

Chapter II The Pre-Pagan Period: The Urban Age of the Mon and the Pyu

A. Pre-Pagan Period: Introduction - General History

The first millennium AD in Burmese history, The Urban Age, is characterized by the first appearance of cities and the formation of nation states. Of great importance in this process was the arrival from India of a wide variety of ideas and beliefs, both religious and secular. The occurrence of urbanism and Indianization at this time is shared by other polities in mainland Southeast Asia and should be considered a regional phenomenon even though the earliest known city, Beikthano, is found in Burma. Indeed, coins minted in Burma have been found in urban sites as far away as northern Thailand and southern Vietnam.

It was also during this period that sophisticated irrigation systems using weirs were established in the central dry zone and henceforward the dry zone remains paramount in Burmese political life and history.

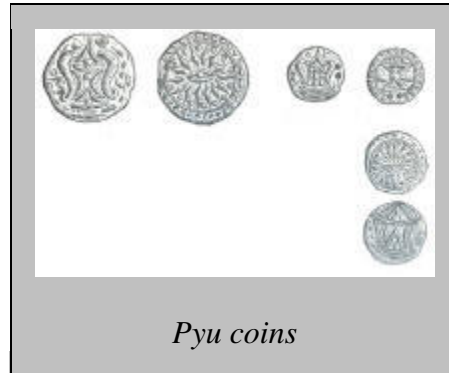
As evidenced by artifacts and inscriptions, an array of religions were practiced during the Pyu period such as Hinduism and in particular Vaishnavism, Theravada Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, Tantrayana Buddhism and a vast range of uncodified animist beliefs and rituals. By the end of this period, the major Animist spirits (Nats=Burmese) had been subordinated to Theravada Buddhism which become the religion of choice among the lowland rice farmers and Theravada Buddhism has remained the predominant religion in Burma until the present day.

From approximately 200 BC, a number of walled cities were built in central Burma whose plans consisted of rounded squares or rectangles. It is believed that circular shapes (at times oval, as in ancient Thai sites) was an indigenous Southeast Asian creation whereas the square or mandala plan was imported India. Upon examining aerial photographs of these cities, it is obvious that the dichotomy between circular and square is not clear-cut. The corners of the city walls have been rounded as well as the entrances to the gateways and in addition, the city walls are not straight but bulge elliptically. Some features of the Pyu cities are certainly of Indian origin such as the use of twelve gates. Therefore the plans of these early cities show a mixture of traits, some indigenous, some borrowed.

Although the Burmese began to live in cities before the arrival of Indian ideas, these foreign ideas were essential to create important capital cities of international and cosmological significance. The adoption of Indian concepts of city planning incorporated a belief in the efficacy of the world axis that connects the centermost point in a properly constructed Mandala city with the city of the Gods above (Tavatimsa heaven) in order to assure prosperity throughout the kingdom below.

A remarkable characteristic of the Mon and Pyu cultures is that they minted and used

silver coinage. The earliest type of these uninscribed coins depicts a conch on one side and a Srivatsa (a door-like symbol associated with good fortune) on the other. These coins date from the 5th century, originated in the Pegu area, and became the model for almost all coinage in mainland Southeast Asia during the first millennium AD. The later Pyu coins are derived from this earlier Mon type and appear in several varieties till the end of the 8th century AD. Many of these coins have had a small hole punched along their perimeter so that the coins may have been used as much for amulets as for trade. After the Pyu Period that ended in the late 9th century, coins were not used again in the Burmese kingdoms until the 18th century!



B. The Mon People of the Coastal Regions

1. General History and Introduction

The first Indianized peoples in Burma were the Mons. An honor shared with their northern neighbors, the Pyus. The Mons, a people of Malayo-Indonesian stock, are related to the early inhabitants of Thailand and Cambodia who also spoke Mon-Khmer languages. The Mons who are considered to be the indigenous inhabitants of lower Burma, established their most significant capital at Thaton, strategically located for trade near the Gulf of Martaban and the Andaman Sea.

Little is known of the early history of the Mon people including how long their various kingdoms flourished and the extent of their domains. For example, it is not definitely known if it was the Mon or the Pyu who controlled the lower delta region. Descriptions in Chinese and Indian texts specify their settlement area as being around the present day cities of Moulmein and Pegu in the monsoonal plains of Southeast Burma. This area was first known as Suvannabhumi ("land of gold") and later as Ramannadesa ("Land of Ramanna"); Ramanna being the word for Mon people. The area known as Suvannabhumi was often connected with the historical Buddha in the later Mon and Burmese chronicles that credit the Mons with first establishing the Buddhist religion in Burma. Although little is known about actual religious practice, trade connections through the Mon port city of Thaton can be traced to the Indian kingdom of the Buddhist King Ashoka from as early as the 3rd century BC. Legend maintains that 2,500 years ago the Mon people began the original structure of the Shwedagon Pagoda that today has

become the most revered Buddhist stupa in Burma, a true national monument. This theory, though tenable, lacks objective corroboration because the many changes that have been made to the pagoda over the years have repeatedly encased its original structure and there is no contemporary record of its foundation or a description of its form.



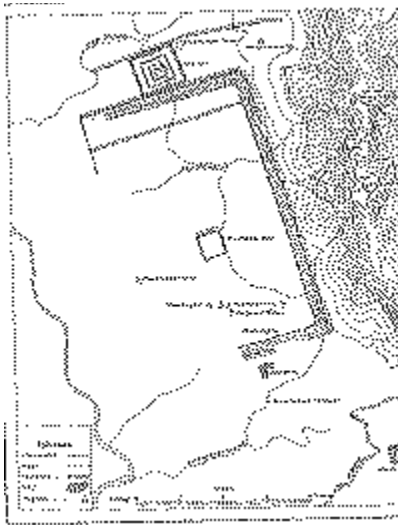
Once a very powerful political and cultural group, today's Mon population of around 1.3 million has been mostly absorbed into the mainstream of Burmese culture. These Burmese Mons make up only a small part of the Mon-Khmer speakers of Southeast Asia with many of their relatives living further to the east in Thailand and Kampuchea. Although their culture has merged with that of the Burmese, the Mons have continued to use their own language and since 1962 have had their own state. As devout Buddhists, they follow their own ceremonial calendar of Theravadin festivals. Their main source of livelihood comes from the cultivation of rice, but they also grow other crops such as yams, sugar cane, and pineapple.

2. Pre-Pagan Period: Thaton

a. Introduction

The early Mon kingdoms that were in power during the prehistoric period, were situated between the Sittang and Salween rivers and were referred to as Ramannadesa. Thaton, the seat of this kingdom, is believed to have been Suvannabhumi ("Golden Land"), a term that was also used to refer to the whole region of continental Southeast Asia

bordering the Bay of Bengal. Thaton is thought to have been founded by King Siharaja during the lifetime of the Buddha, which would place it in the fifth century BC. Thaton was once a flourishing port community that communicated with and transported goods from as far away as Southern India. Later Burmese chronicles credit the Mon people of Thaton with bringing the Buddhist religion to Burma. In these chronicles it is also stated that Buddhist manuscripts from Sri Lanka were translated into Mon characters around 400 AD. Although scholars have questioned this fact, it is known from local inscriptions that Theravada Buddhism definitely existed in Lower Burma by the fifth century AD. Although the exact founding date of Thaton and the extent of its kingdom has yet to be discovered, it is known that Thaton fell under Burmese control during the 11th century when the first great King of Pagan, Anawrahta, sacked the city and returned to Pagan with Thaton's King Manuha as his captive. Thaton remained under Burmese domination until the fall of Pagan in 13th century. Thenceforth, the Mons re-established their independence, although the capital was later moved to other locations including Marataban and Pegu.



City Plan of Thaton

Thaton's quadrangular city plan resembles that of the later Burmese cities of Amarapura and Mandalay. Four walls surrounded the old city creating a rectangular shape that enclosed the walled palace compound that was located at its center. From north to south the palace site measured 1, 080 feet and 1, 150 feet from east to west. Two chief stupas were situated between the palace site and the south wall. Today, the old city of Thaton is no longer visible as growth of the modern town has obscured the earlier settlement.

b. Pre-Pagan Period: Thaton - Architecture

Of the two stupas situated between the palace site and south wall, the Shwezayan is the largest. Across the road from the Shwezayan stupa is the Kalyani Sima, a hall built especially for the ordination of monks. On the sandstone boundary pillars that surround the Kalyani Sima, the stories known as the Ten Great Jatakas may be seen. These

carvings illustrate the last 10 lives of the Buddha before he was reborn as Gautama, the historical Buddha who gained enlightenment. An inscription on one of the pillars dates them to the 11th –13th centuries.

i. Swezayan Stupa

The original form of the Swezayan, stupa, said to have been built in the 5th century BC, is difficult to ascertain since it has been repeatedly rebuilt and expanded. As it stands today, the stupa has a circular base and its overall structure resembles that of a bell. Found within the compound of the Swezayan stupa are several inscribed stones, five in the Mon language of the 11th century. These stones are now preserved within the stupa compound.

Also found within the building are several stone sculptures, loosely dated to the 10th-11th centuries. One of these is a relief carving on sandstone of a standing Buddha. His right hand held at his side points downward with the palm facing outward in the wish-granting gesture known as varada mudra. His left hand is held upwards against his chest with the thumb and index finger pressed together in the argumentative or teaching attitude known as vitarka mudra. Above the Buddha's shoulders are the figures of hamsa birds facing each other.

c. *Sculpture: Thaton*

The relatively few pieces of sculpture that can be dated to this early period vary greatly in style and in subject matter. The subjects portrayed are of Hindu, Buddhist and Animist gods. Two Hindu sculptures dating to the 9th – 10th centuries are carved from slabs of reddish sandstone and depict in high relief the figure of Vishnu reclining on the serpent Ananta. From his body issues a tripartite lotus stem on which are seated Brahma, Vishnu and Siva. This configuration is peculiar to Pyu art. In India, the usual presentation of this event shows a single god, Brahma, appearing within a lotus flower that grows from Vishnu's navel.

Another Hindu sculpture is that of the four-armed Siva seated with his vehicle, Nandi, the bull below his right leg and the buffalo-demon under his left knee. From slightly later are two small images of Ganesa and a small sculpture of a seated Brahma. All of these sculptures were removed to the Phayre Museum at Rangoon and then loaned to the Rangoon University Library where they were located when the Japanese destroyed the building during World War II. Consequently, they are known today only from fragments and photographs.

C. The Pyu People

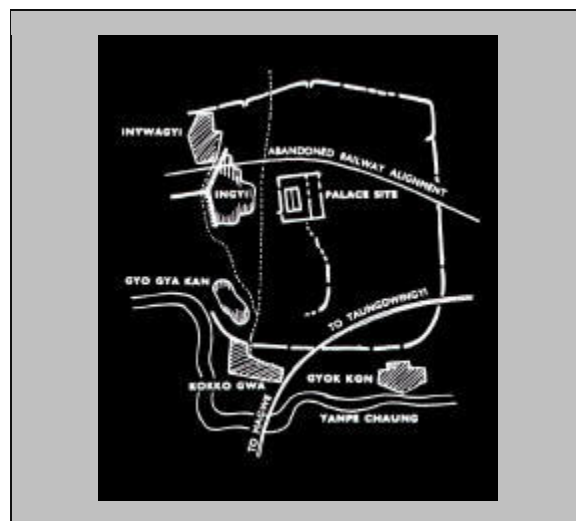
1. General History

The Pyu people settled inland along the middle reaches of the Irrawaddy River but at a distance from the river's course. This is in sharp contrast to the later Burmese cities such

as Pagan, Ava, Amarapura, and Mandalay that were situated directly on the riverbank. The Pyus developed a system of irrigation using elevated weirs as well a sophisticated system of urban planning. The Pyus adopted Buddhism as it spread into Southeast Asia while continuing to practice animism, the worship of indigenous spirits. Excavations at the great Pyu capitol, Srikshehra, uncovered artifacts associated with Vishnu as well as the remains of Buddhist stupas and monasteries that clearly indicate that Hinduism as well as Buddhism were practiced there. Indeed, the name of the earliest Pyu city, Beikthano, means the “City of Vishnu”, the second of the great gods in the Hindu Triad. Due to the scarcity of written material, little is known about the Pyu peoples themselves. Although the Pyu had a written language, few examples still exist. The Pyu language and culture seems to have disappeared as they were conquered and absorbed by the Burmese. The Pyu and Burmese languages are similar, both belong to the Tibeto- Burman family of languages. Most of what we do know of the Pyu is extrapolated from archeological excavations, surface finds and scant references in Chinese Dynastic Histories. Additional but very limited information is found in the few inscriptions on burial urns that typically state the names and reignal dates of early rulers and in the formulaic inscriptions on Buddhist votive tablets. None of these sources yields detailed information about the Pyu people or their culture. In fact, it wasn’t until 1911 that the Pyu language could be read. This was the result of the translation of the Myazedi Inscription, the Burmese “rosetta” stone. This quadrilingual inscription, written in the Pyu, Mon, Burmese, and Pali languages, was erected before the (Buddhist) Myinkaba Kubyauk-gyi Temple at Pagan in 1113 AD. That this Pagan inscription was written in Pyu in the 12th century suggests that although Pyu culture had declined in the 9th century due to invasions from the North by the Chinese and had been subsequently absorbed by the Burmese, the Pyu had continued as an important presence for over three centuries after the Chinese invasions. However, little is heard or known of the Pyu after the 12th century.

2. The Pyu City of Beikthano

a. Introduction: Beikthano – 1st to 5th centuries AD.



Plan of Beikthano

One of the earliest Pyu sites is Beikthano, the City of Vishnu, which is situated near the east bank of the Irrawaddy River between Srikshetra and Pagan. Little of the ancient city exists today because its once tall brick walls were quarried to construct roads and railway tracks. Therefore, most of what is known of Beikthano is the result of archaeological excavations carried out in the twentieth century. Among the excavated structures were found the ruins of Buddhist monasteries, although no Buddhist statuary was found; two pillared halls; four stupa-like buildings; and a city wall made of fired brick enclosing an area of over 2.8 kilometers. The excavations produced artifacts that can be categorized as having essentially Pyu characteristics: silver coins bearing symbols of prosperity and good-luck, burial urns of both plain and elaborate designs, beads of clay and semi-precious stones, decorated domestic pottery, iron nails, and metal bosses. This assemblage of artifacts is shared with the later Pyu cities of Halin and Srikshetra. Through the analysis of the structures, pottery types, particular marks on potsherds, the inscriptions on a clay seal and on burial urns, the period in which Beikthano existed can be established as the 1st–5th centuries AD.

b. Beikthano: City plan

The city plan of Beikthano resembles a bulging rhombus, each side of the city wall measuring about two miles, although little remains today due to natural decay and human depredation. Excavation revealed twelve gateways where the walls curved inward to create entrance passages, each terminating in massive gates. In each of these passages the burnt remains of a wooden gate and rusted iron sockets were found. A rectangular brick enclosure, referred to as the Palace site, lies approximately at the center of the walled city. In the center of the eastern wall of this palace enclosure there is an inner gateway that unlike the curved entrances along the city walls has a square entrance. On either side of all the excavated gates was found an indented space for guards or sentries. Near the entrance to the palace site, two huge pairs of feet carved in sandstone were found. Although the upper portions are missing, these were no doubt once massive figures of door guardians.

c. Beikthano: Architecture

Of the over one hundred debris mounds that are present at Beikthano, twenty-five of them were excavated between 1959 and 1963 (new excavations, it is reported, are presently underway). While artifacts, and coins have come to light, little is known concerning the details of the physical structures at the site since they now exist only as fragmentary foundations. The foundations of a number buildings made of large, kiln-fired bricks were unearthed, among them are two halls with wooden pillars, possibly audience halls; a large rectangular monastery building containing multiple cells; and the foundations of several circular, stupa-like structures, a few of them situated on square

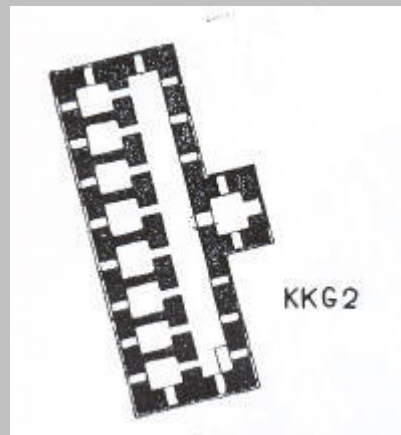
bases. These stupa-like foundations were in several cases closely associated with numerous burial urns containing the ashes and bones of cremated human bodies.

i. The Monastery Building

To the north of the palace site lies the most important structure at Beikthano: a large multi-room building that was almost certainly a monastery. The structure of the building was made of well-fired bricks with wooden doors and window frames. This building, evidently used as a residential dwelling for monks, was destroyed by fire as indicated by the charred remains of its wooden fittings. The remains of the brick walls now rise to about 8 feet. The building consisted of a main rectangular structure measuring about 100x35 feet with a smaller rectangular projection on the east side. The floor plan consists of ten rooms: one entrance hall on the east occupying the projection, one long corridor hall occupying the eastern half of the main rectangle and eight small square rooms to the west of the long hall. The wall opposite the only exit on the east leads to a long corridor, which is connected by a large door to all of the small rooms. The several, small and identical rooms within this building resemble those of Buddhist monasteries at Nagarjunakonda in Andhra State of South India. Since this building is found in close proximity to one of the stupa-like structures, it was almost certainly built as a residence for monks. This structure can be dated by an impression in clay discovered within that was stamped with a circular seal containing four letters in Brahmi script that are datable to the second century AD.

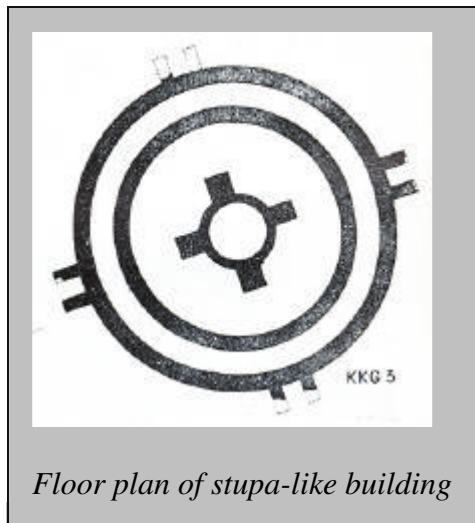


Drawing of Beikthano monastery foundation



Floorplan of Beikthano monastery

Among other structures exposed at Beikthano is a cylindrical building with four rectangular projections outside two concentric retaining walls that resembles the typical Andhra type of stupa found at Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda in Southern India. The Andhra stupa type typically has rectangular ayaka platforms that project at ground level from the cardinal points. Here the projections are very prominent but do not support any inscription pillars nor is the drum of the stupa decorated with sculptured stone slabs as in the Indian prototype.



ii. Stupa-like foundations

Another type of religious or ritual structure that was uncovered in three excavations consists of a square base on which originally stood a cylindrical structure, perhaps surmounted by a low hemispherical dome, which would be like the stupas at Nagarjunakonda. There were no projections from the drum itself but a rectangular wall projected from one side only and is a feature peculiar to Beikthano. Burial urns were found associated with these structures, though not actually enshrined within them. The urns typically were found in groups buried along the outer perimeter of the structures in close proximity to the square foundation base.

An extended human skeleton and two groups of human bones were recovered outside the south and north walls of one of these structures. It is evident from the stratigraphy that the urns and bones were buried at the same time in a single layer. The absence of religious objects at this site and the definite association of the structure with burial urns as well as human skeletons strongly suggest that the building was used for funereal purposes.

Also unearthed were the rectangular foundations of two halls built with brick floors having openings for wooden pillars. These are located near buildings thought to be monastic establishments, an arrangement that also has South Indian precedents. Importantly, the placement of burial urns around the foundation of these structures is a trait unique to the Pyu culture of Burma and is not found in similar structures in South India.

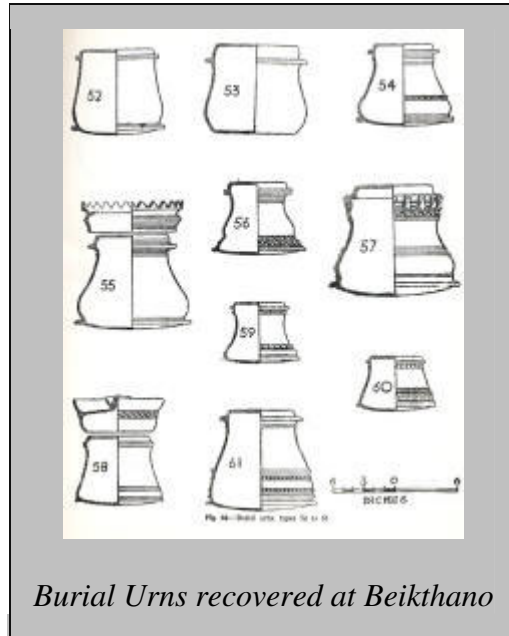
d. Beikthano: Sculpture

A distinct curiosity of this site is the lack of any evidence for Buddhist images, although they have been found at other Pyu city sites such as Halin and particularly Srikshetra. One proposal to explain this curiosity has been that it is an indication that a type of

aniconic Buddhism that does not employ images was practiced here and that the practice was similar to that of the Aparaseliya and Mahisasaka sects of South India that do not use images. On the other hand, all evidence of images may have vanished if they were purposely and completely destroyed and/or transported elsewhere.

e. Beikthano: Other arts

i. Beikthano: Burial Urns



A wide variety of ceramic burial urns were discovered at Beikthano. Almost all consist of a container base with a cover, though they vary considerably in shape from spherical to water pot with neck, to cylindrical with straight sides, to globularly cylindrical. Surface ornamentation also varies greatly from resolutely plain to elaborate sgraffito and applique patterns. Most were found inside or just outside the various structures with calcinated bones and ashes inside.

The burial urns found at Beikthano in some considerable abundance reveal definite cultural links between Beikthano and the later Pyu sites of Halin and Srikshetra. A great number of urns have been unearthed at Srikshetra that show a similar pattern in their contents and their manner of burial, however they are far less ornate in their decoration than many of the urns at Beikthano. Although few urns have been found at Halin, their tall, perpendicular sides are also quite similar to some of the urns found at Beikthano.

Since the burial urns - and rarely, complete human skeletons- were found buried in groups along the outer base of the stupa-like buildings, the urns must then have been used for secondary burials. This practice necessitates having a place to store the cremated remains of several individuals until a sufficient number of them are accumulated for a group interment. Therefore, before the final burial could take place these funeral urns

appear to have been stored in religious buildings as a part of sepulchral rites observed by the inhabitants of the Beikthano. Also, large quantities of pottery of various types and calcified bones and skulls were found within one of the structures unearthed at the site which may be further evidence that it was used as a storage facility or sepulchre for the cremated bodies awaiting burial.

ii. Beikthano: Coins

Limited numbers of Pyu coins - typically marked with symbols but without inscribed words - were found at Bseikthano. The coins that have come to light include types found at the later Pyu sites of Halin and Srikshetra and thus establish an important cultural link between these Pyu sites.

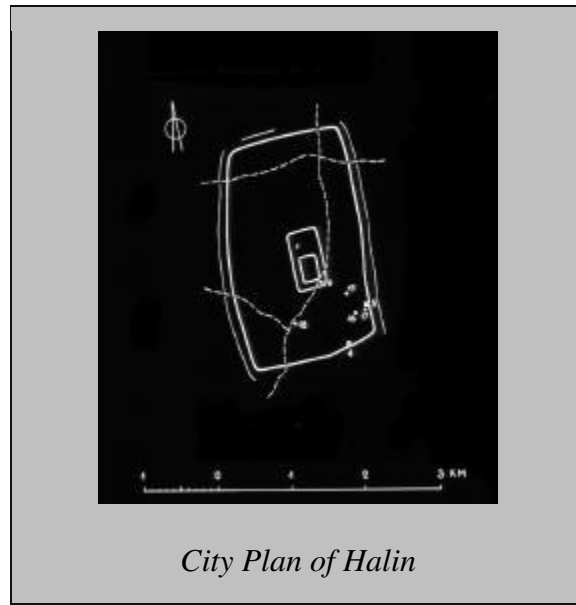
3. The Pyu City of Halin 2nd –6th AD

a. Halin: Introduction, General History

Halin, a Pyu city in northern Burma, is located north of Mandalay about 12 miles southeast of Shwebo and seems to have flourished from the 2nd to the 6th century AD. Preliminary excavations were carried out in 1904-5, in 1929-30 and again from 1963 to 1967. Although these excavations yielded many small finds including burial urns, beads, shards, coins, engraved gems, and metal implements as well as a few inscribed lines written in Pyu, little architectural evidence other than the bases of square or rectangular brick buildings were found. Even so, it is evident that the remains at Halin are characteristically Pyu. That is with the exception that no round stupas, large stone or metal images, nor clay votive tablets were found, such as appear in some abundance at Srikshetra. A practice prevalent at Halin that differs from Beikthano was the burial of non-cremated human remains along with the funerary urns. The attack on Halin in 832 AD by the Nan-chao of Yunnan, China, appears to have been a devastating blow since according to the Chinese records the entire population was carried off into slavery and after this date mention of the Pyu is very rare.

b. Halin: City Plan

Of rounded rectangular shape, the brick-walled and moated city is roughly two miles long and one mile wide. At present, the walls of the city have crumbled almost to ground level. Most of the structures themselves were below ground level and had to be completely uncovered through excavation. Traces of the moat are seen on all sides except the south. Three of the original twelve gateways were uncovered. The brick city walls curve inwards at the onset of each entrance gateway and thus create a protected passageway into the interior of the city. A rectangular shaped outer wall with rounded corners was also delineated that is similar to the city plan of Beikthano.



c. Halin: Architecture

The structures within the walls consist of square or rectangular buildings that in several instances have a quadrangular projection from one side. Earthen funerary urns were found buried both within and outside these structures. Since these buildings reveal no evidence of a religious purpose, they are thought to have been used solely to house funerary urns. At a site situated near the “palace” a large rectangular hall made of brick, possibly serving as an assembly hall was exposed. The charred remains of 84 wooden pillars in four ranks are evidence of how the roof or superstructure was originally held in place. Charred remains were also found of the wooden gates that once stood at the entryways to the city. An analysis of charcoal specimens from this structure thought to be an assembly hall has produced a date of 6th century AD. Charcoal from two of the wooden gates indicate a date to the 2nd or 3rd century AD.

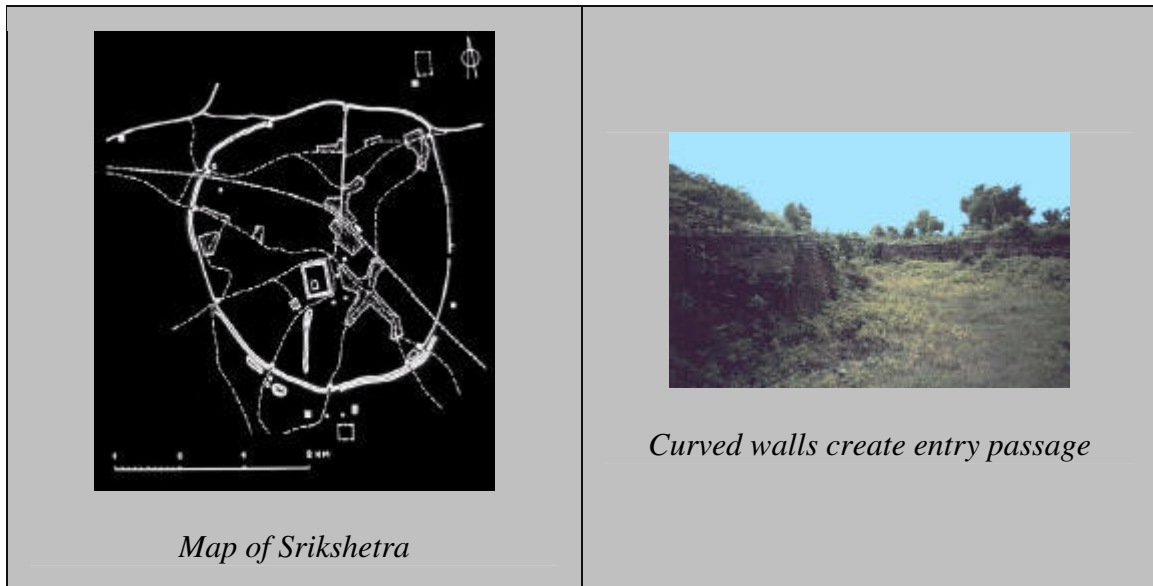
d. Halin: Other Arts

Although no Buddha images or clay votive tablets were discovered, Halin has produced a rich trove of small artifacts. Objects such as decorated sherds and beads of semiprecious stones, a few gold rings, two gold pendants, two gold beads, one round and one barrel-shaped, and several tiny disc beads of gold were found at different ritual structures. Iron nails, knife blades, arrowheads and sockets for doors were recovered in abundance. Of particular interest is a weapon called a caltrop made of four, sharp, connected spikes that was used to impede the progress of cavalry and foot soldiers. Among the domestic objects recovered were three hand-mirrors made of bronze. Other finds, often by villagers, consist of gold, silver, and bronze objects or ornaments but these have frequently been melted down for the value of their metal or sold. Of particular interest are a number of Pyu coins similar to those found at Srikshestra. The only difference between them is that the symbol of the rising sun seen on the Halin coins is replaced by the throne (bhadrapitha) emblem as seen on the coins from Srikshestra. An unusual coin

type found at Halin and rarely seen at Skrikshetra has a conch within the door-like Srivatsa symbol. Also found were several stone slabs that unfortunately bear only partially legible inscriptions. Of those that can be translated, at least in part, the earliest is thought to be an epitaph marking the site of the tomb of one Honorable Ru-ba while another gives the name of a queen, Sri Jatrajiku.

4. The Pyu City State of Srikshetra (Thirikhittaya)

a. Srikshetra: Introduction



The largest and most important of all the Pyu capital cities, Srikshetra, is located approximately five miles southeast of the modern city of Prome, 180 miles northwest of Rangoon, and a few miles inland from the left bank of the Irrawaddy. The site of Srikshetra is known by several names: Thayekhittaya, Hmawza, and Pyi in Burmese and as Old Prome in many English publications. This ancient capital is thought to have reached its height from the 5th through early 9th centuries, although Pyu culture had been developing for centuries elsewhere in Burma.

The culture of the people who once inhabited this great city can be ascertained through the study of architectural, sculptural, epigraphic, and artistic remains, which are relatively abundant when compared to other Pyu sites. Unfortunately, due to the merging of Pyu and Burmese culture, the Pyu language ceased to be used as early as the 13th century. Consequently, it has not been possible to decipher a great number of the inscriptions written in Pyu. The monuments, primarily religious, reveal a close affiliation and communication with India, but as we have seen in other Pyu sites, very few artifacts are identical copies of an Indian form or concept - slight to major changes set these artifacts apart from their Indian prototypes.

It is unknown precisely when and how Srikshetra, a very prosperous city, declined. It is

thought that as the Pyus were gradually absorbed by the Burmans as Pagan grew in importance so that by the late 11th century Pagan had become the undisputed capitol of a unified Burma including the formerly Pyu territories.

b. Inscriptions

The earliest known examples of writing in Burma were found at Srikshetra and employ an alphabet that is derived from those used in South India. Two inscribed gold plates and a manuscript inscribed on twenty gold leaves were found in the Bawbawgyi stupa that have been dated to the second half of the 5th century. A stone slab bearing a Pali inscription recites in verse excerpts from Buddhist texts (the Mangala Sutta, the Ratna Sutta, and the Mora Sutta) and can be dated epigraphically to the 6th or 7th century. Numerous inscribed votive tablets of clay depicting figures of the Buddha have been uncovered. Interestingly, almost all the inscribed materials relate to Theravada Buddhism, although there are images extant from other Buddhist sects as well as other religions.

c. Srikshetra: City Plan

Srikshetra's city plan, unlike that of Beikthano and Halin, is more circular or oval in shape. The city wall of well-fired bricks is surrounded by a moat. The circumference of the wall is eight and one half miles and in many sections, where the wall remains intact, rises as high as fifteen feet. At each of the entrances or gateways into the city, the wall curves inward, as at Beikthano and Halin, to form long corridors on either side of the entrance passages. Also, the palace site is located in the center of the city enclosure, as found elsewhere; is rectangular in shape and measures 1,700 feet to 1,125 feet. The northern half of the city is a low plain dominated by rice fields but rises gradually to the south. Chinese records state that commoners lived and farmed their fields within the great expanse within the city walls. This report also states that the prosperity of the city is evidenced by more than a hundred Buddhist monasteries, decorated with gold and silver, and painted many colors that are hung with embroidered cloth.

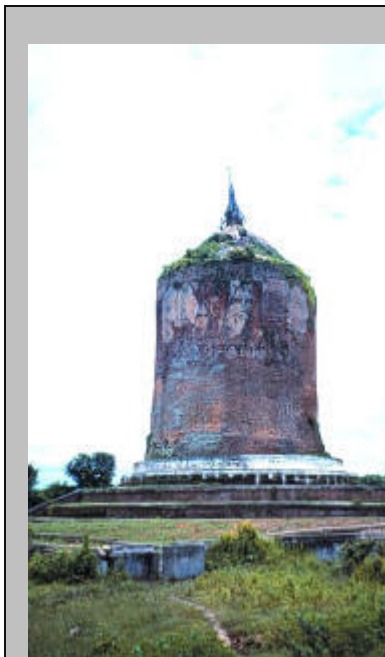
A 19th century Burmese Chronicle, "The Glass Palace Chronicle" was written at the order of the Burmese king and attempts to fit Srikshetra into the Hindu-Buddhist ideal of the perfect royal Capitol City. This model is based on Sudarsana, the heavenly city of Indra (shaka: Burmese) which is located on the peak of Mount Meru at the center of the universe. The palace of Indra is at the center of the city with the palaces of the lesser 32 gods arranged around it. In both Hindu and Buddhist thought, a city so arranged becomes a representation of the "Heaven of the Thirty-Three Gods (Pali:Tavatimsa). The chronicle claims that Srikshetra had all the things needed for such a city: 32 main gates and 32 small gates, moats, ditches, four-cornered towers with graduated roofs over the gates, turrets along the walls and so forth. In later Burmese capitals, the gates of the city represented, and were often named after, the chief vassals or provincial governors of the realm, with the king at the center corresponding to the celestial god Indra. The adoption of these beliefs and their use in city planning are a good example of how attractive Hindu-Buddhist concepts were at providing Southeast Asians with a respected place in

the cosmos and also a place in the international Asian world.

d. Srikshetra: Architecture

Although a number of structures still exist at Srikshetra such as temples, and stupas, there is a growing consensus among scholars that only the stupas date to the Pyu period. The temples were most likely constructed during the Pagan period; many for the re-installation of older Pyu images.

At Srikshetra, the ancient ruins are concentrated in the elevated southern half of the city and also outside the fortress-like walls, while burial mounds containing urns were found scattered throughout the area. The three most salient monuments today are all stupas and are found outside of the city wall: the Bawbawgyi to the south, the Pyagyi to the northwest, and the Pyama to the north. The Bawbawgyi, the tallest of the stupas is 153 feet high and consists of a massive cylindrical column that rests on a base of five concentric terraces. The upper portions of the main cylinder have fallen away over time and the truncated form has been fitted with a tower that resembles the Burmese crown or hti (hti: umbrella). It is therefore unknown what originally crowned this monument, as well as the other stupas at the site. However, this cylindrical stupa form that tapers towards the top is peculiar to Burma and to Pyu culture and is believed to represent a closed lotus bud. This form is more completely retained by the two other important stupas at the site, the Pyama and Pyagyi. The stupa in the form of a lotus bud can be seen in its entirety on many of the numerous votive tablets found at the site.



Bawbawgyi



*Passage inside
Bawbawgyi*



*Votive tablet with "lotus
bud" stupas*

 <p data-bbox="272 821 586 894"><i>Votive tablet with "lotus bud" stupas</i></p>	 <p data-bbox="667 720 954 793"><i>Pyagyi Stupa, general view</i></p>	 <p data-bbox="1040 879 1341 953"><i>Pyagyi Stupa, tapering side</i></p>
 <p data-bbox="285 1446 574 1520"><i>Pyama Stupa, general view</i></p>		

The Bawbawgyi is not an entirely solid structure as it may appear at first sight. Indeed, the cylindrical body is hollow up to about two-thirds of its height and in this regard, differs from most stupas in Burma that are typically solid and cannot be entered. There is an opening at the base and another aperture high up in the opposite wall. Inside the stupa was found a small ceramic vase containing excerpts from Buddhist manuscripts that were written in Pali (=sacred language of Buddhism) on twenty sheets of gold and silver. The script used in writing these passages has been dated to the mid 5th to mid 6th century AD, which dates the structure to well within the Pyu period. Also, clay votive plaques

inscribed with the name of the first great king of Pagan, King Anawratha, were found inside the stupa in an especially created chamber. This too is a clear indication that the structure predates the Pagan Period and is therefore no doubt Pyu. King Anawratha's continued reverence for the Bawbawgyi is bitter-sweet, however, in that when the votive tablets were placed inside, the relics contained in the stupa were evidently looted to be taken away to Pagan to be re-enshrined there.

The stupas at Srikshetra lack the decorative architectural moldings and motifs that are found on modern stupas which some scholars see as an indication of their antiquity. However, others believe the decorative elements were originally created in plaster and they fell away long ago.

Notable in architectural features although less in height than the above mentioned stupas are three temples, the Bebe, the Lemyethna, and the East Zegu. The Bebe and the Lemyethna are situated outside of the surrounding walls while the East Zegu is located inside the perimeter of the city. The Bebe temple, made of brick, has a small square sanctuary with a porch facing east. On top of the hollow base are three receding terraces on which stands a plain cylindrical pinnacle with a rounded top. The sidewalls have attached columns with false arched doorways on the exterior and arched niches inside. A sculptured stone slab bearing a seated Buddha flanked by a disciple on either side rests against the west wall. The Lemyethna is a small square temple with four entrances. The core is solid and is surrounded by a narrow corridor and four porches. Originally, each side had a stone slab bearing a seated Buddha image. It has a terraced roof but the pinnacle no longer exists.

Both the Bebe and the Lemyethna were made using the same building techniques and ornamental forms that were used later in Pagan buildings. The apparent re-installation of several Pyu images within these temples indicates that they are obviously later constructions, thus later Pagan Period creations.



Pointed arch and form of door-surround like those found on temples at Pagan

Therefore, some scholars have considered the small temples at Srikshetra to be the prototypes for the much larger temples at Pagan. Most scholars now accept that these temples are provincial constructions dating to the Pagan Period and are not Pyu at all.

e. Srikshetra: Sculpture

Srikshetra, in comparison to other Pyu sites, is unusual because of the greater number as well as complexity of the images and artifacts that have come to light. The diversity is found not only in subject matter but in iconography as well. Also, objects were created by a variety of techniques and media: for example, carved stone, cast bronze, gilded repousse silver, beaten and repousse gold, inscribed copper, engraved gems, molded and inscribed clay. Consequently, the artistic diversity of the Pyu Period is scarcely rivaled by later periods in Burmese history where the number of objects available for study is vastly larger. A number of Pyu art objects and artifacts are unique or occur only during this Period. In contrast, objects from later periods are often repetitious so that by the nineteenth century, Buddha images are almost always shown in a single iconographic mode, that of “earth touching” or “calling the earth to witness”.

The sculpture from Srikshetra can be divided into categories according to religious affiliation although the characteristics of some objects such as Pyu coins may be equivocal. The sculpture will be discussed here according to religion: Theravada Buddhist, Mahayanna Buddhist, Hindu, Animist and Secular.

i. Theravada Buddhist Sculpture at Srikshetra

Most images of the Buddha are carved in high relief with a considerable stele backing. Several sets of these monumental images have been found arranged so that two triads face one another. This practice occurs only during the Pyu Period and may harken back to the megaliths of a much earlier time.

A number of Buddha images were found within or outside the ancient city. A great number of clay votive tablets have come to light as well as several bronze molds that were used to stamp them out. These tablets were placed in the foundation and deposit boxes of stupas and temples during construction as a means to increase their sanctity as well as the spiritual merit of the donor. An example of this practice is the placement by King Anawratha of votive tablets within the Bawbawgyi stupa; each displays fifty small images of the Buddha.

Individual images at Srikshetra represent a number of events in Gautama Buddha's life: The Birth, The Prince contemplating the Mysteries of Life, Meditation, one of the most elaborate presentations of the First Sermon to be found in Burma, Teaching with both hands in vitarka mudra, the Enlightenment using both right and left hands for earth touching, the earliest representation of the earth goddess in Burma in which she is shown with two long tresses of hair, the Miracle of Double Appearances, Overcoming the Nalagiri Elephant and Holding the alms bowl. In later presentations these events are often assigned much less importance and appear, if at all, within a small frame in a wall painting or as a background embellishment to the Buddha's enlightenment.



Gautama Buddha preaching the First Sermon



Four earth touching Buddhas, terra cotta

There are several remarkable depictions of the four Buddhas of the past on silver repousse reliquaries. There are also representations of a fifth Buddha, Maitreya, the Buddha of the Future.



Three of the identical five Buddhas of the past, stone slab from Khin Ba's mound

Several bronze images believed to depict Maitreya have come to light, although they may be the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara without his usual identifying marks. However, one of these curious images has the name Maitreya (incorrectly?) written on its base. The interest in Maitreya, the Buddha as well as the Bodhisattva of the Future (like Gautama Buddha, he is both a Theravada and Mahayana deity), arises from a belief that he will return to save the world. This concern with Maitreya as a savior figure continues during the Pagan Period where it is an inspiration for creating votive plaques and for the creation of one of the world's rare building types: pentagonal temples that have a shrine for each of the four Buddhas of the Past as well as one for Maitreya.

Most sculptures at Srikshetra are typically in high relief with a heavy stele backing, although some large single sculptures in the round have been discovered. One such sculpture from the Kan-wet-khaung-gon mound is made of stone and depicts the Buddha in a seated meditation posture with two hands placed on his lap. This is a particularly important image, not only because it is free standing but because it can be dated to the late 7th century by the bilingual inscription on its base. The inscription is fortunately not only in Pyu but Sanskrit as well, the script of which can be dated. This image is then one of the few dated benchmarks that can be used to establish a developmental chronology for Pyu sculpture.

Of particular interest is a cylindrical gilded silver casket found in the relic chamber of the Khin Ba mound. In a style derived from the North Indian Gupta style, it is embossed with the last four Buddhas of the present world cycle seated in the earth-touching posture with a standing disciple between each of them. The casket has a flat lid. A banyan tree rises from its center that was once adorned with metal twigs and leaves. Inscribed around the rim of the lid is a Pyu-Pali inscription in South Indian characters. The inscription identifies each Buddha by name as well as their disciples; it also records two names, probably of donors. A smaller reliquary casket shaped like a cube is without a lid or base and has a meditating Buddha seated on each face. Both reliquaries are executed in a precise and beautiful repousse technique.

It is not possible to give a detailed description of the Pyu style of image because so many different styles co-existed. Indeed, images that turn up and don't fit any of the known Burmese styles, are frequently, and often inaccurately, dubbed "Pyu".

ii. Mahayanist Sculpture

A number of Mahayanist images appear in the assemblage of sculpture from Srikshetra: a beautiful Avalokiteshvara, the Maitreyas mentioned previously, and several bodhisattvas as well as female deities that at present have not been more precisely identified.

iii. Hindu Sculpture

The Hindu images that have come to light are almost all associated with the god Vishnu, the second member of the supreme Hindu triad, the king of the gods, and the model for kings on earth. He is easily identified by his major attributes the club-scepter and discus. Examples of him standing on the shoulders of his winged mount, Garuda, with a female goddess have been uncovered. Several representations of Vishnu reclining on Ananta, his loyal serpent-protector have been found not only at Srikshetra but in the Mon countries as well. A truly extraordinary image, long identified as a guardian figure or devarapala has recently been identified as a standing Garuda, - perhaps with Tantric associations.

Several secular figures have also come to light. An exceptionally fine collection of bronze figures was discovered in an excavation near the Pyama stupa. Five bronze Buddhas along with five animated figures that together constitute a wandering troupe of entertainers: a flute player, a drummer, a cymbalist, and a dancer, along with what seem to be a dwarf clown carrying a sack. All of the figures in the troupe are beautifully cast although they are all less than four and one half inches tall.

A truly enigmatic two-faced stele was discovered that is thought to depict a warrior king accompanied by his two lieutenants. On the reverse, two women - the king's wives? - hold an empty throne awaiting the king's arrival. If the recent identification is correct, it is a representation unique within the history of Burmese art.

Also of interest is an ornately molded bronze bell that measures eleven inches in height and is decorated with two emblems of srivatsa, a symbol that frequently appears on Pyu coins.

f. Srikshetra: other arts

Small objects and statuettes made of gold, silver, and copper have also been found at Srikshetra. Such objects include miniature stupas of silver, gold and silver caskets, models of boats, ducks, deer, butterflies, lotus flowers, gold and silver rings, necklace of elephants made of jade, and a variety of beads made of carnelian, amethyst, crystal, quartz, agate, and glass.

i. Animist Arts

Earthenware funerary urns of varying shapes and sizes were found while excavating mounds scattered throughout the city and its environs. Most of the urns contain calcified bones mixed with ashes and loose earth. The few copper and stone urns that have been found were probably used for the burials of royalty. This was almost certainly the case because the four large stone urns that were discovered near the Payagyi pagoda each bear a brief epitaph recording the names of royalty and their dates.





The use of urns, both stone and ceramic, for secondary burial is a widespread trait in early Southeast Asia. Their use during the Pyu Period is probably the continuation of an earlier megalithic practice.

E. Pyu City States: Conclusion

What little is known concerning the decline of the Pyus comes only from Chinese sources which claim that invasions in the ninth century from Yunnan province in China occupied areas that had once belonged to the Pyus. One Chinese chronicle refers to the defeat of the Pyus and the capture of three thousand residents from what was probably Halin. However, there are no firm indications at Srikshetra or at any other Pyu site that suggests a violent overthrow. These incursions are thought to have weakened the Pyu State so that by the ninth century the Burmese were able to move down into what had been Pyu territory and settle in Kyaukse and the Pagan region. The Pyus left their mark on the Pagan State; in as much as the site of Srikshetra was incorporated into the state ideology. The first kings at Pagan traced their mythical genealogy back to the kings of Srikshetra, a continuity in political life that is not found elsewhere in Southeast Asia. On balance, however, a considerable gap exists between the fall of the Pyus in the ninth and the earliest datable Pagan shines to the 11th for the Pyus to have played an important part in creating the artistic and cultural life of Pagan.

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