

TEXTS AND IMAGES
Glimpses of Myanmar History



Tun Aung Chain

SEAMEO Regional Centre for History and Tradition

CONTENTS

The Value of Myanmar Traditional Texts	1
The Rājakumār Inscription	15
Yadanabon Remembered: The Maung Maung Tin Chronicle	24
Old Bottles, New Wine: The <i>Rājadhamma Saṅgaha</i>	53
Between Two Cultures: Judson's Translation of the Bible	71
Narrative in the Mahānipāta Plaques of the Ananda	82
Cherubs Are Extra: The Kyauktawgyi Murals	108
Tête-à-tête in Calcutta	143

The Value of Myanmar Traditional Texts*

In this paper, I would like to define Myanmar traditional texts very broadly as the corpus of writing produced by Myanmar scholars before the colonial period. This corpus is a large and diverse one and I am certain that I shall be doing less than justice to my subject. Nevertheless, I would like to give some indication here of the nature of Myanmar traditional texts and of their significance for us in the present.

I am classifying the texts on the basis of their medium. This is because there is a close relationship between the medium and the type of text: the nature of the medium—the facility of its use, its durability, etc—has a bearing on the type of text which it conveys.

I shall be dealing with five media in which Myanmar traditional texts appear: stone, metal, brick plaster, palm leaf and paper.

First, taking stone, it is a medium which is bulky and durable and, therefore, very suited for texts which require general viewing and are intended to endure for a long time. But working on stone is laborious and expensive, and therefore stone does not lend itself easily to lengthy texts.

The texts inscribed on stone are usually studied from rubbings, of which there are two major collections in Yangon: one in the Department of Archaeology and the other in the Universities Historical Research Centre. The latter collection has 15,766 texts as rubbings; this gives some idea of the volume of traditional texts on stone.

The earliest texts on stone are those inscribed on funerary urns which are an element of Pyu culture. Early in the 20th century, four stone urns were found at Sriksetra (modern Pyay or Prome) the Pyu capital. As read by Blagden (1917:43), one of the texts read:

Year 50, 5th month, Suriyavikrama died, aged 64 years.

Other texts give the dates 35, 57 and 80 and the names Harivikrama and Sīhavikrama. There is some uncertainty as to the era used in these texts. Blagden assumed that it was the Sakkaraj era, which would place the texts in the late 7th and early 8th century. But Than Tun (1969:42) is of the opinion that it is the Gupta era, which would place the texts in the latter part of the 5th century.

More recently, in March 1993, another stone urn was found at Sriksetra. It has seven lines of text, which is the lengthiest text so far found on funerary urns. The text has been roughly deciphered and Myanmar scholars are still struggling with its interpretation. In addition to the three previous names, four more names occur: Devamitra, Crimthuvikrama, Jatrañāṇa and Dhammadyavikrama. (San Win 1993:1).

* Read at the Conference on the Library and Archives Preservation Needs of Southeast Asia, Chiang Mai, 15-17 December 1993. Published in *Myanmar Historical Research Journal*, 1 (November 1995). Slightly revised.

Yadanabon Remembered: The Maung Maung Tin Chronicle*

The year 2005 is a year of celebration not only of the fiftieth anniversary of the Myanmar Historical Commission but also of the hundredth anniversary of the first publication of the *Konbaungzet Mahayazawindawgyi* (Chronicle of the Konbaung Dynasty).¹ Seventeen years after that first publication, the *Konbaungzet Mahayazawindawgyi* went through a second and revised edition.² The text of the second edition is the one familiar to students of the Konbaung period (1752-1885); it has gone through subsequent editions, the most recent in 2004.³ For the present study, the edition of 1967⁴ is used.

The revised *Konbaungzet Mahayazawindawgyi*, as represented in the 1967 edition, consists of three parts:

Part One, recording events from the rise of Alaungpaya (r. 1752-1758) to the despatch by Bagyidaw (r. 1819-1838) of a religious mission to Bodh Gaya on 3 December 1821, in 871 printed pages.⁵ This was the work of a Royal Commission established by Bagyidaw⁶ which started its work on an official chronicle on 3 May 1829.⁷

Part Two, a continuation of Part One, recording events from the work done by the religious mission sent by Bagyidaw to Bodh Gaya on 3 December 1821 to Mindon's conferment of honours on princes and high Court officials in May 1854, in 469 pages.⁸ This was the work of another Royal Commission established by Mindon (r. 1853-1878)⁹ which started work on its chronicle on 4 September 1867.

Part Three, a continuation of Part Two, recording events from Mindon's conferment of honours on princes and high Court officials in June 1854 to Thibaw (r. 1878-1885) going into exile on 29 November 1885 and his death in exile on 16 December 1916, in 538 pages.¹⁰ This was the work of a private scholar, Maung Maung Tin (1866-1945).

Bagyidaw's Commission compiled its chronicle in five bundles (*htok*) and 38 sheaves (*twè*) in palm leaf manuscript¹¹ and in two parts:

Part I (Bundles I to III in manuscript) was a chronicle of the line of kings from the institution of kingship and the election of the first ruler Mahāsammata to the deposition of Mahadhammayazadhipati (r. 1733-1752), last king of the Nyaungyan dynasty (1600-1752), on 11 March 1752. With an introduction of 23 Pali *gāthās* with a Myanmar explication, *gāthās* 14 to 20 provided the reasons for the writing of the chronicle: that the King perceived that there were chronicles in variety which were in conflict with each other and which were repetitious, that since there should be no contradictions, errors and discrepancies in the chronicle which was the rule and scales by which matters of the King, the Kingdom and the Religion were measured, the King had ministers and senior monks meet in the Antechamber (*Sanu*) of the Glass Palace¹² to

* Read at the Myanmar Historical Commission Fiftieth Anniversary Conference, Yangon, 12-14 January 2005, Published in *Myanmar Historical Commission Conference Proceedings*. Yangon: Myanmar Historical Commission, 2005.



Fig. 35. Sky and constellations

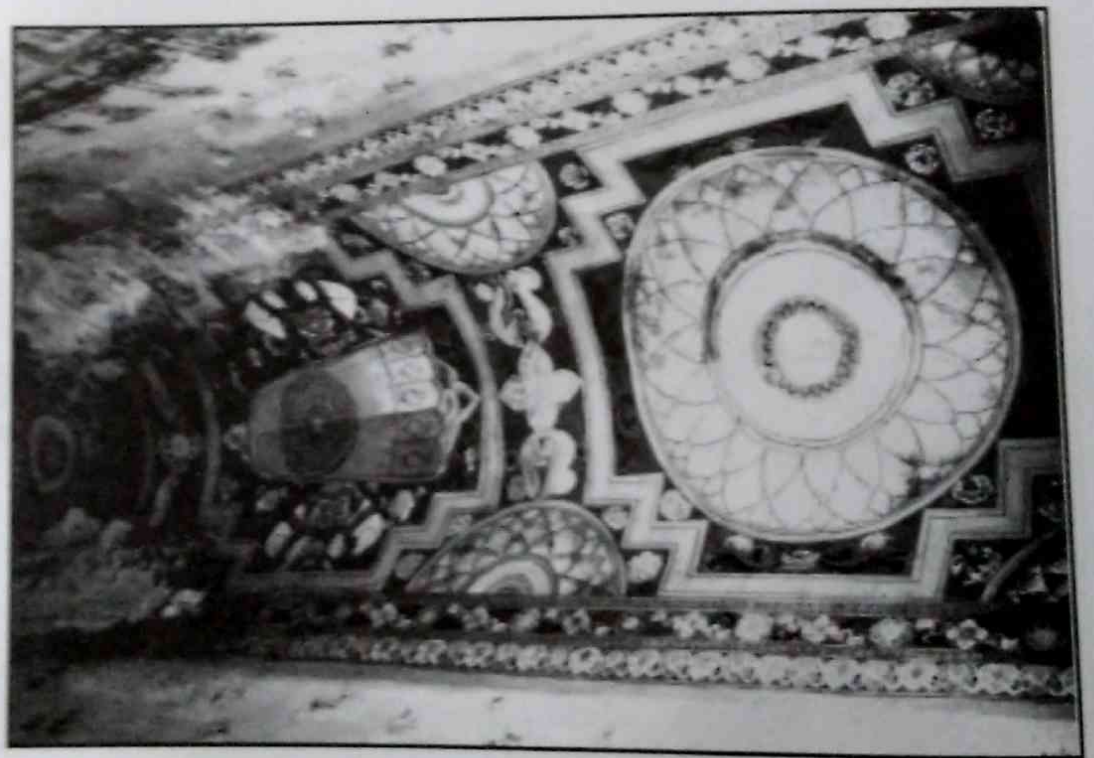


Fig.. 36. Buddha's Footprint

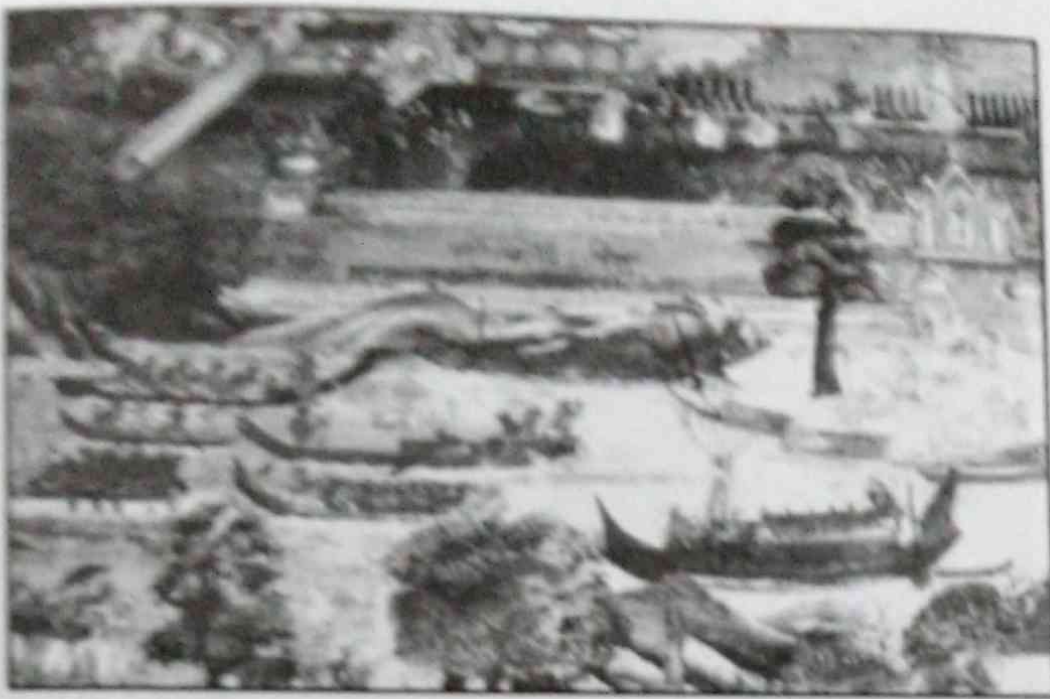


Fig. 33. Ayeyarwady river traffic

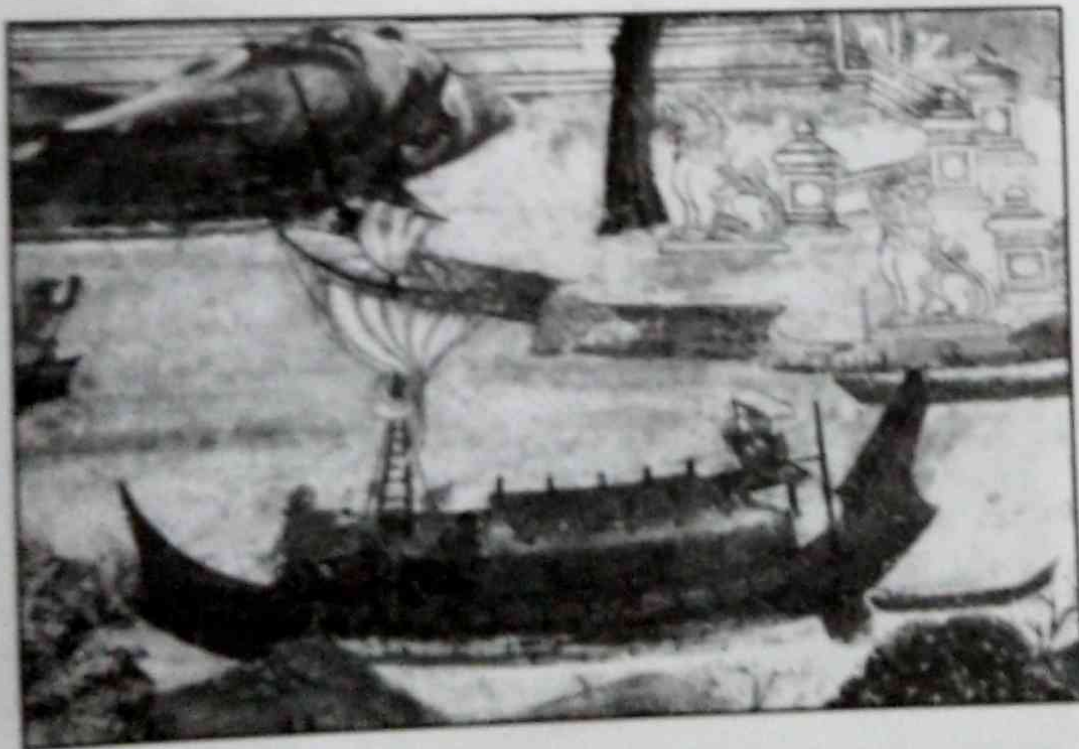


Fig. 34. Cargo boat



SEAMEO Regional Centre for History and Tradition