

## THE SACK OF AYUTTHAYA: A CHRONICLE REDISCOVERED

### The Myanmar Poetic Account of Ayutthaya Vanquished: Notes on Its Rediscovery and Significance

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With the assistance of Yee Yee Khin

*Yodaya Naing Mawgun*, meaning record of victory over Ayutthaya, is a panegyric that celebrates in a classical poetic form the Myanmar victory over Siam in 1767. It was composed by Letwe Nawrahta, a senior Myanmar official at the court of Innwa (Ava), using reports from the battlefield probably immediately after the events took place. The account is thus the most contemporary one extant of the more than year-long siege and sack of the Siamese capital. It reveals details of the campaign not found elsewhere, including how the Myanmar army overcame Ayutthayan defences and the disunited defenders. The document served as a source for compilers of later Myanmar chronicles. Although long known to have existed, it was lost for over a century and rediscovered only recently. An annotated edition with full exegesis has been published in Myanmar.<sup>1</sup>

#### Lost ...

The loss of the manuscript for many decades was a result of confusion between two *mawgun* poems bearing the same name, as well as misattributions by copyists and cataloguers.

Two epics bearing the same title, *Yodaya Naing Mawgun*, are mentioned in *Pitakat Thamaing* or *Pitakat Thon-bon Sar-dan*,<sup>2</sup> a bibliography of classical

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<sup>1</sup> *Yodaya Naing Mawgun (Letwe Nawrahta)* by Yee Yee Khin was published in 2011 in Myanmar by the Tun Foundation. [ED. NOTE—See also the Article that precedes this Note in the present edition of *JSS*, entitled “*Yodaya Naing Mawgun* by Letwe Nawrahta: A contemporary Myanmar record, long lost, of how Ayutthaya was conquered” by Soe Thuzar Myint, tr.; pp. 1–24.]

<sup>2</sup> U Yan, *Pitakat Thon-bon Sardan, Khaw, Pitakat-taw Thamaing* (second ed., Yangon: Tipitaka Nikaya Thathana-pyu A-phwai, 1989); first published in 1906 and reprinted several times, mostly by the Hanthawaddy Press. The bibliography has been transliterated into Roman script by Peter Nyunt and was published in 2012 by the Pali Text Society, Bristol, under the title *Catalogue of the Pitaka and Other Texts of Pali, Pali-Burmese, and Burmese (Pitakat-to-samuin:)* by Man:-kri Mahāsiriṇṇeja-sū [one of U Yan’s principal titles]; with summary and annotated translation by Peter Nyunt.

works compiled in 1888 by U Yan (1815–1891)<sup>3</sup>, Royal Librarian in the palace of King Mindon (1853–1878) and King Thibaw (1878–1885). The first was by Letwe Nawrahta (1723–1791) on the conquest of Ayutthaya in 1767. The second was by U Pon-nya (1812–1868) of Salay on the Siamese incursion into the Shan region in 1853.

Compounding the confusion, their common title commences with “Yodaya”, a word in Myanmar that refers generally to Siam or the Siamese people, as well as the old capital of Ayutthaya. Hence in U Pon-nya’s case, it was misunderstood as denoting the victory of 1767 although his was about quite a different, later campaign against the Siamese. U Pon-nya used “Yodaya” to mean the Siamese at Kengtung and not the former Ayutthaya.

As it is considered a fine work of literature, U Pon-nya’s *Yodaya Naing Mawgun* was reproduced many times in palm-leaf manuscript form and later printed many times. Letwe Nawrahta’s poem of the same name was not valued so highly as literature and hence was not as often copied on palm leaf and *parabike* paper manuscripts nor widely distributed to monastic libraries and private collections in pre-colonial times. In time Letwe Nawrahta’s *mawgun* came to be eclipsed by U Pon-nya’s. The erudite royal librarian, U Yan, listed only the author and title of Letwe Nawrahta’s work in his bibliography of classical Myanmar literature, whereas with U Pon-nya’s he also quoted the first line and noted that it had been composed during the reign of the founder of Yadanabon Mandalay (i.e., King Mindon).<sup>4</sup>

Letwe Nawrahta’s *Yodaya Naing Mawgun* was never printed and consequently not widely disseminated. Even scholars who have made extensive use of palm leaf and *parabike* manuscripts, such as the late eminent historian Than Tun, the vice-chairman of the Myanmar Historical Commission Toe Hla, and U Maung Maung Tin and U Htun Yee, among others, had ever seen only a few stanzas of Letwe Nawrahta’s *mawgun*.

During colonial times U Kyaw Dun and the compilers of a four-volume anthology of Burmese literature most probably possessed the full text of this important poem, but included only four of the forty-six stanzas in the anthology.<sup>5</sup> At one time those four stanzas were the only concrete textual evidence that scholars had of Letwe Nawrahta’s record of the final conquest of Ayutthaya.

Two specific misattributions, of the text itself and in its cataloguing, resulted in Letwe Nawrahta’s *Yodaya Naing Mawgun* falling temporarily into oblivion.

<sup>3</sup> Thaw Kaung, “Bibliographies compiled in Myanmar”, in Pierre Pichard et al., *Études birmanes en hommage à Denise Bernot* (Paris: École Française d’Extrême-Orient, 1998), pp. 403–414.

<sup>4</sup> In U Yan, op. cit., Letwe Nawrahta’s poem is no. 1908 and U Pon-nya’s is no. 1928.

<sup>5</sup> U Kyaw Dun, ed., *Myanmar-sar Nyunt-baung Kyan* (Rangoon: Government Printers, 1929–1931), vol. III, pp. 2–3.

A palm-leaf manuscript of the poem was owned by Sar-yei-daw-gyi U Hnit,<sup>6</sup> who, along with U Tin and U Ne Dun, was attached as one of three secretaries or scribes to the Consultative Council that the British created soon after their annexation of January 1886 to replace the old Hlut-taw, the Privy Council of Myanmar kings. The members of this Consultative Council included ex-ministers such as the Kinwun Mingyi, Taungwin Mingyi and Shwe-dike Atwin Wun. They constituted an advisory body to help the British in administrative matters pertaining to the deposed king's domains in Upper Myanmar. The manuscript was copied in 1889, about three years after the royal court had ceased to exist, for the prominent court recorder.

Subsequently the manuscript was obtained by U Tin (1861–1933), a colleague of U Hnit and later an archaeological officer who spent many years at Bagan and became a renowned scholar, compiling four volumes on the administration of the Myanmar kings.<sup>7</sup> The palm-leaf manuscript did not bear the name of the author, only the title of the poem. In 1889, the copyist had erroneously written the author's name as “Nawade” (the Second) on the title page of the palm leaf, on the right hand side of the first page of the text and on the last page.<sup>8</sup> Nawade is a title given by the Myanmar kings to some of the best-known court poets. Scholars have had to append numbers to differentiate at least five such Nawade; only the first and the second are famous. The second, Dutiya Nawade (1756–1840), sometimes known as Wetmasut Nawade because he was given the town of Wetmasut to “eat” or administer the revenue, wrote at least fifteen *mawgun* and hence is sometimes also called the Mawgun Nawade. Three of the fifteen were *sit-naing mawgun*; i.e., records of military conquests, such as *Ar-than-naing mawgun* on the conquest of Assam, *Yakkine naing mawgun* on the conquest of Rakhine (Arakan) and *Dawei naing mawgun* on the conquest of Dawei (Tavoy). This last text, which has not been found, is most probably about the retaking of Dawei at the start of Hsin-byu-shin's campaign against Siam in 1764.

When U Tin's collection of manuscripts was acquired by the Bernard Free Library in 1924, the palm-leaf text of *Yodaya Naing Mawgun* was again erroneously assigned to the authorship of Nawade in the catalogue. The Bernard Free Library was closed during the Second World War and reopened in 1948, to become the core of the Myanmar National Library in 1952. Letwe Nawrahta's *Yodaya Naing Mawgun* had thus been kept in the National Library from the very beginning albeit hidden from scholars by the misattribution of authorship of the text itself and in the catalogue.

<sup>6</sup> On scrutinizing the manuscript, the present author Kaung found the name of the original owner, Sar-yei-daw-gyi U Hnit, on the right-hand side of the first page and on the last page.

<sup>7</sup> Bagan Wundauk U Tin, *Myanmar Min Oke-choke-pon Sardan* (Rangoon: Government Printers, 1931–1933).

<sup>8</sup> Yee Yee Khin, op. cit.

### ... And found

In a thesis completed in 1960, Daw Mya Mya Than, a lecturer at the Myanmar Department of Yangon University, identified the palm-leaf manuscript in the National Library wrongly catalogued under Nawade as the “lost” text by Letwe Nawrahta. She included a transcript of the full text in her thesis for a Master of Arts degree.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately the thesis, never published, was lost for many years and Daw Mya Mya Than herself passed away.

Around 1980 Daw Kyu Kyu Hla, a lecturer in the Myanmar Department of the Rangoon Arts and Science University, obtained a copy of the full text of *Yodaya Naing Mawgun* while she was writing her master’s thesis on Letwe Nawrahta’s life and works.<sup>10</sup> She included an abstract of all its forty-six stanzas in an appendix.

In the process of compiling a new edition of the anthology of Myanmar literature in 1992, Daw Myint Than, a member of the Myanmar Language Commission, used a copy made from the palm-leaf manuscript in the National Library to help in editing the four stanzas included in the anthology.<sup>11</sup>

In 2007 Yee Yee Khin finally brought to light the full text of Letwe Nawrahta’s *Yodaya Naing Mawgun* as a result of her doctoral research. Her thesis, completed in 2007, focused on three *mawgun* poems about military conquests, one of them being Letwe Nawrahta’s.<sup>12</sup> She rediscovered Daw Mya Mya Than’s lost thesis and traced the palm-leaf manuscript in the National Library through the reference given by Daw Myint Than. In 2010 she completed her work on Letwe Nawrahta’s *Yodaya Naing Mawgun*, having made a handwritten copy from the palm-leaf manuscript in the National Library, edited the text and compiled an introduction, notes, glossary, bibliography and indexes, together with an exegesis in modern Myanmar prose.<sup>13</sup>

An English translation of Letwe Nawrahta’s *Yodaya Naing Mawgun*, by Soe Thuzar Myint, has been published in Bangkok, together with the translator’s revision of her English-language master’s thesis for Chulalongkorn University.<sup>14</sup>

The present writer had long searched for this sole known contemporary record of the battle for Ayutthaya, written from the Myanmar perspective. In 2008, I included my English translation of Daw Kyu Kyu Hla’s abstract as an appendix

<sup>9</sup> Mya Mya Than, “Mawgun Thamaing”, MA thesis in Myanmar literature, University of Yangon, 1960, pp. 369–89

<sup>10</sup> Kyu Kya Hla, “Letwe Nawrahta Bawa hnint Sarpay”, MA thesis in Myanmar literature, Arts and Science University, Rangoon, 1981.

<sup>11</sup> Daw Myint Than, ed., *Myanmar Sar Nyunt-baung Kyan*, vol. 3 (Yangon: Thadin hnint Sar-nai-zin, 1992).

<sup>12</sup> Yee Yee Khin, “Myanmar Sit Naing Mawgun 3 Saung hnint Aphwint Kyan”, PhD thesis, University of Yangon, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> See footnote 1 for details of the publication of this thesis.

<sup>14</sup> Soe Thuzar Myint, *The Portrayal of the Battle of Ayutthaya in Myanmar Literature* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 2011).

to my paper “Letwe Nawrahta (1723–1791), recorder of Myanmar history” for the Burma Studies Conference at the University of Northern Illinois, DeKalb.<sup>15</sup> Subsequently, I was invited to give the present paper at Chulalongkorn University and the Siam Society in Bangkok.

The original text of the *mawgun* has been digitized and copies made available in the Yangon University Library, the Universities Central Library and the Library of the Historical Research Department. The Universities Central Library digitized the text as found on the palm-leaf manuscript.

### **Brief life of Letwe Nawrahta**

The author of *Yodaya Naing Mawgun* was born at Mon-ywe in the year 1723 and given the name of U Nay, or U Myat Tha Nay. At the age of 20, he was first employed at court as tutor to the eldest son of King Maha Dhamma Yaza Dipati (1733–1752), the last king of the Nyaung-yan dynasty. In 1752, he witnessed the Mon sack of Ava and retreated to his home village for a year before returning to the court of King Alaung-min-taya of the new Konbaung dynasty (1752–1885). He went on to serve a total of six kings as writer, minister and military commander in a court career spanning almost fifty years.

During his career, Letwe Nawrahta bore many titles, making difficult to the task of piecing together his career. (See accompanying table, overleaf.) Luckily he listed most of them in an inscription on a bell that was donated to a pagoda he had built in Mon-Ywe, his birthplace.

King Alaung-min-taya conferred on him the title of “Letwe Nawrahta” on 29 June 1757, after the conquest of the Mon Kingdom. His earlier title of Letwe Thondara (which he held for approximately three years, from 1754 to 1757) was thereupon given to another court poet who, when banished to a remote area, wrote a lovely, emotional *yadu* poem which won him pardon from his exile and lasting fame. That two poets had held the same title under one reign has sometimes caused confusion. Although Letwe Nawrahta received many titles, he preferred the one conferred by the founder of the Konbaung dynasty who kept him at his side, valued his services and first promoted his rapid rise.

Letwe Nawrahta lived in momentous times for Myanmar and Siam. He was at the Court of Innwa (Ava) when it was overrun by the Mons in 1752. He was by the side of his king, Alaung-min-taya, when the Mons were finally crushed and the Mon Kingdom ceased to exist. He was a high-ranking court official when Myanmar troops vanquished Ayutthaya in 1767. He saw the collapse of the Rakhine

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<sup>15</sup> Toe Hla read the paper at DeKalb on the present writer’s behalf. The paper is included in my book: Thaw Kaung, *Aspects of Myanmar History and Culture* (Yangon: Gant-gaw Myaing Sarpay for Loka Ahlinn, 2010), pp. 63–100.

### Titles bestowed on Letwe Nawrahta by Myanmar kings

NO.	TITLE	KING	REIGN	REMARKS
1	Yanda Kyaw Swa	Maha Dhamma Yaza Dipati	1733–52	Became a court official under the Crown Prince around 1743; the first of the two titles was conferred by the Crown Prince.
2	Pyan-chi Kyaw Htin			
3	Letwe Thondara	Alaung-min-taya	1752–60	Conferred in 1754
4	Letwe Nawrahta			Conferred on 29 June 1757
5	Sithu Kyaw Htin	Naungdaw-gyi	1760–63	Probably conferred on 4 February 1761 (shown only on the bell inscription)
6	Nanda Thura Kyaw Htin			
7	Nay-myo Thiri Zeya Kyaw Htin	Hsinbyu-shin	1763–76	
8	Nay-myo Maha Kyaw Htin			
9(a)	Nay-myo Maha Thin Khaya Kyaw Htin			
9(b)	Min-gyi Kyaw Htin [not a new title]	Singu	1776–82	As his titles under three previous kings included Kyaw Htin, he was generally referred to as Min-gyi Kyaw Htin.
10	Min-gyi Maha Thiha Thura	Bodaw-paya	1782–1819	

Kingdom and its integration into the Myanmar king's territory. As a poet as well as a functionary, he took great interest in historical events and would record them for posterity. His *Yodaya Naing Mawgun* is one such record, much appreciated by the king, the court and the people of its time.

*Mawgun* is a well-known Myanmar literary genre, a poem that records and celebrates important events, especially those at the royal court and capital. A *mawgun* is a panegyric written in praise of the king to mark a royal act or historic event in his reign such as a military victory, coronation, the completion of a religious building, arrival of foreign ambassadors, or the acquisition of a white elephant.<sup>16</sup>

Letwe Nawrahta is known to have written eight poems in this style, although others of his might have been lost or not properly identified. His subjects include the coronation ceremonies of King Bodawpaya (Badon) in 1784, building of pagodas, the conquest of Ayutthaya in 1767 and the conquest of Rakhine (Dhanyawaddy,

<sup>16</sup> Hla Pe, "Burmese poetry, 1450–1885, its scope and nature", in Hla Pe, *Burmese Literature, Historiography, Scholarship, Language, Life, and Buddhism* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1985), p. 8.

Mrauk-Oo) in 1785. Besides the *mawgun* on Ayutthaya, Letwe Nawrahta wrote one on the conquest of Rakkine in 1785, five texts of questioning famous abbots on religious topics, several *pyo* poems, an anthology of *yadu* poems by famous authors, songs, musical compositions and one of the earliest codes of conducts for kings.

Letwe Nawrahta died in 1791 at the age of 68.

### **The *Yodaya Naing Mawgun* manuscript**

The only full text is a palm-leaf manuscript in the Myanmar National Library.<sup>17</sup> The manuscript is a *kyan-sit*<sup>18</sup> palm-leaf manuscript consisting of one *anga* (a batch of twelve leaves) with eleven lines on each leaf.

In the colophon, the copying of the manuscript is dated to Myanmar Era, year 1251, month Wā-So, 4th day after the full moon; equivalent to 9 July 1889. The manuscript was copied for Sar-yei-daw-gyi U Hnit whose name appears on the right hand side of the first page and on the last page.

In a handwritten copy made by Pyone Pyone Aye, curator of the Manuscript Section of the National Library, the text occupies thirty-nine pages of A4 paper with twenty-two lines to each page.

The manuscript is complete and intact, although in recent years it has suffered some damage on at least two leaves owing to frequent moves (about seven times) by the National Library between different buildings in Yangon, and now to the new capital, Naypyidaw.

The text of the manuscript also seems to be complete with a proper exordium and colophon, although some scholars believe that a few sentences in the colophon were omitted when this copy was made in 1889. They argue that Letwe Nawrahta would have given his full rank and titles on manuscripts; however, that cannot be verified at present, as this manuscript is the only one found up to now. We hope that eventually another copy will be discovered in one of the many monastic library collections that remain to be inventoried for preservation. Yet the hope may be in vain as manuscripts are rapidly disappearing through natural causes, fires and floods and insect attacks, as well as being taken out of our country, to Thailand especially, where they fetch high prices. Hopefully a copy might otherwise be recovered from a library outside the country or from a private collector.

At present, the only other copy available for comparison with this text are the four stanzas (numbers 2 to 5) in the anthology of Myanmar literature.

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<sup>17</sup> The Myanmar National Library is being moved from Yangon to the new capital, Naypyidaw, where it will be housed in newly constructed one-storey buildings.

<sup>18</sup> *Kyan-sit* manuscripts were second in rank, usually written for ministers and court officials. They were coated with vermilion on the two length-wise edges and gilded on about 4 inches in the middle.

### Summary of the *Yodaya Naing Mawgun* of Letwe Nawrahta

The poet composed the *mawgun* in five parts. The first four have eight stanzas plus a short summarizing stanza, while the last has nine stanzas plus a summary.

**Part 1: Stanzas 1 to 9.** Since a *mawgun* is a panegyric celebrating the achievement of a king, the first stanzas start with King Alaung-min-taya's faith in the military prowess of his second son, Hsin-byu-shin, who was ruling at the time the work was composed. It states that the father always had this son in the front ranks of his troops during his military campaigns.

In 1760, King Alaung-min-taya led troops to attack Ayutthaya and, according to the Myanmar chronicles, withdrew because of sickness and died before reaching his capital. The poet writes that the great king, before his death, specially charged his second son Hsin-byu-shin with the task that he himself had been unable to achieve, namely the recovery of Ayutthaya, which he held was a Myanmar possession as a result of King Bayin-naung's conquest in 1569.

The poet then relates that from around 1761 onward, with the reign of Naung-daw-gyi, the eldest son of Alaung-min-taya, the kings prepared for the assault and capture of Ayutthaya by first sending Myanmar troops to subdue the ninety-nine *kyaing* or *chiang* (*mong*) of Shan territory, the fifty-seven provinces in the region of Chiang Mai, Nan and Phrae, as well as the southern region around Dawei (Tavoy), encircling Ayutthaya in preparation of their attack.

Letwe Nawrahta also states his aim in writing this *mawgun* as a record of the conquest for posterity, "till the ending of the world", so people would be proud of the King's great achievement.

On 6 July 1764, Hsin-byu-shin appointed General Naymyo Thihapati as commander to march and capture Zimme (Chiang Mai). By April 1765, that army had conquered both Chiang Mai and Luang Prabang.

**Part 2: Stanzas 10 to 18.** The Myanmar troops converged on Ayutthaya by two main routes. Although the Siamese thought they would enjoy respite from the Myanmar attacks from May 1765 when the monsoon started, the Myanmar troops broke with past practice and stopped only briefly at the height of the floods, continuing their march to the Siamese capital and capturing town after town along the way. By 14 January 1766, the Myanmar troops on the northern route arrived to the northeast of Ayutthaya and encamped at Pathok Village. The commanding officers sent back two hundred captured elephants and over a thousand cannon to King Hsin-byu-shin at the capital.

On the southern route, General Maha Nawrahta had started his march on 30 November 1764, encamped at Dawei during the monsoon and continued the massive invasion of Siam on 22 October 1765. The Myanmar troops captured Kanchanaburi and set up camp about five stages to the west of Ayutthaya at Kanni Village. The battles on the southern route are not given in detail.



Around Ayutthaya, there was fierce fighting on both land and the rivers. When the floodwaters rose, the Myanmar troops built fortresses with bricks and earth to raise the ground.

Letwe Nawrahta vividly describes one naval battle in which the Siamese fought back courageously. Their commander, Bya Than, was captured alive by the Myanmar artillery chief, San Htun. In that battle alone the Myanmar captured many weapons, boats and fifty thousand prisoners of war. All the war captives were treated kindly. The Siamese who had fled the fighting were allowed to return and live with their families. Those Siamese who had laid down their arms and gone over to the Myanmar side were made to drink the water of allegiance; some were chosen for positions in the Myanmar army.

The Siamese built fifty brick fortresses outside the walls of Ayutthaya, walled up all the entrances to the city with bricks and prepared to withstand a long siege.

Part 3: Stanzas 19 to 27. This section of the poem tells of twenty-seven stockades built by thirty-one Myanmar contingents to encircle the city. The poet recorded the names of the commanders, the location of these stockades and other manoeuvres in detail that effectively cut off all supplies to Ayutthaya city.

Maha Nawrahta informed his commanders that the orders from the king were to capture Ayutthaya in the quickest possible manner. He thought of a stratagem, recounted in the *Mahosadha Jataka*, of digging tunnels up to the base of the city wall. The lieutenant commanders and various troop leaders agreed with their commander's proposal.

Siamese reinforcements sent from Phitsanulok and other towns were routed. The poet portrays the Siamese as a courageous foe, a worthy adversary of the Myanmar whose commanders had to resort to innovative tactics.

**Part 4: Stanzas 28 to 36.** The climax of the poem records the final stage of the long siege and the eventual collapse of Ayutthaya's defences after fourteen months.

The author relates that the Siamese had the help of many foreign soldiers including Bengalis, Panthay (Chinese Moslems), Malays and Chinese, yet were unable to break the Myanmar encirclement.

The people of Ayutthaya were starving through lack of provisions. The Siamese king sued for peace, promising to send annual tribute of elephants and horses, even royal princes and princesses. But by this time the Myanmar generals were confident of victory and turned down all offers of peace. Anyway, their king's order was to conquer Ayutthaya as swiftly as possible and return to the Myanmar capital.

Five tunnels were dug to the base of the city wall. Three forts were first built to hide the tunnel openings. The earth from the tunnels was secretly thrown into the river, as in the example from the *Mahosadha Jataka*.

Combustible material such as bamboo and dried grass was taken into the tunnels under the base of the walls in five places. When they were set on fire, the foundations of the walls gave way in several places, the walls collapsed and the Myanmar troops were able to enter the city easily. The Myanmar overcame the defenders not only because of their courage and valour, but also their surprise stratagem.

The poet notes that it took about five years to conquer Siam. Although the attack had begun under Alaung-min-taya, the conquest was finally realized during the illustrious reign of his second son, King Hsin-byu-shin.

The date of the final capture of Ayutthaya is given as Myanmar era year 1129, Tagu month, 11th waxing day, equivalent to 8 April 1767. The poet records that King Ekathat was killed in the city while trying to flee.

**Part 5: Stanzas 37 to 46.** The concluding part gives details of the names of the commanders, deputies, adjutants and other officers in both the northern and southern armies. The poet also compares the conquest to that of Bayinnaung in 1568.

He also gives great detail about the weaponry captured including the number, size and sometimes weight of the cannon and other firearms, with special mention of a pair of huge cannons.

Finally, the poet mentions the war booty and how it was divided up among the commanders. The soldiers took what they could carry, but the main treasure was taken back to the king. The majority of the victorious troops left Ayutthaya on 30 May 1767, about seven weeks after the city's fall, and they all finally reached Innwa after about two months.

## Comments

There is no mention of ex-king Uthumphom, who had much earlier relinquished his throne to become a monk, being brought back to Innwa and put in charge of the Siamese community in Sagaing across the Ayeyawady River.

The poet records that it was a victory not only over Ayutthaya but also over the separate kingdoms of Chiang Mai and Lan Xang.

Of the three sons who consecutively succeeded Alaung-min-taya, the great warrior monarch who founded the last Myanmar dynasty, Hsin-byu-shin was the most militant. In his youth he fought in the vanguard of his father's campaigns. When he ascended the throne, the Siamese could expect an attack since he had been present at his father's unsuccessful siege of Ayutthaya in 1760.<sup>19</sup>

Hsin-byu-shin's personal name was Maung Ywa. He was born on 8 August 1736 when his father was still a headman of Moksobo (later renamed Shwebo). When his father became king, he was given the town of Myedu and became known as the

<sup>19</sup> Htin Aung, *A History of Burma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), p. 173.

Prince of Myedu. He was only 27 years old when he ascended the throne and only 31 when he conquered Ayutthaya. He carried the title Myedu-min (King Myedu) until his death at age 39 on 9 June 1776, but is popularly known in Myanmar history as Hsin-byu-shin, “Possessor of the White Elephant”, referring to a white elephant (given the title *Sadan Pyaung Kyaw*) from Magway presented to him on 18 June 1770. To differentiate him from King Bayinnaung (1551–1581), the Hanthawaddy Hsin-byu-shin, he is sometimes referred to as the Konbaung Hsin-byu-shin.<sup>20</sup>

In the opening stanza of this poem, Letwe Nawrahta related that Alaung-min-taya entrusted his sons with the task of bringing Ayutthaya back under Myanmar suzerainty. Alaung-min-taya claimed it as his rightful inheritance because Bayinnaung had once conquered Ayutthaya.<sup>21</sup> Our poet mentions that Siam had broken off the tributary relationship only at the instigation of some Talaing (Mon) rebels who had run away to Siam.

The campaign to conquer Siam began under the eldest son, Naungdawgyi, who reigned for only three years (1760–1763) and died when only 29. Unlike Hsin-byu-shin he did not excel in fighting and his short reign was spent in quelling rebellions. Letwe Nawrahta relates that he initiated the invasion of Chiang Mai territory in 1761. Hsin-byu-shin ordered the invasion of Ayutthaya from the north and from the southwest, via Dawei (Tavoy). The final campaign against Ayutthaya took three years, from 1764 to April 1767.

Hsin-byu-shin did not join his commanders in the final assault on Ayutthaya because Manchu Chinese troops attacked Myanmar in 1766 and penetrated to Singu on the Ayeyawady River within three marches of Innwa.<sup>22</sup>

Letwe Nawrahta’s account contradicts Prince Damrong’s surmise that the Myanmar troops went to quell rebellions in Chiang Mai and Dawei and originally did not aim to attack Ayutthaya.<sup>23</sup> That supposition is contrary to all Myanmar records. A. P. Phayre has written that Hsin-byu-shin had “inherited his father’s energy and military talent and soon after his accession took preliminary measures for future operations against Siam to avenge the insult which Alaung-hpra had received at Ayuthia.”<sup>24</sup> The stratagem of a pincer attack with two military columns is found in Myanmar military manuals known as *Thayninga-byu-ha-kyan* (*Senaga Byuha*).

<sup>20</sup> Daw Kyan, “Maung Laut, Maung Ywa, Maung Waing do a-kyauing”, in Daw Kyan, *Thamaing hu-thi hnint a-chya sar-dan mya* (Yangon: Yone-kyi-chet Sarpay, 2008), p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> G. E. Harvey, *History of Burma* (London: Longmans, Green, 1925), p. 250. Harvey calls this claim false because Ayutthaya was never under the administrative control of Myanmar: “Bayinnaung had merely held it to tribute for twenty years, and the claim had lapsed ever since”.

<sup>22</sup> Harvey, op. cit., pp. 253–58, 355–56; Henry Burney, “Some account of the wars between Burma and China”, *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, VI (1837).

<sup>23</sup> Damrong Rajanubhab, *Our Wars with the Burmese: Thai–Myanmar Conflict, 1539–1767* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2001), pp. 320–26.

<sup>24</sup> A. P. Phayre, *History of Burma* (London: Trubner, 1884), p. 186.

William J. Koenig wrote that Hsin-byu-shin, soon after ascending the throne, “quickly executed a classic north–south pincer operation against the Thai.”<sup>25</sup>

## Conclusions

The long-lost text of a Myanmar contemporary account of the siege and destruction of Ayutthaya in 1767 has been recovered and reproduced so that scholars can study the original version in verse and a full exegesis, as well as a prose translation in English. This epic was written by a senior court official who had full access to the military records. It seems to have been compiled immediately after the events recorded, unlike the later Myanmar *yazawin* chronicles such as the *Hman-nan*,<sup>26</sup> the *Kon-baung-set*<sup>27</sup> and the unpublished *Monywe Yazawin Kyaw* which were compiled many decades later. The compilers of those chronicles used this *mawgun* poem as one of their main sources for the events of 1765 to 1767, but left out some details and put in some facts from other sources.

As a court poet composing a panegyric to a monarch who prided himself as being the conqueror of Ayutthaya, Letwe Nawrahta related only what he considered to be auspicious events. He omitted anything unpropitious including hardships, tribulations and deaths of the Myanmar soldiers and some senior commanders, such as the death from fever of Maha Nawrahta, the commanding general on the southern route.<sup>28</sup> He also gives no details of troop losses on the Myanmar side.

Some scholars such as U Htun Yee have suggested that this *mawgun* is an eyewitness account of the conquest of Ayutthaya, but that seems unlikely. There is no such claim in this poem. In his other writings, such as the *Alaung-min-taya-gyi Ayedaw-bon*, Letwe Nawrahta recorded that he was a *tat-yei* or adjutant-general at the side of the king during warfare against the Mons.<sup>29</sup> It is also likely that Letwe Nawrahta was with his king, Alaung-min-taya, during the unsuccessful siege of Ayutthaya in 1760. But in December 1766 and early 1767 Letwe Nawrahta was not well and could have returned to his birthplace, Mon-ywe, to rest from onerous court duties. Moreover, since King Hsin-byu-shin did not personally lead his troops,

<sup>25</sup> William J. Koenig, *The Burmese Polity, 1752–1819* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, 1990), p. 16.

<sup>26</sup> Daw Kyan, U Sein Hlaing and U Aye Cho, eds., *Hman-nan Maha Yazawin-daw-gyi* (Yangon: Sar Thu-gyi Sar-oke Taik, 2008).

<sup>27</sup> Maung Maung Tin, comp., *Konbaung-set Maha Yazawin-daw-gyi*, fifth ed. (Yangon: Yar-pyi Sar-oke Taik, for Universities Historical Research Centre, 2004).

<sup>28</sup> Possibly this was a blessing in disguise that enabled the two armies to be combined under a unified command, though the king did send a replacement for the deceased southern commander.

<sup>29</sup> Letwe Nawrahta, *Alaung-min-taya-gyi Ayedaw-bon*, ed. by Daw Ohn Kyi (Yangon: Myanmar Historical Commission, 2011).

it is likely that Letwe Nawrahta remained at the royal court. This matter requires further research.

Myanmar kings conquered the Kingdom of Ayutthaya twice: the first time by King Bayinnaung, who left the Siamese capital and monarchy mostly intact; and the second by King Hsin-byu-shin, who destroyed the city and ended the four-century-old kingdom.

Twice did Myanmar capitals suffer similar destruction, each time bringing a dynasty to its end. The first occasion was in 1287 when Bagan was destroyed by the invading Mongols. The second occurred only fifteen years before the fall of Ayutthaya when Ava (Innwa) was torched by Mons invading from the south. This event ended the two centuries of rule by the Toungoo-Nyaungyan dynasty and resulted in the rise of the new Konbaung dynasty (1752–1885).

Warfare between kings brings enormous hardship and suffering to their peoples. In another of his historical works, the *Alaung-min-taya Ayedawbon*, or *Letwe Nawrahta Yazawin*, the author relates the extreme deprivation and starvation that the Myanmar people suffered after the Mons completely destroyed Innwa and took away the Myanmar king and royal family to the south. We read also of the suffering that the Siamese people endured with the end of Ayutthaya. The residual animosity abiding in peoples' memories over tragic historical events should be slowly effaced and not intensified by modern leaders. According to the eminent Myanmar historian, Than Tun, many of the troops in the northern column were Shans, while other Shans fought in the defence of Ayutthaya.<sup>30</sup> It was not a war between peoples or nation states, but rather a war between kings.

As we study this poetic record of the end of Ayutthaya, it is our hope that the lessons of history are not lost on the current leaders and people of both our countries and that we will continue to live in peace, harmony and friendship, as we have done for over two centuries since the war that ended one of the most famous of Siamese dynasties and destroyed its capital city.

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<sup>30</sup> Than Tun, *A Modern History of Myanmar, 1752–1948* (Yangon: Loka Ahlinn, 2010), section on “The Thai Campaign (1764–1767)”, p. 36.