

*Sacred Sites of Burma: Myth and Folklore in an Evolving Spiritual Realm* by DONALD A. STADTNER (Bangkok: River Books, 2011). ISBN 978 974 9863 60 2 (soft)

This book admirably records in text and illustrations the robustness of Myanmar's religious traditions. Story after story shows, as stated on the dust jacket, how 'Buddhist tales can arise and evolve with astounding speed and creativity'. In text and copious images, the volume combines guidebook, history and myth-hunting within Burma's rich narrative tradition.

The book opens with brief explanation on the use of 'Burma' rather than Myanmar, citing common usage and its preference by opposition groups since 1989. A similar rationale is given for the use of English-era spellings such as Pagan and Moulmein rather than Bagan and Mawlamyine. In a short Preface, the author moves from anecdotes of miraculous events and the rise and fall of popular beliefs about the curative power of pagodas to how the lives of Burmese people are 'profoundly touched' by pagodas and images of the Buddha (p.13). This is followed by a 25 page section on 'The Life of Sacred Sites', an anecdotal compendium on the links between rulers, relics and the Buddha. The 'unexpected paradox' of the Shwedagon, Kyaik-hti-yo ('Golden Rock') and the Rakhine Mahamuni association with Mon and Rakhine rather than the dominant Bamar as well as their recent popularity persists throughout the volume's unravelling

of the relatively modern historicity of 'sacred ranking' (p.18). In the summary of narratives surrounding Kyaik-hti-yoe's sacred hairs, for example, the tutelary Shwe Nan Kyin is set in multiple contexts of early Mon myths and more recent Karen themes. Here, however, Stadtner notes these are not meant to reduce the pagoda's many tales to a simple ethnic and religious conflict (p.167). The reader at this point and throughout much of the book is left free to choose one version of the myth or give all an equal footing.

Be it reiteration of Sri Lankan sources or recent government patronage, 'successful' sites are defined as embodying power, sanctity and hope in equal parts (p.17). A closer conceptual engagement with 'sacred' lies would have perhaps constrained the entertaining and highly informative scope and anecdotal style of the book's seven sections: Yangon (90 pages in length), Mon Country (40), The Buddha's Visit to Upper Burma (26), Pagan (20), Later Burmese Kingdoms (70), Inle Lake (14) and Rakhine State (21).

The section on Yangon includes both a straight history of the city and a search for narratives of the Shwedagon, Sule and Botataung pagodas. This is followed by short but welcome sections on Jewish, Christian and Hindu places of worship. The chapter is sometimes dispersed, for example with a 1869 engraving of the original Holy Trinity Cathedral on Strand Road in a section on 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century religious and ethnic changes (p.60) and the Holy Trinity and St. Mary's architectural descriptions

following the Yangon pagoda profiles (p. 126). While the Muslim tomb of the last Mughal ruler, Bahadur Shah II is well covered (p. 124), more on the range of mosque architecture would have filled a gap in the literature. This is also the case with the two sections on Indian, Chinese and Christian sects in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Yangon (pp.54-60 and pp.122-131). These are small points however, for while the factual style of these sections sometimes seemed at odds with the narrative layering of Buddhist sites, Stadtner's widening of 'sacred' to include many religious groups is a strong addition to the text. This is done at a number of points in the text and illustrations such as a picture of a signboard near Mudon, south of Moulmein, to raise funds for a South Indian Hindu deity in an area where many Tamil immigrants live (p.187).

The book seeks out successive narratives of sites alongside a chronological sketch. At the Shwedagon, for example, the stupa's origins and current veneration are described as well as the pagoda's central role in political events of the Independence movement and more recent decades. The 1920 pillar inscribed in English, French, Russian and Burmese is noted as a memorial to students, although as it commemorates the eleven student leaders of the University Boycott beginning on December 5, 1920, it is more usually called the Boycotter's Memorial (p.102). In a broad topical and chronological sweep, the reader is repeatedly shown how new and often politically motivated the seemingly old is. For example at the Botataung, 1943

bombing prompted a ground-breaking ceremony to re-build the structure on Independence Day, January 4, 1948. In the many myths of each site, at times Stadtner directs the reader. At the Botataung, for example while weaving through the platform shrines, tales of Bawgathena of Syriam, the 'Romeo and Juliet' love story of King Okkalapa's son and the daughter of King Bawgathena and the real-life basis for the Mya Nan Nwe (Lady of the Emerald Palace), it is the early Independence restoration with its links to the Shwedagon that are affirmed at the pagoda today (p. 121). However, for the Shwemawdaw in Pegu (Bago), the conclusion is left more open.

As with the Botataung, where 1970's paintings by U Ba Kyi (p.19, 75, 78-9) are spread through the text, the Shwemawdaw illustrations include paintings by U Chit Maung (1908-1973) of the first president Sao Shwe Thaik hammering a stake to begin reconstruction (p. 33) and U Nu laying the first brick to rebuild the pagoda after earthquakes in 1912, 1917 and 1930 (p. 151). These frame an early Independence popularity similar to the Botataung but are not as explicitly flagged. For example, another story is from a 1710 Mon text of the sage Gavampati, Thagyarmin and nine Hair relics which Stadtner suggests might link to the nine silver receptacles found when rebuilding the pagoda after World War II (p.149). A large chunk of the pagoda that fell in 1917 and is now preserved on the platform is also illustrated (p.153) but the earthquake-nationalist thread is left side by side with archaeology and narrative.

This division is re-iterated with Bagan where factual inscriptions and monuments are pointedly separated from the post-14<sup>th</sup> century chronicle myths, which Stadtner considers a 'mishmass' in modern books which combine the two (p.214). This structure is repeated throughout the volume, in some cases such as Shri Khsetra (p.204-209) and Thaton (p. 171) in a neutral manner but in other such as the palace structures at Pegu (p. 151) and Bagan with considerably more scepticism (p. 215). The possibility that the narratives, places and artefacts may be connected is dismissed as submission of archaeology to nationalism (p.116). At other points, however, archaeology is given an import that is also open to question such as making the Mon contribution at Bagan far greater than the Pyu (p.215).

In Kyaik-hti-yoe and other sections, legendary accounts are compressed and balanced with anecdotes such as an 1892 painting of the pagoda at the Mahamuni in Mandalay and the 1907 completion of the Pegu-Martaban rail line. Likewise, the Moulmein section includes a highly readable description of a 1935 series of painted tin panels by Po Yin at Mahamuni temple, lively 1901 frescoes at Kyaik-than-lan pagoda and the 1890 monastery of Queen Sein-don.

A brief section on popular pilgrimage sites around Magwe and Prome (Pyay) documents the journeys of the Buddha to this region and the double footprints of Shwesettaw. While put in the context of Pali sources, the focus is on the link between *sangha* and lay society rather than the unravelling of myths

(p.193). As elsewhere, illustrations abound, here including an 1892 mural of the Shwesettaw at the Mahamuni in Mandalay that reiterates the Pali commentary with one footprint for the heretic (or in local legends, a venison hunter) Saccabandha and a second lower one for the Naga king. Following a brief description of the local legend of Myathalun (emerald couch pagoda), the text moves to a mix of recent restoration, archaeology and sacred sites around Prome (Pyay). Stadtner first gives a nutshell history of the Pyu and then recounts King Kyanzitttha's inscription and the Buddha's prophecy that the sage Vishnu would be reborn as the first king of Shri Kshetra and 1630 years later as Kyanzitttha (p.205). While the Bagan inscription is linked to Sri Lankan texts where the Buddha's prophecy is made in India, by the 16<sup>th</sup> century, another narrative sets the Buddha's prophecy on Hpo-u Hill opposite Shri Kshetra. This includes a local mole that the Buddha predicts will be born as Duttabaung, the first king of Shri Khsetra. Stadtner ties this to the offering of a handful of dust to Asoka, but also locally recasts the site with illustrations of the moles (*hpo*) sculptures at the base of the hillside and Hsinbyushin's 1769 donation of his *hti* fallen from the Shwedagon (p.210-211). As at Shwemawdaw, the reader is left to choose between many narratives.

Every page includes one and usually two illustrations, all laid out with a keen sense of colour, form and visual interest. They combine superb photographs of the sites and contemporary practice with a remarkable compilation of

pagoda murals, old photographs, rare reproductions of paintings on glass and aquatints. A glass painting dated to 1905 recounts a 1903 incident when a tiger spotted on the upper levels of the Shwedagon was duly killed by British soldiers (p.94). This faces a page an 1825 aquatint of the Shwedagon, a picturesque view of British soldiers strolling past fanciful renditions of man-lions (*manuthiha*) and lions (*chinthe*) (p.95). Another aquatint from the same collection depicts the Bagan landscape west and north of the Ananda as an orderly array of diminutive stupas, temples and monasteries. There are tidy walkways dotted with figures under the broad sky strolling beside the river (p.225). At times, one wishes for more identification of the artists, for example to note that the famous 20<sup>th</sup> century artist U Han Tin cast the fine bronze depicting the washing of bloody swords at the pond just northwest of the Shwedagon (p.49). At others, however, such as the anonymous murals at the Amarapura Kyauk-taw-gyi, the mixture of local and European style is described in detail (pp. 278-283). The author has scouted out examples by famous and lesser known artists and the index lists in the illustrations in bold by artist. Full page reproductions and sizes with Stadtner's precise visual description in the captions could fill an additional volume. The examples are varied, with one spread on the Mahamuni including a detail of a mural, a 1962 view of the north entrance by U Chit Myae (1904-1976) and a sculpture of a popular jataka (no. 193) in the Ananda temple compound

of the complex (pp.272-273). They provide a rich source for anyone wishing to vicariously or actually visit some of the sites.

The book describes an array of places, introducing a blend of archaeology, history and literature that typifies the country's cultural sites. Stadtner delves into the complex relationship between these often strongly debated points, bringing together many of his previous publications and much more. The stream of anecdotes and illustrations forestall a singular response as the pages move from one site to the next, down the trail of one myth and then sideways to an image of its past or present life. The volume is full with enough historical, literary, chronicle and graphic examples to have been expanded fourfold. The book ends with two anecdotes that typify its scope. One is a photograph and historical account U Ye Kyaw Thu who restored the Sittwe Mahamuni temple 1900 and operated a bank that kept Indian money-lenders at bay. The other links back to details of Hindu, Christian and Muslim sites in Yangon and Moulmein with a brief description of the Budder-mokan shrine dedicated to a Muslim saint, one of a pair of poor merchant brothers whose cargo of turmeric turned to gold. In a myriad of stories, illustrations and temple treks, the author's enjoyment of the quest draw the reader's eye into the pages of this book.

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