

Unexplored historical sites in Monland

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The area that today is southern Burma was once part of the old Mon kingdom known as Thaton or Sudhammavati, Sadhuim in Mon. In other sources, the area is called Suwannabhumi, the 'Golden Land' The legendary beginnings of Thaton date



to the 6th or 7th centuries. At the same time, another Mon kingdom, Dvāravatī, flourished in what later became the central plains of Thailand. According to Chinese sources, the western border of To-lo-ho (one of many Chinese corruptions of Dvāravatī) in the 7th century was the ocean (Chiu-t'ang-shu, the 'Old T'ang History'). This would mean that Dvāravatī at that time reached the Gulf

of Martaban, i.e. the location of the kingdom of Thaton. In old Mon legends, Thaton is in fact sometimes called 'Dvāravatī'.

“Afterwards the Lord travelled the Jambudipa for eight years. Then the Mahāthera Gavampati invited the Lord to the country Karannaka, the city of Sadhuim, or Sudhammavati. The son of the hermit of Grang Nak Mountain, Suriyakummā, ruled the country as king Suriyarājā. The king had a son called Sirimāsoka who was ruling the land at that time. The Lord of the Light came from the city of Mitthila with a retinue of twenty thousand followers. Staying in the sky he came flying to Dassanagiri Mountain. From the top of Dassanagiri Mountain he came to the land Dvāravatī. When King Siridhammāsoka and his ministers saw the Omniscient One, they were very pleased and with his family and dependents the king entered the monkhood. It was not long before they attained the stage of an arahata, an Enlightened One. At that place the Omniscient One imprinted a footprint. Tanangsri, Tenasserim, the place is called. When the Omniscient One had departed from Dvāravatī, the king built a golden image, the ministers built silver images and the people built brass images and enshrined them. From the land Dvāravatī the Omniscient went on to the land Kamboja. The king Sumanarājā together with his ministers saw the Omniscient One and were very pleased. Together with their families and dependents they entered the monkhood. It was not long before they attained the stage of an arahata.”



(‘Mahathera Gavampati invites the Lord Buddha’ from ‘History of the Monuments’, MCL Sanghlaburi, 2000)

In a paper presented at the International Conference on Text and Context in Rangoon in 2001 titled “The Legend that was Lower Burma”, Michael Aung Thwin, a respected authority on Burmese history, claims that there existed no organized polity or kingdom in what today is lower Burma before the 11th century.

“[I]f a kingdom or polity existed in Lower Burma earlier than the rise of and development of Pagan, there should be some archaeological evidence of it, such as early human remains, urban sites, agricultural and/or commercial vestiges, and in general, the infra-structure of a state or polity - such as cities, towns and villages - that should have made up that state or polity.”(p.2) “In other words, it



was only after Pagan had conquered Lower Burma in the mid 11th century that the first dated Mon writing of Lower Burma, using the Burma script, appears in Kyansittha’s Thaton inscription of 1098. [...] Had the Mon used the Burma script prior to the late 11th century or the Dvaravati script prior to their use of the Burma script, surely there would have been some evidence of it, especially in the nearly 1200 years that

they were supposed to have inhabited Lower Burma.” (p.10)

In the Bulletin of the Burma Historical Commission, Vol. II, 1961, G.H. Luce states that

“The main body of Old Mon inscriptions, 11th-12th century, comes from Burma. The earliest, not yet edited in print (Inscriptions of Burma, Potrfolio IV, Plates 358-360) come from Thaton, and Kawgun Cave on the Salween 30 miles north of Maulmein. They date probably from the middle of the 11th century, shortly before Anuruddha’s capture of Thaton (c. 1057 A.D.). One, at least, of the inscriptions is partly written in high-flown poetical style” (p.308)

and

“The beautiful script of the North Siam Haripuñjaya inscriptions clearly derives in the main from that of 11th to 12th century Burma. But that of Burma probably derives in turn from that of 7th century Dvaravati.”(p.309)



There obviously has been Mon writing in use in pre-Pagan times in lower Burma. The fact that at least one of the inscriptions discovered so far is written in “high-flown poetical style” shows that the Mon language had developed to some extent by the 11th century and was not a newly written language, trying to adapt

the “Burma script”. Unfortunately archaeological excavations in Burma have concentrated on the upper part of the country, with hardly any serious work being done in Monland. The few excavations conducted in lower Burma actually revealed not only foundations of old monuments, but also reliefs that are similar in style and age to reliefs found at Dvāravatī sites in Thailand dated to the 9th century. (s. E. Guillon, 1999, *The Mons*, Siam Society, Bangkok: p.105). More excavations will certainly reveal more artefacts and inscriptions.



While extensive archaeological research and excavations in Monland are still to be done, many legends of old kingdoms (or probably rather fiefdoms) have survived. Legends, to be sure, that are the product of human imagination, but there is some truth in every legend, and some of the places mentioned are still here to be seen today.

One such legend is the “Story of Saṅgadā”, conserved on palm leaf manuscripts and published in print in 1999. The story begins with the following verses:

“Having paid homage to the merit of the Triple Gem indeed, I will set about with firm mind to arrange the words and phrases, according to the rules of verse and the numbering of poetry. There is a story told in the land of Monya, in the land of Hamsavatī, which I want to be remembered. The book of Saṅgadā it is called. This book was composed once before, but much time has since elapsed and the verses have become obscure. The verses and the letters have lost their force. The words fell apart, losing their power. I therefore want to compose the book again, write the verses anew, and put them together in order. Set up your mind; do not let your thoughts go astray. Listen to what I have to tell, do not let your hearts tremble and wander. There was a big city, prosperous and noble, Welukacca, the Bamboo grove, was its proper name. Woodcarvings adorned the houses; the windows were wrought with golden patterns. The palace was decorated with gemstones and the tiered roof most aptly crowned the building. In shiny caves, light glowed and long pavilions were built of gold. White elephants as bright as lightening were kept. Buildings were close together, well arranged. Light-footed fast horses surrounded the place orderly. People of different races and colors lived together in harmony on all sides of the city. Many languages could be heard, different tongues; Haw Chinese were everywhere, as well as Thai, Burmese, Indians, Mon and Parsees. All languages could be heard at the water wells. The city walls and towers were well stocked with carts at all places. The moats and the city walls were like offering altars for the gods, like the Tāvatiṃsa Heaven of Lord Indra, the Chief of Gods. The place was prosperous beyond account, the highest wonder to be seen.”

According to folk legends, the city of Saṅgadā was located near the village of Ko’ Dot, some 80 miles south of Moulmein. A temple and a small pagoda stand today

were the old palace is believed to have been, and remains of city walls are hidden under dense undergrowth. A stone inscription in front of the pagoda is of newer date, being written in modern Mon. There is no indication in the legend as to the date of the story, nor have any excavations been made at the site.

“The Struggle of Razadarit” as edited by Nai Pan Hla in 1958, the most famous historical account of the Mon, starts with the story of Magadū, the legendary king of Martaban in the 13th century. The beginning of the account in its printed Mon version is rather atypical, as there is no invocation as is usual in classical Mon books. It is obvious that Nai Pan Hla’s Razadarit (Nai Pan Hla’s spelling is a Pali-



Burmese hybrid; more correct would be Rājādhirāj) is part of a more complete historical work, as collected and edited in the Pak Lat chronicles (Phrapradaeng, 1910) and republished as Rājawaṃsakathā in 1997 in Sangkhlaburi, Thailand.



“That demon, which was wandering in the cycles of life, died and was born, died again and was born again uncountable times, was born in human form in the city of Wān. One day his parents went out to work the fields. They put their son under a big straw hat (“gadū”) by a tree. [...] Therefore his parents called him Magadū.” (p.1)

When Magadū grows up he takes over his father’s profession as travelling merchant, selling his goods in the Thai city Sukhothai. Magadū settles in Sukhothai and through his efforts he gains the high position of elephant master. After having an affair with the king’s daughter, Me Nang Soy Da, Magadū flees Sukhothai and returns to his native Wān.



“Magadū returned to his native village and stayed with his parents and many close friends as before. The thirty merchants he had taken to Sukhothai came back to be his servants again. Because Magadū lived at that village, it was called Magadū.” (p.5)

Magadū later conquers Martaban and installs himself as king there.

“1825 years after the Omniscient One had passed into Nibbana, in the year 643 of the common era

(A.D. 1282), Magadū gained victory over Alimamang and got the city of Martaban. He had a palace built in the centre of the city.” (p.7)

The king of Sukhothai gives him the (Thai) royal name Phra Cao Fah Rua, which in Mon is corrupted to Warero.



The native town of Warero is Wān, which is believed to be in the vicinity of Martaban. Some 40 miles to the south of Martaban, near the modern town of Thanbyuzayat, there is an unexplored historical site known locally as Wakharu. ‘Wā’ (pronunciation *wèə*) in Mon means ‘field’, ‘kharū’ (*hərao*) is a kind of plant that grows in salt water (male *Olax scandens Roxburgh*), but popular history

links the site to Magadū/Warero. Colloquially, the village and historical site are also known as Magadū.

No written records have been found so far, and excavations are restricted to a five-metre ditch dug recently by treasure hunters. The palm leaf records have allegedly been taken away by the Burmese, although no one remembers when. The area is a



clearly distinguished open meadow, surrounded by an earthen wall, now covered with trees and bushes. The round/oval layout of the area reminds one of Dvāravati sites in Thailand. An old, stone enforced well is still in use by the monks of the new temple at the edge of the old palace ground. Round holes in the laterite ground look like old pillar bases, although nothing remains of the pillars themselves. Square depressions in the even ground look like ancient ponds. As long as no excavations



are undertaken onsite, it is impossible to tell the date and history of the Wakharu historical site. A direct connection with Warero is unlikely, given the distance to Martaban. The trade route from Martaban to Sukhothai was rather through Myawadi-Maesot straight east from Martaban.

The Thanbyuzayat area was and still is of importance as starting point of the road to Siam/Thailand through the Three Pagoda Pass.

Many more sites remain undiscovered in Monland, waiting for serious archaeological and historical exploration and research. The answers to many questions about old Thaton and its relation to Dvaravati are probably still buried in the ground of Monland.