

The age of the Shway Dagon pagoda (3rd edition)¹

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The Shway Dagon inscription in Mon written in the late 15th century says that the two merchants Tapussa and Bhallika of Asitañjananāguir in the Mon kingdom went on a trading mission to India. They met the Buddha, who had just attained enlightenment at the *rājāyatana*. After eating the food the two brothers offered the Buddha taught them the law and gave them a few of his hairs. Tapussa brought the hairs back to Asitañjananāguir, and on the Tambagutta hill built the *cetiya-ghara* enshrining the hairs.² What this inscription means is that the Pagoda was built in the late 6th century B.C.³ The task of this paper is to examine this thesis.

The meeting of the Buddha and the two merchants can be read in the *khandhaka* section of the *Vinaya pitaka*.⁴ The gift of hairs, however, is not mentioned in any of the three *pitaka*. The gift is first mentioned in the *athakathā* i.e. commentaries written after the 5th century. Even then the *athakathā* do not say that the two merchants were from the Mon kingdom. What is more interesting is that the Buddha had not decided to propagate his philosophy until he got back to the banyan tree from the *rājāyatana*.⁵ The first people who had the chance to listen to the Buddha's philosophy were the five *vaggi*.⁶ The primitive Buddhism is an impersonal way of life. And as such the Buddha would never be personal and vain enough to make a gift of hairs to be worshipped.

In Thaton, Prome and Pagan there are many stone and terracotta plaques, dating from the 5th to 13th century, depicting the life and legend of the Buddha. On many a plaque we can see the meeting of the Buddha and the two merchants. The gift of hairs, however, is not portrayed. This particular scene is not found also among the wall paintings of the Pagan and early Ava periods. From such archaeological evidence it is obvious that various races of Burma at different times either did not know the legend of the gift of hairs or they did not accept it.

The primitive Buddhism is an impersonal way of life. And as such the Buddha would never be personal and vain enough to make a gift of his hairs to be worshipped. We must therefore reject the legend of gift on the textual and archaeological grounds, and also in consideration of the Buddha's temperament.

1 Read to the Kanthasanelai Group on 11 II 68, with U Tin Lwin, Head of the Dept of Pali, Rangoon University, in the chair. I am indebted to H. L. Shorto, Esq., Reader in Mon in the University of London, for researches in Mon.

2 BLAGDEN, C.O., in *Epigraphia Birmanica* IV I, 1936, 36, 38–39.

3 Unless it is indicated by B.C., it will always mean A.D.

4 OLDENBERG, H. & RHYS DAVIDS, TW, (ed.), *Vinaya Texts* III, 1885, 82.

5 *ibid.* 84.

6 *ibid.* 93.

What we must now deliberate is when was the Pagoda built. Before we do that we must investigate when Buddhism came to Burma. Reading through the legends of the innumerable pagodas one is deluged with the tales of the visits by the Buddha and the personal gifts made by him. According to the *Digha nikāya* and *Majjhima nikāya* in the *Sutta pitaka*, the Buddha's movements were confined to the states in Añiga, Videna, Magadha and Kosala in northern India.⁷ We must therefore throw out the claim that Buddhism came to Burma during the very lifetime of the Buddha.

The *Mahāvamsa* says that Aśoka sent two monks – Sona and Uttara to Suvañṇabhūmi to propagate Buddhism.⁸ Aśoka ruled in the 3rd century B.C. and this section of the *Mahāvamsa* was said to have been written in the 5th/6th century. There is a gap of 700 to 800 years. The *Kalyāṇī* Mon inscription of the late 15th century echoes this statement and claims that Suvañṇabhūmi is Thaton.⁹ It cannot definitely be pinpointed that Suvañṇabhūmi is Thaton. It is possible that Arakan, lower Burma, Thailand and the Malay peninsula, together form Suvañṇabhūmi.¹⁰ This thesis is based on the *Sussodājātaka*, *Samkhajātaka* and *Mahājanakajātaka* of the *Mahānidessa*, *Mahāvamsa*, *Sāsanāvamsa* and *Jambūdīpa uḥ-choṅkyamḥ*. The mission to Suvañṇabhūmi is not mentioned in the edicts of Aśoka.¹¹ It may be argued that the missions sent to the Himalayan countries also are not mentioned in these edicts, but they are upheld by the other evidence. According to the *Mahājanakajātaka* there was intercourse between Suvañṇabhūmi and India. To be able to date the said intercourse we must endeavour to ascertain when the *Mahājanakajātaka* was written. Some scenes from the *jataka* are depicted under the title *Janako rājā Sivali devī* on the railings of the Bhārhut stūpa which is usually assigned to the 2nd century B.C. On this archaeological evidence it is positive that the *Mahājanakajātaka* was composed at least by the 2nd century B.C. It follows therefore that the contact between Suvañṇabhūmi occurred at least by the 2nd century B.C. It does not necessarily follow that the first wave of Buddhist movement reached Burma by the 2nd century B.C.

Some circular foundations were unearthed when the first scientific and extensive excavation was undertaken at Peikthano, near Taungdwingyi. They are of great interest to the student of the history of Buddhism in Burma. These foundations very much resemble those of the Safichi and Bhārhut stūpa which are assigned to the 3rd or 2nd century B.C. If the foundations in Peikthano were really of Buddhist nature then Buddhism must have come to Burma quite early. For no Buddha icon has yet been discovered in Peikthano. The Buddha image was manufactured only by the beginning of the Christian era.

7 THAW, Tin Hla, „The coming of Buddhism“, in: *The Rangoon University Buddhist Association Magazine*, 1961–2, 10.

8 GEIGER, W. (ed.), *Mahāvamsa* XII, 1908, 1–8.

9 *Epigraphia Birmanica* III ii, 1928, 185–7.

10 THAW, „A historical geography of maritime Burma“, in: *The Guardian Monthly* XIII, 12, 1966, 32.

11 SIRCAR, D.C., *Inscriptions of Asoka*, 1957, 43–4, 51–5.

By the 3rd century Buddhism had not only come to Burma it was already flourishing. A 3rd century inscription in Nagarjunikoṇḍa, south India, states that Buddhism was flourishing in Cilata.¹² The thesis of S. LEVI and NIHAR RAJAN RAY is that Cilata was Arakan and lower Burma.¹³ The statement in the inscription is supported by the Chinese text *San-tu-fu*, written also in the 3rd century. The *San-tu-fu* says that Buddhism was flourishing in Chin-lin.¹⁴ Paul PELLIOT identifies Chin-lin with Thaton-Martaban-Moulmein area.¹⁵

The above external evidence is well corroborated by the archaeological evidence from Arakan, Irrawady valley, and lower Salween valley. From Arakan many objects, lithic and bronze inscriptions of Buddhist nature were recovered. They belong to the 5th to 10th century. From Halin, near Shwebo, we have a stone sculpture depicting a Buddhist scene. The date of this sculpture is around 5th century. From Prome we have priceless collections of Buddhist icons and literature. There are gold silver leaves with extracts from the three *pitaka* on them. Palaeographically Thiripyanchi MYA dates them to 4th century¹⁶ This is followed by a silver casket with four repoussé Buddhas sitting around it. (It can be seen in the National „Museum“, Rangoon.) Stylistically it belongs to the Amaravati school and of the 4th century. The Pyu inscription is written around the base in 4th/5th century hand. From Rāmaññadesa i.e. lower Burma the earliest finds are three bronze Buddha images from Rangoon, Twante and Thaton.¹⁷

It is therefore beyond a shadow of doubt that Buddhism was already flourishing in various places in Burma by the 3rd century.

Having established that Buddhism was already flourishing in Burma by the 3rd century we must now deliberate when was the Shway Dagon Pagoda built as we set out to do. The earliest document we have about the Shway Dagon is the inscription written in Mon, Burmese and Pāli. The date of the inscription is the late 15th century. They can be seen on the northern side of the eastern entrance. It says that in 1372 King Bañā Ūḥ whose regnal title was *Dhammajetralokyanātharājādhirāt* repaired the Pagoda and raised the height to 66 feet. The following is the relevant extract:

B (23) *tilapuīl cetidhatswokkyaktraymin tapussa bhallika mathapana lar pḍaylatukḍip tmo, tambaguttawwo, //pḍaykā—*

12 VOGEL, J.P., „Prakrit inscriptions from the Buddhist site of Nagarjunikoṇḍa“, in: *Epigraphica Indica* XX, 22.

13 LEVI, S., *Ptolemee le niddesa et la Brhatkatha*, 1925, 23–4. NIHAR RAJAN RAY, *Theravada Buddhism in Burma*, 1946, 15–18.

14 PELLIOT, P., „Le Fou-nan“, in: *Bulletin de l'Ecole Francaise d'Extrême Orient*, III, 266.

15 *ibid.*

16 MYA, „Thiripyanchi“, in: *Report of the Director of the Archaeological Survey, Burma*, 1957–8, 34.

17 THAW, *The Development of the Buddha image in Burma*, (M.A. thesis), University of London, 1963.

B (24) *Iatilanuh tilaciñ batānmaḥimu dhammajetralokyanātharājāḍhirāt mapasmiṅgah//prāsātmadah cetiyagha ragahcadahkle, tuy//daktlun janwotrwon//khāmadakgah dan 40 hat*

B (23) The hair-relic pagoda, built by Tapussa and Bhallika on the Tambagutta hill, was

B (24) repaired by King *Dhammajetralokyanātharājāḍhirāt*. He pulled down the many-tiered-roof of the temple and raised it to the height of 60 feet.¹⁸

According to the above inscription the Pagoda was already standing before Banā Ūḥ repaired it in 1372. Before we proceed further there is one very important point we should bear in mind. That is the architecture of the Pagoda. The architecture of the Pagoda that Bana Ūḥ repaired was not a conical one but a house with walls and roof. This is indicated by the word *cetiyaghara* i.e. temple in the line 24 in Face B. We can see the early specimens of this school of architecture in Prome.

In his *Geographike Syntaxis* PTOLEMY mentioned Rangoon as Tamala. The 13th century Mon inscriptions call it Tamba. Burmese inscriptions of 1400 call it Takun. The 15th century Mon inscriptions call Rangoon Tambagutta and Dgun.¹⁹ It is obvious therefore that Rangoon has been a town of importance since the beginning of Christian era. Prior to the outbreak of the Second World War, the plinth of a pagoda in Tadagalay, north Rangoon, was excavated upon. Along with other artefacts a bronze Buddha image was recovered. Stylistically its date is about the 5th century.²⁰ The same site yielded many Buddhas images of Pagan period. The Botatoung Pagoda by the Rangoon river collapsed during the war. When it was reconstructed it yielded a priceless tablet. On the obverse is a sitting Buddha image and on the reverse is the *yedhamma* verse. The style of the image and the palaeography of the script suggest the piece to be of 7th century.²¹

It may be asked why the Shway Dagon itself suffers from paucity of evidence. The principal culprit was Queen Shinsawbu of the late 15th century. King Sutasomarājāḍhirāt who succeeded Bafīā Ūḥ enlarged the Pagoda again.²² In 1436 due to the severe earthquake the upper half of the Pagoda collapsed, and successive rulers tried to rebuild it.²³ By doing so they dealt a more and more severe blow to the documents of the Pagoda. The final blow was dealt by Queen Shinsawbu whose regnal title was Śrī Tribhūwanādityaprawaradhammajetralokyanāthamahādhammarājāḍhirajadewī. She levelled the entire hill top and made tile-floor all over. Then she enlarged the Pagoda.²⁴

18 *Epigraphia Birmanica* IV i, 41.

19 THAW, *Guardian* etc., op.cit., 33.

20 THAW, *M.A. thesis*, op.cit., 26.

21 THAW, *thesis*, op.cit., 26.

22 *Epigraphia Birmanica* IV i, 41.

23 *ibid.*

24 *ibid.*

As mentioned above the original architecture of the Pagoda was that of a temple and not of a conical shape. This style was fashionable from the 5th to 15th century. And as said above the early types of the 5th century can be seen in Prome. According to the available archaeological evidence we have noted that Buddhism came to Rangoon not later than the 5th century. In and around Rangoon the Shway Dagon hill is the most likely place to build the first religious edifice.

In conclusion the age of the Pagoda should be estimated. We have seen that Rangoon was a human habitat since the beginning of the Christian era. We have also seen that Buddhism was already flourishing in Burma by the 3rd century. Furthermore we have seen that Buddhism was well rooted in Rangoon by the 5th century. The architecture of the original pagoda also suggests that it was akin to those of old Prome. In due consideration of these facts it is humbly suggested that the Shway Dagon was already standing by the 5th century.