣṇu image is near Thaton, in the Kawgun Cave. Only the Viṣṇu in the Kawgun Cave has survived, as the others were destroyed during the Second World War when they were kept in the Rangoon University Library. Their function is difficult to determine, especially since their exact find-spots are unrecorded. They may have been worshiped by foreign traders, but were probably created for those indigenous to the region, since a mix of Hindu and Buddhist imagery is consistent with other early Southeast Asian communities (Skilling 1997: 98 ; Skilling 2003: 105). The Thaton-Kawgun Hindu images have been assigned various dates, from the c. ninth - tenth centuries (Ray 1932: 55) to the eleventh century (Gutman 2007: 5). The four sculptures therefore reveal Thaton's eclectic religious milieu at the turn of the first millennium.

These Viṣṇu images in Lower Burma depart completely from standard depictions of this theme, since three deities emerge from the god's navel, rather than one (Fig. 7). This very unusual iconography is repeated, however, in Upper Burma at Pagan, where a Viṣṇu in this mode is the chief image of the Nat Hlaung Kyaung temple, an important early shrine situated within the city walls. This depiction at Pagan may well have derived from Lower Burma (Stadtner 2005: 144), especially in light of the early dates proposed for the Thaton sculpture. One sculpture with the same motif is known at Śrī Kṣetra, but it appears to date to some time after the first millennium (Gutman 2007: 4).

The Mon at Pagan

One window into Pagan's rich diversity is Kyanzittha's famous "Palace Inscription", which reflects the city's ties to a wide Asian community. Its long Mon text is sprinkled with numerous Sanskrit and Pali technical words, by itself an indication of Pagan's borrowings, perhaps via the Mon in Lower Burma. The consecration rites for the palace were conducted by various types of Hindu Brahmin ritualists, Brahmin astrologers and Buddhist clerics, a combination that has marked most Southeast Asian courts from the very beginning. A chief deity was Viṣṇu, or "Nārāyaṇa", invoked in connection with the installation of the wooden posts (Blagden 1920). The scholastic flavor of the rites is reminiscent of Sanskrit architectural manuals that grew up after the Gupta period in north and south India,

another indication of foreign borrowings. Versed in traditional “housebuilding”, Burmese Brahmins and probably Mon Brahmins participated in the rituals (Blagden 1920: 57; Luce 1968–1969: I. 68). At the same time, monks performed rites before images of the Buddha, Gavampati and a *tipiṭaka* set. Descriptions of the palace archways recall an ubiquitous motif found above doorways in Pagan that was probably borrowed from eastern India, another reminder of Pagan’s far-reaching connections. Once the Brahmins bathed the pillars, Burmese, Mon and Pyu (called *tricul* in the inscription) commenced singing (Blagden 1920: 42). The Pyu were evidently limited to this solitary contribution. On the other hand, there were 126 Mon officiants who carried water vessels in procession, and there were Mon chiefs, or their children, who resided in Pagan’s Jetavana Monastery, presumably the most prestigious in the land. This inscription leaves little doubt that the Mon played a greater role in this key event at Pagan than the Pyu, but it is also clear that Mon shared the stage with many others and that Pagan’s culture cast its net widely.

The Pyu were, of course, an element in early Pagan, to judge from the famous four-sided inscribed Myazedi pillars dated to 1113 (Mon, Burmese, Pali and Pyu). However, that no Pyu inscriptions of note succeed this single record suggests that the Pyu became increasingly unimportant. Had the Pyu been in Pagan in great numbers, or if a small group occupied an elevated position, ample opportunities existed for the Pyu to express themselves in epigraphs during the twelfth century. Rather, it was Mon that dominated the corpus of stone inscriptions during Kyanzittha’s long reign, and it is Mon that appears in captions beneath Pagan’s earliest wall art. But like Pyu, the use of the Mon language faded at Pagan, and by the end of the twelfth century Burmese overtook Mon as the preferred language for inscriptions and captions.

Reasons for the decline of the Mon language at Pagan cannot be yet identified, but its rise and demise raise a host of issues. Were the Mon a small but highly influential group in early Pagan, respected because of their cultural and religious heritage? Or did the Mon constitute a rather high percentage of the population that later intermarried with Burmese and assimilated to the dominant culture? Did the early kings at Pagan compel the Mon to migrate to Pagan or did they cajole or entice key Mon clerics and craftsmen to Upper Burma? Or were the Mon in Upper Burma in large numbers even before the reign of Anawratha? Were Mon Buddhist traditions more important than Sri Lanka Buddhist traditions? These important questions cannot yet be answered, but the ubiquitous use of Mon during Kyanzittha’s long reign implies that the Mon enjoyed a greater influence than the Pyu. In what ways was this elevated status translated into concrete influence must still be investigated.

In the final analysis, Aung-Thwin (2005: 245) cannot explain the use of Mon: “The short answer is that we do know for certain [why Kyanzittha’s inscriptions

are in Mon]”. Aung-Thwin thus advances “a simple practical reason” for Kyanzittha’s use of Mon, arguing that Anarawhta’s conquests of Lower Burma captured “an influx of Mon speakers [from Thailand], perhaps fleeing the so-called cholera epidemic or the advance of Khmers into the Lower Burma region” (2005: 246). Even if cholera or the Khmer were responsible for driving the Mon into Lower Burma, the choice of Mon in official royal inscriptions was unlikely to have been made to accommodate the hapless Mon refugees. Moreover, this solution offered by Aung-Thwin rests entirely on much later chronicles, one of which incidentally says that the Mon returned to Thailand (Jayawickrama 1968: 104).

The Pyu at Pagan

A thriving community existed at Pagan throughout most of the first millennium and can probably be associated with Pyu speakers, in view of the city’s location between Śrī Kṣetra in the south and Halin in the north, two walled cities and home to Pyu inscriptions (Hudson, Nyein Lwin, and Win Maung 2001). However, it has not yet been possible to chart a clear continuum between the archaeological remains from the first millennium and monuments associated with the earliest historical rulers at Pagan, such as Anawrahta. For example, while there are thousands of first-millennium finger-marked bricks at Pagan, there are no standing Pyu structures at Pagan. Also, Chinese chronicles add that much of Upper Burma under the Pyu succumbed to invading forces from Yunnan as early as the ninth century, an observation repeated in all modern histories of Burma but not proven by hard evidence on the ground. Nonetheless, it would appear that the Pyu were somewhat marginalized by the eleventh and twelfth centuries, to judge from surviving epigraphs. The Pyu survived into the second millennium, witnessed in the Myazedi inscriptions and Pyu singing at the palace consecration, but they were scarcely as important as the Mon during the same period whose language dominated inscriptions during the influential reign of Kyanzittha.

An old thesis revived by Aung-Thwin was that Pyu temples at Śrī Kṣetra served as prototypes for Pagan. This contention has been fully rebutted in a review by Pichard (2007), so it is unnecessary to repeat his observations. However, it is sufficient to say that many of the brick temples at Śrī Kṣetra cited by Aung-Thwin and others as prototypes for Pagan probably belong to the Pagan period or much later and therefore could not have acted as later models for Pagan.

Conclusion

Pagan’s diversity impels researchers to look beyond the Pyu or the Mon, but unraveling Pagan’s cultural strands requires both depth and subtlety, like

understanding ancient Rome or Taxila. The history of art, for example, offers many cases where artistic influences were not tied to religious or cultural influences. The well-known Buddhist sculpture of Gandhara is one illustration. It was influenced by Western classical styles, but Gandharan society was largely untouched by imported ideas from the West. At Pagan, the art of the Pala dynasty in eastern India played an indisputable role in shaping the city's sculpture, architecture and painting, but the Mahayana Buddhism of eastern India never took root at Pagan (Stadtner 2005: 38, 190–191). For example, the *jātakas* were not within the normal repertoire of Pala art, but *jātaka* sets were a major component in Pagan's art. On the other hand, Sri Lanka probably enjoyed great religious authority at Pagan, but artistic influence from Sri Lanka at Pagan has been difficult to identify. The Mon certainly were influential in Pagan's early development, to judge by inscriptions, but it is difficult to know to what degree and in what ways the Mon contributed to the civilization as a whole.

If the ordering of the *jātakas* was one influence stemming from the Mon, then this implies that at least some religious literature passed through the hands of the Mon in Lower Burma and was introduced at Pagan at an early stage. This is suggested, but not proved, by the long passages from Pali texts translated into Mon and appearing beneath Pagan's murals. Even the famous historical chronicle from Sri Lanka, the *Mahāvamsa*, was put into Mon and is found on the walls of the Kubyauk-gyi temple, in Myinkaba, c. 1113.⁹ In this sense, the Mon may have acted as a filter of Pali influences, but this is speculative, and it would be entirely unwarranted to think that there was no Buddhist practice in Pagan before the advent of Anawrahta and his successors. Also, the very tradition of placing *jātaka* tablets onto terraced stupas, an important feature of Pagan's landscape, may have derived from the Mon (as in the Thagya Pagoda, Thaton). Another likely Mon contribution was the peculiar form of Viṣṇu, the centerpiece of the Nat Hlaung Kyaung Temple.

Certain elements of Mon civilization in Lower Burma were not borrowed at Pagan. For example, the carved *sima* stones, enlivened with *jātaka* scenes, find no parallel in Upper Burma, but relate more closely to the "Dvāravatī Mon" (Piriya 1974). Also, the terracotta *jātaka* plaques from Thaton's Thagya Pagoda also find no exact affinities with those at Pagan, but only agree in a general way with those at the Hpetleik stupas. Also, a stone sculpture of the Buddha at Thaton could never be mistaken for a work from Pagan, or from Pala India, with its very distinctive facial modeling (Fig. 8).

⁹ Scenes from the *Mahāvamsa* are depicted in the entrance corridor to the main shrine, on either side. These depictions may not be drawn directly from the *Mahāvamsa* but from later collections in which the *Mahāvamsa* appears, with certain changes (Skilling 2007: 102).

In addition, the style of narration found at Thaton was never used in Pagan's sculpture or tile work. This can be seen on some of Thaton's tiles and *sima* stones in which two episodes of the same story are depicted simultaneously, one above and one below. In a *sima* stone at Thaton the prince is shown at the top in the stormy sea and again below holding on to the broken mast for dear life (*Mahajanaka Jātaka*) (Fig. 9). In a Thaton tile, the *bodhisattva*-to-be appears at the bottom, taking refuge with a family of potters, and then above, going forth in a chariot (*Mahosadha Jātaka*) (Fig. 10). These distinctive artistic traditions in Thaton are nonetheless compatible with the notion of an influential Mon presence in early Pagan.

To press the case too hard for Mon or Pyu influence at Pagan is to under-value the vitality and diverse cultural strands that made up Pagan's civilization and, indeed, much of the later history of Burma. This paper seeks not to triumph the Mon over the Pyu but to recognize that there is room for many paradigms in a balanced exploration of Pagan. The Pyu and the Mon shared the landscape at Pagan, but the Mon were more influential, to judge from the epigraphic record. But widespread and specific Mon influence at Pagan is difficult to discern, unlike, for example, the obvious debt Pagan's art owes to Pala India. Much of the discussion today is clouded by the touchy issues of ethnicity and language that too often lurk uncomfortably beneath the surface of Burma's history. That Mon and Burmese were inscribed on Bayinnaung's Pagan bell inscription and were also used in the fifteenth-century inscriptions at the Shwedagon, or that Burmese, Mon and Shan captions were ordered for paintings at the Kaunghmudaw Pagoda near Sagaing, are poignant reminders of the plurality of cultures that make up Burma.

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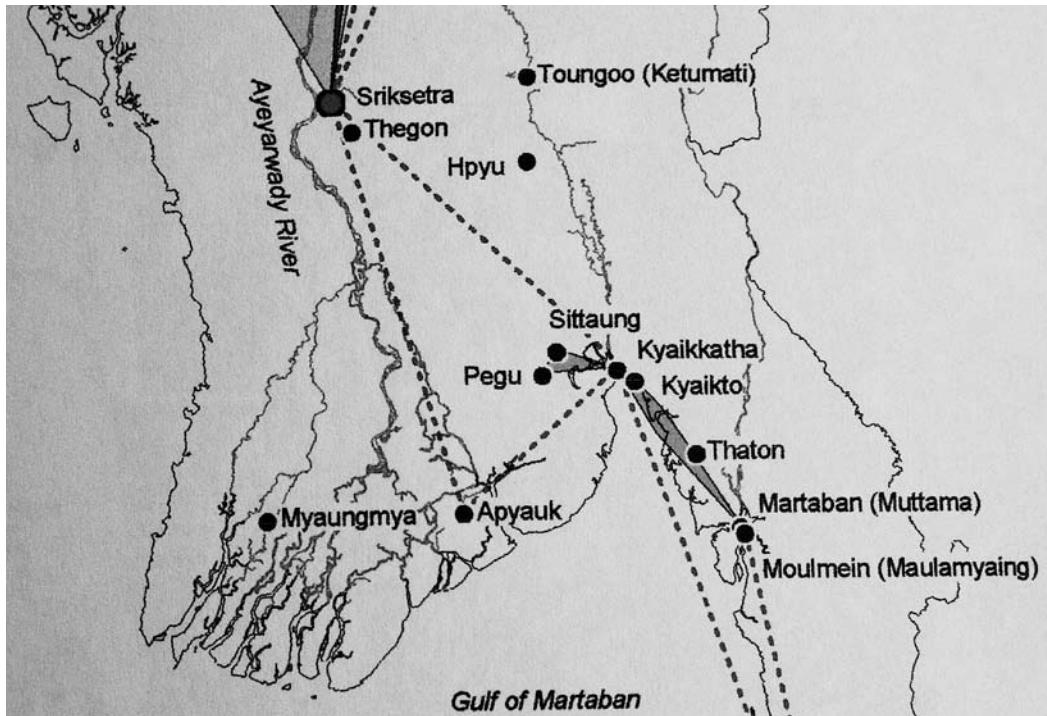


Fig 1. Map of Lower Burma. Distribution of Gulf of Martaban Coin Series (after Hudson 2004, fig. 118).

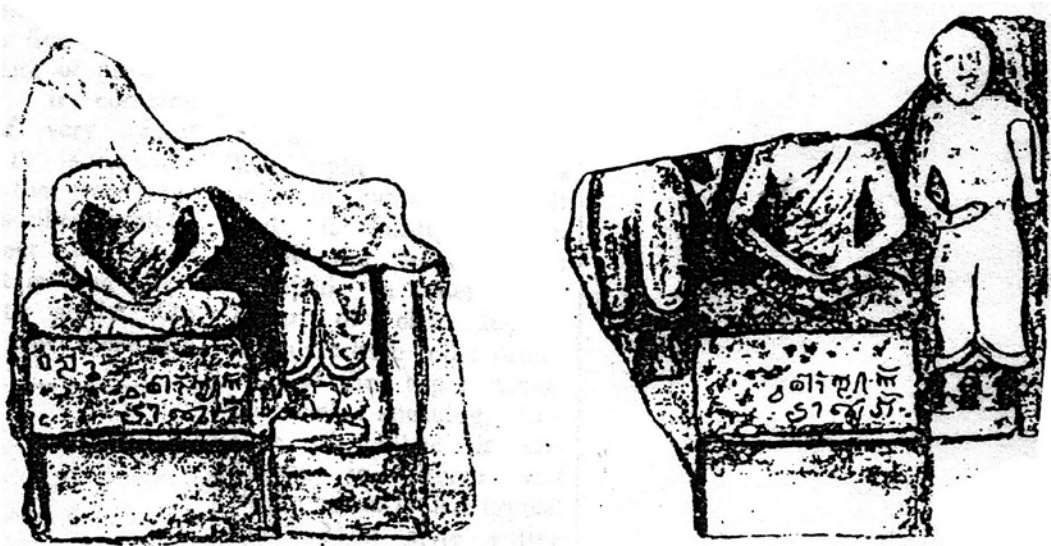


Fig 2. Terracotta votive tablets, Winka, c. fifth-sixth centuries (after Nai Pan Hla 1986, 7).

Fig 3. Winka, terracotta panel, c. fifth-sixth centuries. Mon Cultural Museum, Moulmein (courtesy Elizabeth Moore).



Fig 4. Maung Di Pagoda, near Yangon, c. 1050 or earlier.



Fig 5. Standing Buddha, bronze, Thaton (after Mya 1930–1934, pt. I. pl. CXII, d).



Fig 6. Thagya Pagoda, c. eleventh century. Terracotta plaques in the middle terrace, Thaton.





Fig 7. Viṣṇu recumbent on serpent, Thaton, destroyed in Rangoon during the Second World War (after Temple 893, pl. XIV).



Fig 8. Part of a standing Buddha, Shwesayan Pagoda godown, Thaton, c. eleventh century.



Fig 9. Kalyani Sima, c. eleventh century, Thaton (after Guillon 1999, fig. 39).



Fig 10. Terracotta plaque, c. eleventh century, Mahosada Jātaka. Shwesayan Pagoda godown, Thaton.

