

Heritage Across Borders: The Funerary Monument of King Uthumphon

Based on a lecture delivered at the Siam Society on 13 September 2012 by

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On 21 July 2012, the front cover of the *Bangkok Post* carried a story headlined, “Ayutthaya king’s tomb set to be destroyed”. The story, written by Yan Pai, had appeared three days earlier in the online journal, *The Irrawaddy*. The story opened as follows:

A site believed to be the historic tomb of a Thai king is set to be destroyed to make way for a new urban development project in Myanmar.

King Uthumphon was the 32nd and penultimate monarch of the Ayutthaya kingdom, ruling in 1758 for about two months.

His burial place is believed to be inside the prominent Linzin Hill graveyard on the edge of Taungthaman Lake in Amarapura township, Mandalay.

“Thai people come to this tomb regularly to pay respect to their king,” a resident told *The Irrawaddy*. “I have heard that this graveyard will soon be cleared for some sort of urban project.”

According to Myanmar’s historical records, King Hsinbyushin (1736-1776), the third king of the Konbaung dynasty, invaded the ancient Thai capital of Ayutthaya in 1767 and brought as many of its subjects as he could back to his capital Ava, including Uthumphon, the former king.

“The records say the Thai king was in the monkhood when he was brought back as a prisoner of war and, when he died in captivity, his body was buried at Linzin Hill,” said Tin Maung Kyi, a well-known historian and Mandalay resident.

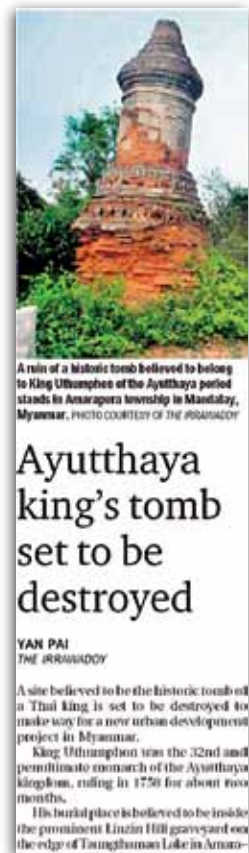


Figure 1. *Bangkok Post* article

The mission

On 5 August, we flew to Mandalay with four objectives:

1. To check with the relevant authorities on the reported plans to demolish the monument;
2. To investigate alternative solutions including, preserving the monument *in situ*, moving it to an appropriate site in Myanmar, or moving the ashes of the King back to Ayutthaya;
3. To seek information on Ayutthaya settlements in the Ava area and on the funerary monument mentioned in the press articles; and
4. To use this information as a basis for making recommendations to the proper authorities.

The Association of Siamese Architects also sent a team, headed by Vichit Chinalai, an architect specializing in renovation and conservation of cultural heritage buildings.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs also broached the issue through diplomatic channels. The Thai Embassy in Yangon sent a letter to the major of Mandalay to delay the clearing of the site.

The site

After Ayutthaya fell to the Burmese on 7 April 1767, some 30,000 prisoners were taken to Burma according to the Thai chronicles. Ordinary prisoners, perhaps two-thirds of the total, were led by a southern route towards Pegu, while craftsmen, nobles, and the former king Uthumphon went by a northerly route to the Burmese capital at Ava.

Some were settled across the Irrawaddy River in Sagaing. To this day, the area is famous for silver and bronzeware skills believed to have passed down from craftsmen among the prisoners. There are temples built in the Thai style with internal walls painted in the distinctive style of Thai murals (see Figure 2). Nearby Amarapura is famed for silk, also linked to the Thai prisoners.



Figure 2. Yodaya Ordination Hall in Maha Teindol Temple, Sagaing (photo: Woraphat Arthayukti)



Figure 3. Plaque at Monte Zu sand pagoda in Mandalay (photo: Woraphat Arthayukti)

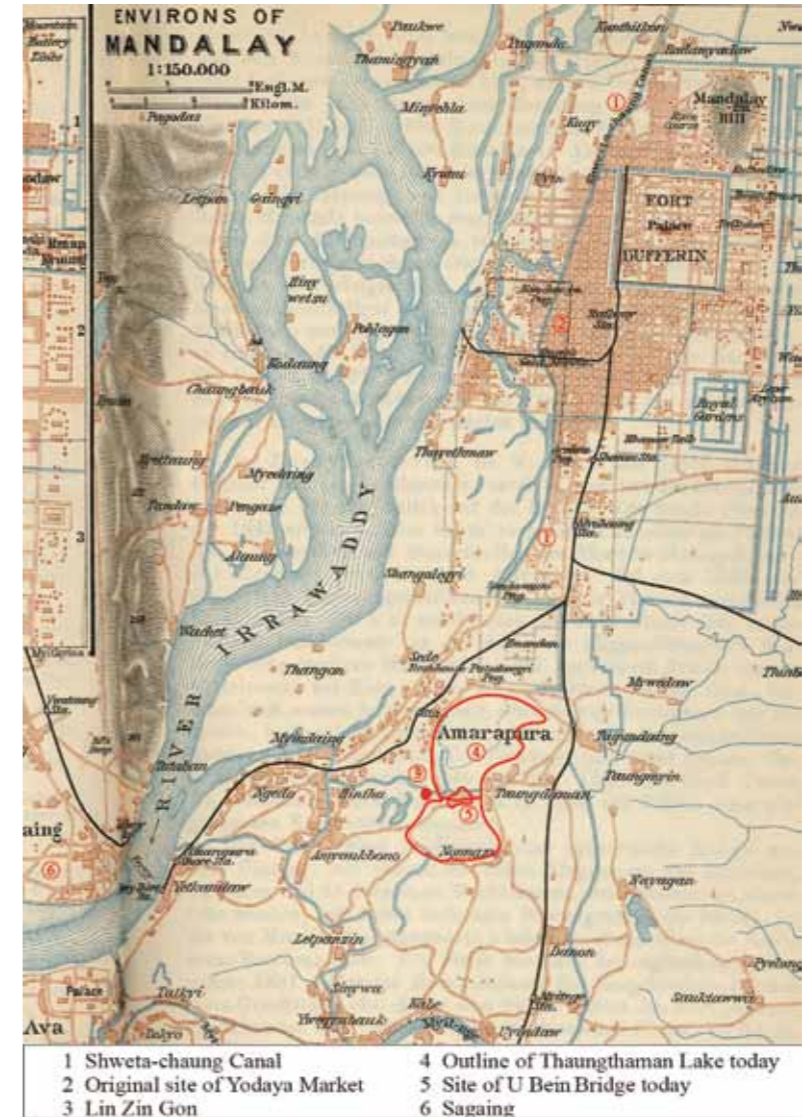


Figure 4. Mandalay in a 1914 British map, showing the location of the Lin Zin Gon cemetery and Shweta-chaung Canal

According to U Maung Maung Tin,¹ a Mandalay historian who collected information from descendants of the Ayutthaya prisoners, the Burmese king provided land for the prisoners to settle along the Shweta-chaung or Golden Canal (see Figure 4), especially in a village named Rahaeng, later changed to Yawahaeng. They built a market known as Yodaya Zay, Ramathep Shrine, and three stupas. Beside the road along this canal, there are temples which still show characteristic traces of Thai architecture on the outside. The descendants of the Ayutthaya prisoners still hold an annual festival of building sand stupas

¹ U Maung Maung Tin, “Chaloei thai nai manthale” [Thai war prisoners in Mandalay], tr. So Yokfa and Sunait Chutintaranond, in *Phama rop thai* [Burmese wars with Siam], ed. Sunait Chutintaranond (Bangkok: Matichon, 1999). The original article in Burmese appeared in 1983.

along this canal. Beside one of these, Monte Zu, there is a plaque erected in 1990² that states that “the Yodaya King who abdicated the throne, Chaofa Dok” was settled in this area along with his “relatives, ministers, and officers” (see Figure 3).

The market in Mandalay is still known as Yodaya Market, based on the old Burmese rendering of “Ayutthaya”. At a temple in this market, we saw a mask for a character from the Rama story, a reminder that, while the story was well-known in Burma, the dance-drama of this story also came from Siam to Burma with singers, dancers, and mask-makers among the prisoners.³

The Lin Zin Gon cemetery is not far from this creek, some 16 kilometers to the south of central Mandalay (see Figure 4). The name “Lin Zin” comes from “Lanchang,” a term which the Burmese used to describe people from Chiang Mai, Luang Prabang, and Siam.⁴ “Gon” means a knoll. Nearby is U Bein Bridge, a major local tourist attraction claiming to be the longest teak bridge in the world (1.2 km), built with wood salvaged from the old palace in nearby Amarapura. Some tourists also visit the Lin Zin Gon cemetery, especially Thai visitors and descendants of Thais settled in Burma. The late HRH Princess Galyani Vadhana visited the cemetery in the 1990s.

The former king

The penultimate king of Ayutthaya was born around 1730, a son of King Borommakot (r. 1733–1758). He was originally named Dok Maduea after the flower of a fig species sometimes called the gular tree. In early 1757, when he carried the title of Prince Phon Phinit, his father named him as deputy king and hence his likely heir, in preference to his older brother, Prince Anurak Montri. Just over a year later on 26 April 1758, King Borommakot passed away. According to one version of the Royal Chronicles, he confirmed the succession in his final hours.

Prince Phon Phinit was consecrated as the new ruler on 12 May 1758, and is known to history as King Uthumphon, a Sanskrit version of fig flower. However, the tension with his elder brother was already evident. On 22 May, King Uthumphon chose to abdicate. He entered the monkhood and went to reside at Wat Pradu (later known as Wat Pradu Songtham), to the east of the city of Ayutthaya. His elder brother assumed the throne as King Ekathat (sometimes known as King Suriyamarin).

The former King Uthumphon left the monkhood in 1760 to assist with the defense of Ayutthaya against a Burmese attack, but promptly returned to the robe when

² This was six years after the 200th anniversary of the construction of the sand pagoda in 1784.

³ See Tin Maung Kyi, “Thai Descendants in Burma: A Thai Court Dancer’s Family,” *JSS*, 89 (2001), pp. 57–61.

⁴ The term Lin Zin is also used for the area in Sagaing where some of the prisoners were settled.

the Burmese withdrew. During the subsequent Burmese siege which culminated in the fall of the city in 1767, he is not mentioned in the chronicle accounts and presumably remained in the monkhood. At the fall of the city, King Ekathat was killed.

A Burmese poetic account of the fall reports that “princes and princesses and their retainers, more than 2,000 in number, over 800 queens bearing titles” were taken away as prisoners. At Ava, they were debriefed on the history, geography, government, and ceremonial of Ayutthaya. The resulting document, known in Burma as the *Yodaya Yazawin* (chronicle),⁵ later found its way back to Siam. One Thai translation was entitled, *Khamhaikan khung luang ha wat*, the *Testimony of the King who Entered a Wat*.⁶ The title expresses a belief that former King Uthumphon was the source of the testimony, but there is no proof. The document has no account of the prisoners themselves or what happened after the fall of the city.

According to the Konbaung Chronicle, Uthumphon was in the robe of a monk when brought to Mandalay, and remained so until his death in 1796.⁷ The plaque at Monte Zu sand pagoda specifies that the Thai king lived in Paung Le Tike, a monastery close to and east of the Raheng Market.

The challenge

At the start of our visit in August 2012, we paid a call on the mayor of Mandalay and learned two important pieces of information.

First, the reason for wanting to clear the cemetery might be a little more complex than “a new urban development project” as reported in the press.

Second, the authorities were intent on going ahead with the project. They had already removed other tombs and ruins on the site. They have deferred to the Thai Embassy’s request for a delay in removing the supposed tomb, but they will not delay indefinitely. They claimed there is no evidence to prove that the monument is the tomb of former King Uthumphon. They said those who want to preserve the tomb must prove it is what they claim.

The problem

In truth, this is difficult. There is no plaque or inscription on the monument. There is no written evidence of when and why it was built.

In the manuscripts collection of the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office,

⁵ Tun Aung Chain, *Chronicle of Ayutthaya: A Translation of the Yodaya Yazawin* (Yangon: Myanmar Historical Commission, 2005).

⁶ *Khamhaikan khung luang ha wat* (Bangkok: Sukhothai Thammathirat University, 2004).

⁷ U Maung Maung Tin, “Chaloei thai nai manthale,” p. 138 reproduces the relevant extract from the chronicle.

now stored in the British Library, is a *parabaik*, or accordion book, which states on folio 288, here translated line by line by Dr. Tin Maung Kyi (see Figure 5):



Figure 5. From *parabaik* in the British Library (used with permission of the British Library)

The third founder of Ratanapura [Ava] and Lord of the White Elephant fought and won Ayodhya, together with the King. The King was brought here. During the reign of his brother (King Badon), the founder of Amarapura, the [Thai] King while in monkhood, died at Amarapura. At Linzin-gon cemetery he was entombed/cremated with great honor entitled to a monarch. This is the image of Chaofa Ekadath [Ekadasa].

The Burmese king in the first line is Hsinbyushin (r. 1763–76). His brother, known as Badon or Bodawpaya, became king in 1782 and moved the capital from Ava to Amarapura in 1783.



Figure 6. The monument in Lin Zin Gon cemetery before the site was cleared (photo: Woraphat Arthayukti, July 2007)

This old document, stating that the funerary rites for the former king were held at Lin Zin Gon, would seem to offer a degree of proof that the monument at Lin Zin Gon today is his tomb. But the document is problematic in several ways. First, the image shows a man in royal attire, yet the text states clearly that the former king was in the monkhood while in Burma. Second, the last line muddles the names of the two last kings, calling Uthumphon by the name of his brother Ekathat who died in the fall of the city. These errors and inconsistencies bring the credibility of the document into question.



Figure 7. Lin Zin Gon after clearing (photo: Woraphat Arthayukti, 25 September 2012)

The monument is also problematic (see Figure 6). It stands some 6–7 meters high. Often it is referred to as a stupa or *chedi*, since that is the structure normally used to inter crematory remains. But the building at Lin Zin Gon does not resemble any *chedi* known in Siam. There is a rather similar structure at Mingun, around 20 kilometers away, north of Mandalay. It stands in front of the Mantalagyi or Great Royal Stupa, begun by King Badon in 1790 and intended to become the greatest stupa in the world. The construction was abandoned unfinished after an earthquake in 1838 cracked the structure.

But the Mingun site is suggestive. At Lin Zin Gon, behind the supposed tomb is a mound which was covered with overgrowth. The plan which the Association of Siamese Architects team drew of the site shows that this mound stands at the center of other monuments, including the supposed tomb, in a pattern that resembles a *mandala*. When the undergrowth was stripped away in September 2012 (see Figure 7), the mound was revealed as the base of a stupa, square with redented corners (similar to the Mantalagyi). Perhaps this much grander structure was the depository for the former king's crematory remains, and should be the target of conservation.

If the written evidence is problematic, and the site still full of unknowns, there remains strong circumstantial evidence that needs to be taken seriously.

It is known that some of the Ayutthaya prisoners were settled in this area. Lin Zin Gon is located in a no man's land between four old capitals – Mandalay, Amarapura, Ava, and Sagaing. The buildings of their dynasties are located within these capitals. There is no history or memory linking the buildings at Lin Zin Gon to any of them. The area may have been a site used by several communities brought as prisoners, in the same way that religious sites of Malay, Lao, Mon, Khmer and other communities brought as prisoners can be found around Ayutthaya and Bangkok. No figure of similar status as former King Uthumphon is known to have lived and died in this area. The association of the Lin Zin Gon remains with the former king is plausible. It should be investigated properly while that is still possible. Though the likelihood of finding “proof” in the form of written words may be remote, experts in art history and archaeology could contribute to the discussion.

Finally, there is the folk memory. The belief that Lin Zin Gon is the site of the former king's remains has been passed down across two centuries, largely in the oral culture of the descendants of the Thai prisoners of 1767. *The Irrawaddy* reported a local resident saying, “Thai people visiting Burma come to this tomb regularly to pay respect to their king.” This oral history could also be examined more closely.

Even if all these efforts produced no “hard” proof, the emotions of the Thai descendants should be respected. The *Irrawaddy* report pointed out,

Scholars in Mandalay have raised concerns that the new project will mean the loss of considerable heritage and affect Myanmar's nascent yet potentially huge tourism industry.

“Thai people regularly come to their ex-king's tomb to pay respect,” said Nyein Win, an archaeologist in Amarapura. “I always have to clean the tomb before their arrival. They will also feel hurt if the tomb is destroyed.”⁸

The monument may be a trace left from a period of great conflict between two neighbors. At a time when relations between the two are becoming closer, the preservation of the monument could contribute to that amity. In this case, the internal and external politics of the matter may be more important than any kinds of “proof.”

The state of play

By late 2012, there were three main players involved in the issue.

The Mandalay Municipality wished to remove the monument, relocating any crematory remains found to another cemetery. However, as the diplomatic approaches had brought the Myanmar Government into the picture, they were hesitant to move independently.

The Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs wanted a delay so that the monument can be properly studied and perhaps authenticated, in which case it would consider offering funding to ensure that the monument were preserved.

The Association of Siamese Architects proposed disassembling the monument and reconstructing it in a nearby monastery. They have made preliminary engineering plans for the task, and formally requested permission from the Municipality.

The second mission⁹

A second mission, headed by Damrong Kraikruan, deputy director-general of the Department of Information in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and an assistant, and including a representative of the Ministry of Culture as well as an independent researcher and member of the Siam Society, traveled to Mandalay and the Myanmar capital, Nay Pyi Daw, on 24–28 September 2012.

At a meeting with an official of the Myanmar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the head of mission stressed the importance of the stupa issue for bilateral relations, since there are good reasons to believe that it contains the ashes of a former king. The official had no previous knowledge of the issue and said that only the Culture Ministry could raise this issue at cabinet level. The delegation then met with a recently appointed deputy minister of culture, himself a historian and knowledgeable about the stupa. In July 2012, as a member of the Upper House, he raised the matter in parliament and stated that the stupa should not be destroyed. He showed us a

⁸ Yan Pai, “Siamese king's tomb to be destroyed,” *The Irrawaddy*, 18 July 2012, at <www.irrawaddy.org/archives/9398>.

⁹ This section was added in December 2012.

letter that the historian Dr. Tin Maung Kyi sent to the prime minister to ask that the stupa not be demolished. The deputy minister also said that the Burmese Konbaung Chronicles mentions King Uthumphon's cremation.

In Mandalay the delegation met Dr. Tin Maung Kyi, a descendent of the Yodaya captives who lives in downtown Mandalay, and four families that are descendents of the Yodaya prisoners. Dr. Tin did not know about the stupa until 1989 when he saw a copy of the *parabaik* from the British Library and passed on the information to U Puiunya or Phra Panya, abbot of the monastery adjacent to the Lin Zin Gon cemetery, who had not known that the stupa contained the ashes of the Thai king.

An 84 year old female descendant of the Yodaya people, who lives about 300 meters from the stupa, said she had since childhood been told by her forebears that the stupa contained the ashes of the Thai king. A nearby family, not Yodaya descendants, said that their grandmother, who is almost 100 years old, had told them that the stupa contained the Thai king's ashes. However, a family of Yodaya descendants that the delegation met living in downtown Mandalay did not know about the stupa.

So the evidence of oral history seems positive to a certain extent. Additional oral history studies would be important.

Prince Damrong Rajanuphap, who had heard rumors of the stupa of King Uthumphon, visited Mandalay in 1936 and directed an unsuccessful search in Ava.¹⁰ He concluded that the stupa was probably in Sagaing, but this is unlikely.

The delegation concluded that there is sufficient evidence to believe that the ashes of King Uthumphon are in the stupa complex in Lin Zin Gon cemetery. After the trip, there were two meetings between representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Culture, Association of Siamese Architects, and other parties which decided that the Ministry of Culture would conduct an in-depth study of the Yodaya captives, the Association of Siamese Architects would excavate the site, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs would liaise with the Myanmar authorities. Excavation was expected to begin in early 2013.

Acknowledgements

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¹⁰ In his account of his visit to Burma in 1935, Prince Damrong Rachanuphap wrote: "It was known since the Fifth Reign that the site had been found of the remains of the King of Siam (that is, King Uthumphon, who we call 'the king who sought a wat') who died in Burma. I believe the site must be a stupa with an inscription in Ava since Ava was the capital when Burma carried the Thai away after the fall of Ayutthaya." He made enquiries about such a stupa in Ava but drew a blank. On return to Penang he read from the Royal Autograph Chronicle that the Thai had been taken to Sagaing, and regretted his missed opportunity. Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, *Thieo mueang Phama* [A visit to Burma] (Bangkok: Phrae Phithaya, 1971), pp. 212–13.