

# BURMA'S LOST KINGDOMS

*Splendours of Arakan*

PAMELA GUTMAN

Photography by ZAW-MIN YU

This thorough introduction to the history, art, architecture and culture of Arakan, an ancient state located along Burma's northwest coast, explains and illustrates how Southeast Asia from the beginning of the first millennium AD absorbed and reinterpreted the influences of many cultures. It was written by a noted scholar who has conducted research in the area for over twenty years.

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BURMA'S LOST KINGDOMS

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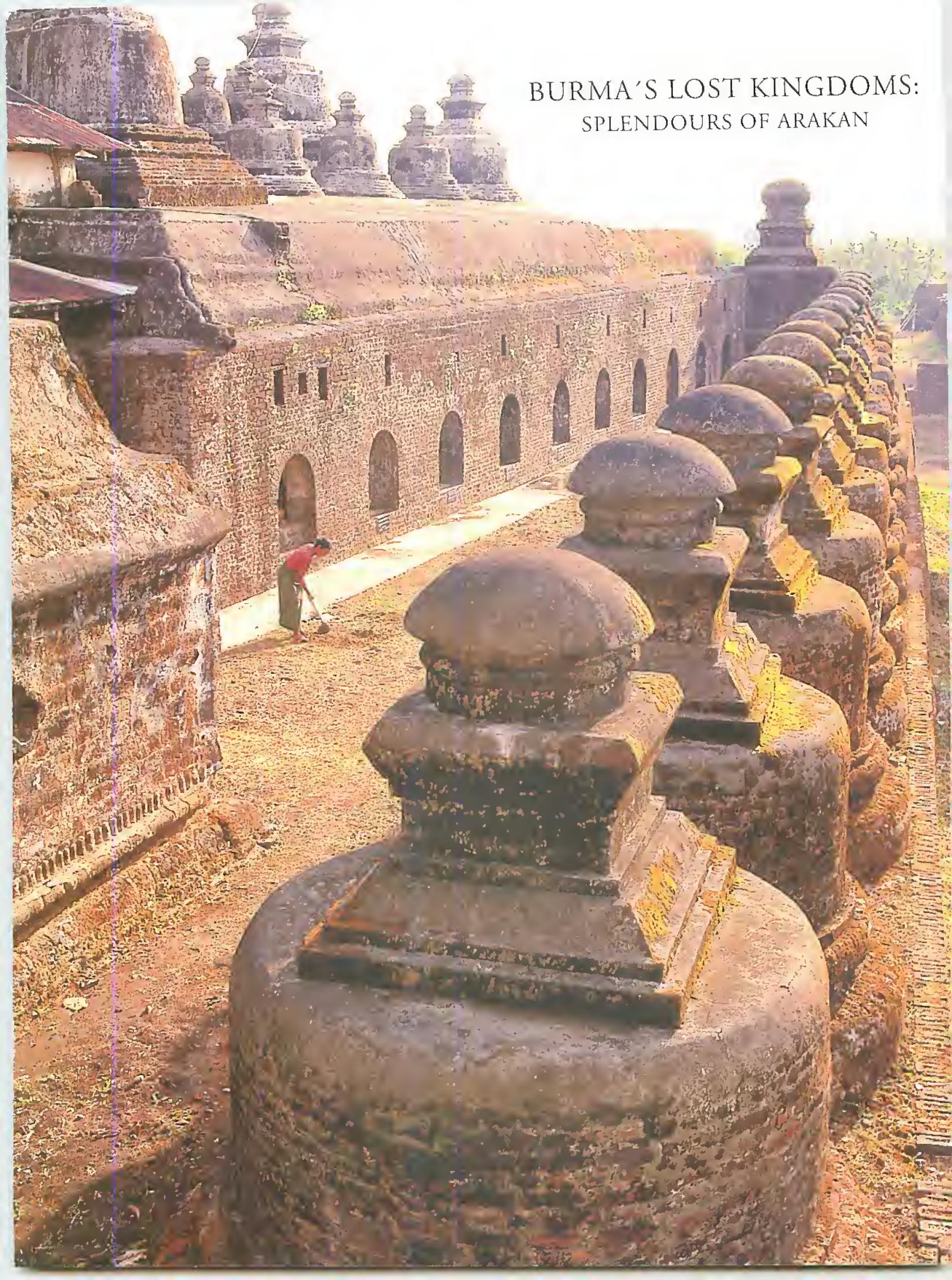
ALONG THE BAY OF BENGAL in the northwest corner of Burma lie splendid capital cities of ancient Arakan: Dhanyawadi, Vesali, the cities of the Lemro valley and Mrauk-U (Myohaung). Mentioned in Ptolemy's Geography of the 2nd century AD, Arakan was from the earliest times a cosmopolitan state with a vigorous and complex culture. Indian Brahmins conducted the royal ceremonial, Buddhist monks spread the teaching, traders came by land and sea, and artists and architects used Indian and Southeast Asian models for inspiration. Through Buddhism, Arakan came in contact with other remote countries including Sri Lanka, Nepal, Tibet and China. To the east were the many early empires of Southeast Asia: Mon, Khmer, Burman and Siamese, and to the west the Hindu empires were replaced by the Islamic courts of Bengal and Delhi. This is the first comprehensive study of the history and civilization of Arakan; it serves as an excellent introduction to hitherto almost unknown schools of sculpture and architecture.

PAMELA GUTMAN was first sent to Arakan in 1972 by G.H. Luce, the noted historian of Burma, to decipher its ancient Sanskrit inscriptions. She took her Ph.D. from the Australian National University for her thesis on the cultural history of Arakan before the 11th century, and her love of Burma's art and history have drawn her back to that country numerous times. Both Asia's past and present have claimed her interest: she has been involved in formulating Australian policy on Asia and was Adviser on Foreign Affairs to the Prime Minister. She has published widely on aspects of Southeast Asian history and culture, and today is a Member of the Refugee Review Tribunal and an Honorary Associate Fellow of the University of Sydney.

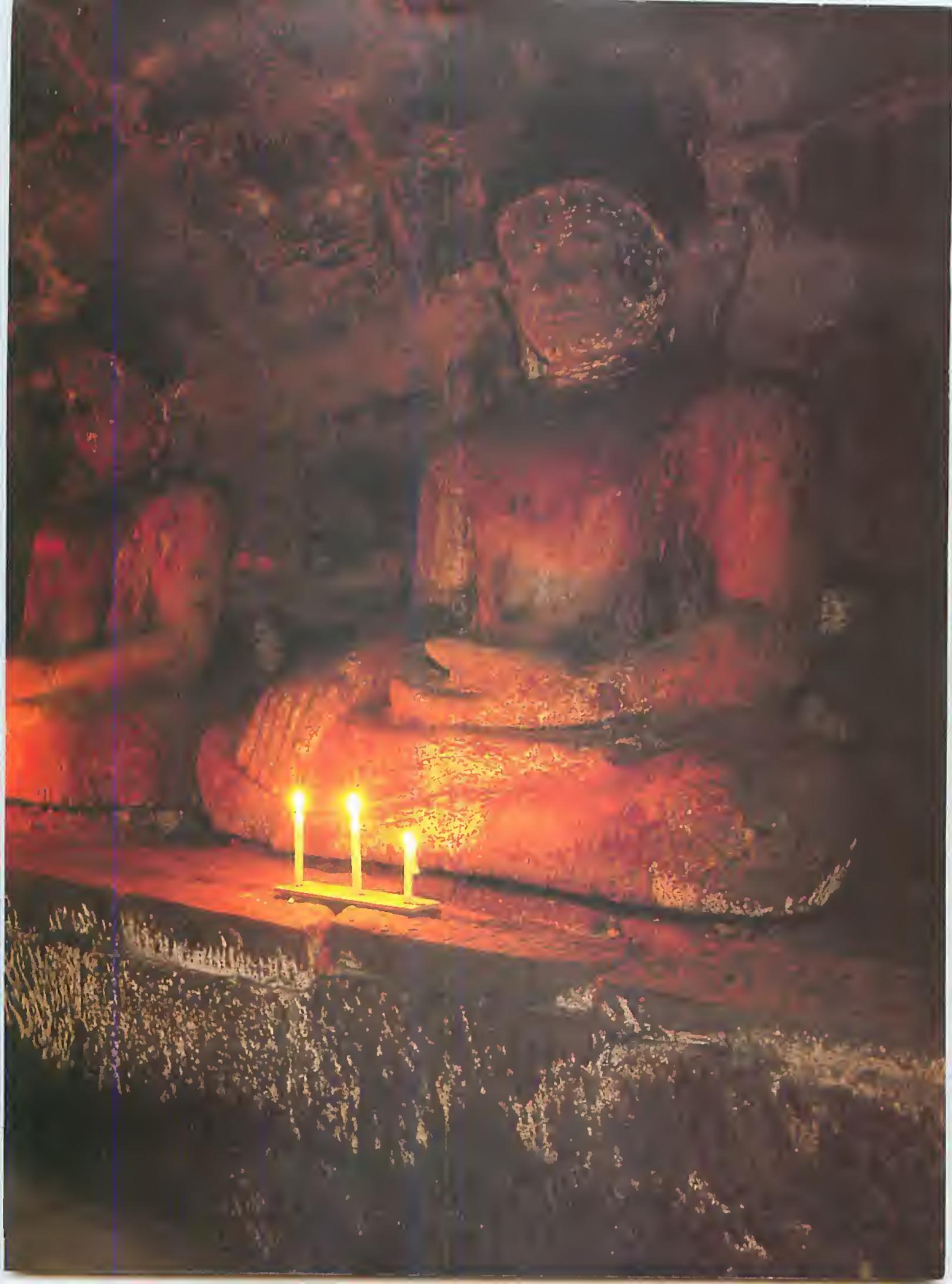
ZAW MIN YU comes from a family famous for its photographers and film makers and today is one of Burma's foremost photographers. His work is well-known in Europe and in Asia, where he has specialised in historical sites. He is currently producing a series of television documentaries on Burma.

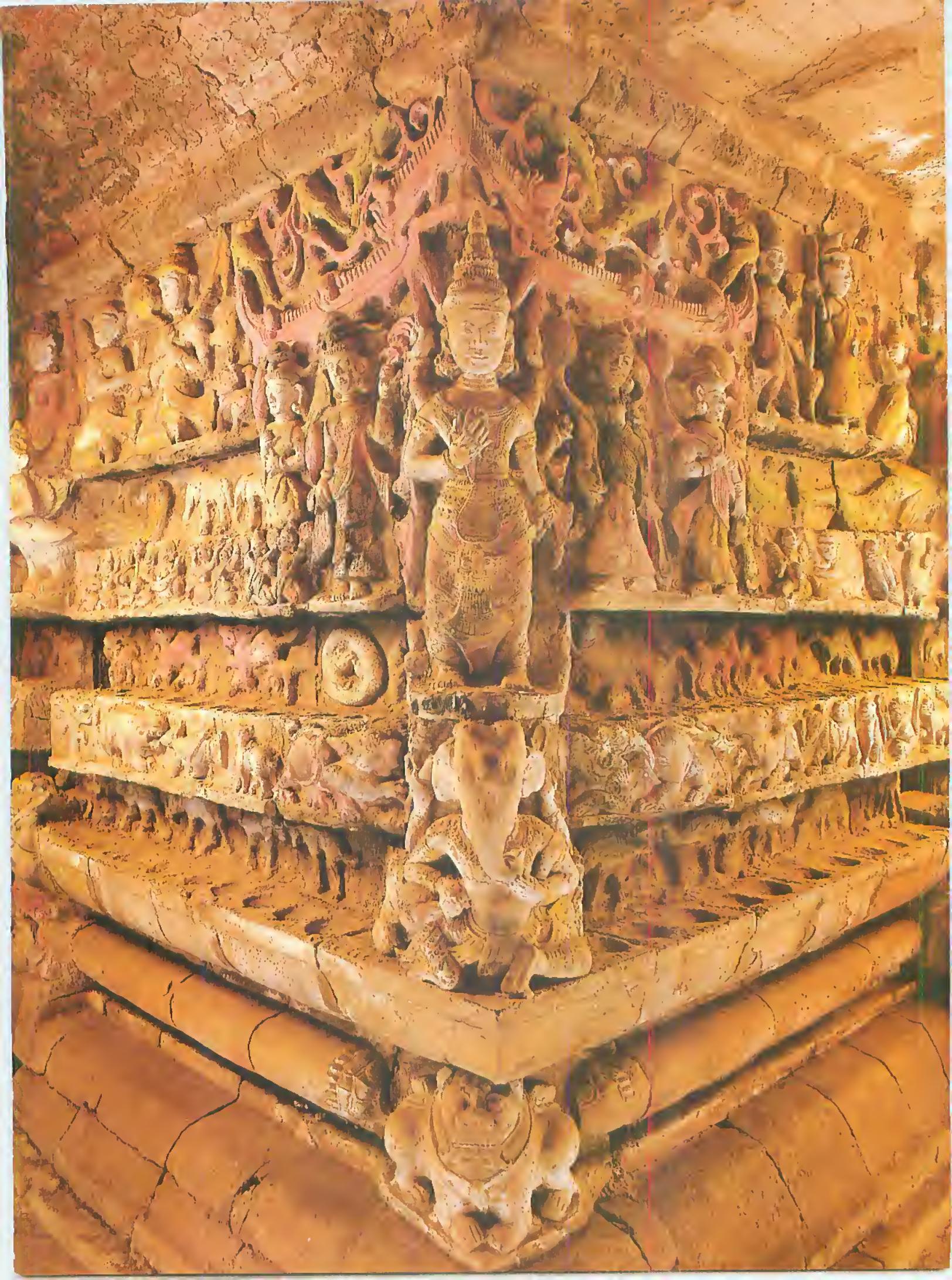


BURMA'S LOST KINGDOMS:  
SPLENDOURS OF ARAKAN











Pamela Gutman  
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Splendours of Arakan

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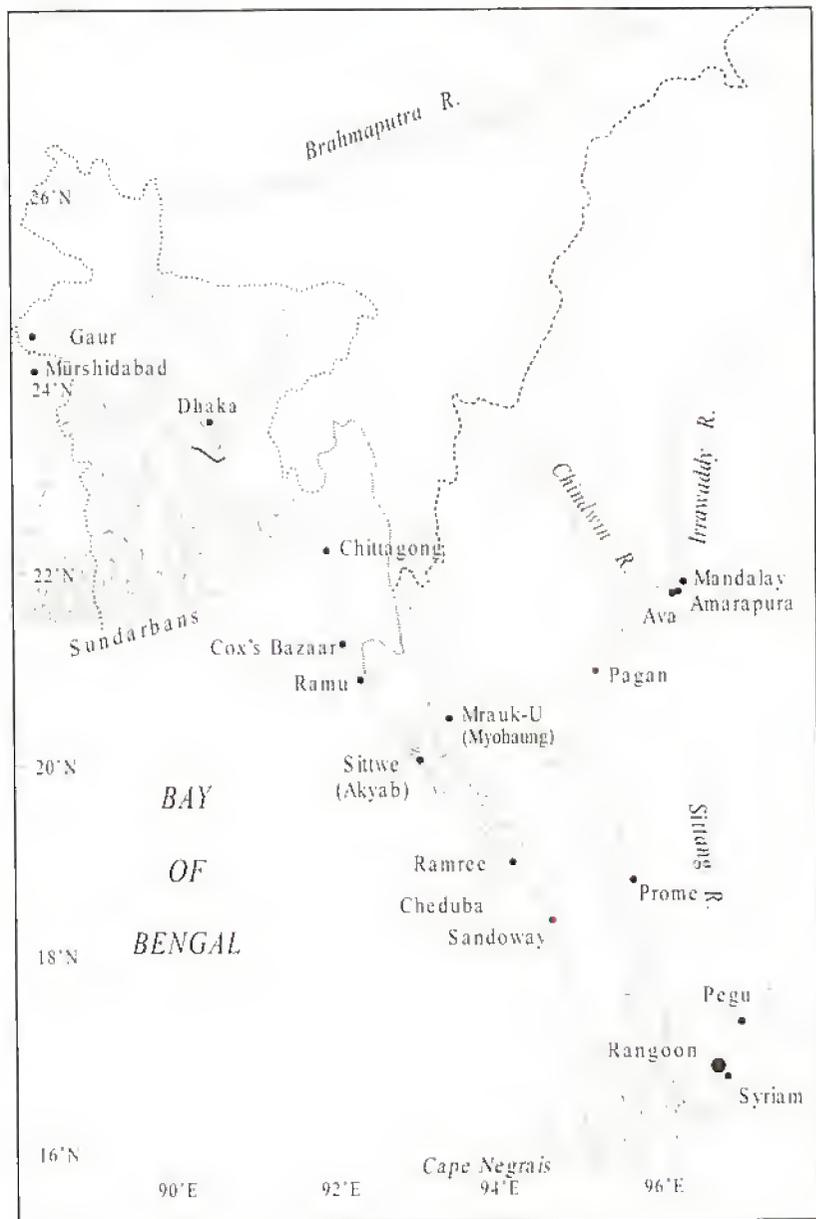
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IN MEMORY OF U OO THA TUN  
– HISTORIAN OF ARAKAN –



PART I  
THE SETTING



Map 1. Arakan in relation to Bangladesh and Burma



## INTRODUCTION

Largely unknown to the Western world for much of its turbulent history, Arakan played a pivotal role in the exchange of cultures and religions between India and Southeast Asia. For over a thousand years the region which now forms the Rakhine State of the Union of Myanmar (Burma) was an independent state whose rich history is only slowly being paid the attention it deserves. Stretching along the Bay of Bengal, from the Naaf River which separates it from Bangladesh to Cape Negrais in southern Burma, it occupies the narrow strip of land to the west of the mountains of the Arakan Yoma (Range). Land and sea routes connected it with Bengal to the west and Burma proper to the east, routes that were travelled by peoples, religions and cultures. When its neighbours were weak, Arakan was able to expand its influence along the coast to the east, west and south. At other times strong and aggressive neighbouring states would drive the Arakanese back to their homeland in the north or, at times, seek to conquer them.

Arakan's heartland was in its north, based on the rich alluvial flood plains of the adjoining Kaladan and Le-mro valleys. The earliest cities were in the Kaladan valley, backed by hills and facing west, and were thus open to influence from India and beyond. Subsequently cities were founded west of the Le-mro River, more accessible to Burma proper. The greatest city, Mrauk-U, bestrides the gap between these two valleys and thus could control both. All these cities were accessible to the Bay of Bengal through the tidal Mayu, Kaladan and Le-mro Rivers and their tributaries.

From the early centuries of the present era Arakan was ruled by kings who adopted Indian titles and traditions to suit their own environment. Indian Brahmins conducted the royal ceremonial, Buddhist monks spread their teachings, traders came and went and artists and architects used Indian models for inspiration. In the later period, there was also influence from Islamic courts of Bengal and Delhi. As an important centre for trade and as a goal of Buddhist pilgrims it was also the recipient of influence from other cultural centres in Southeast Asia. But the peoples of Arakan - like their counterparts elsewhere



1 The pillar at the entrance to the Shitthaung pagoda. Inscribed in Sanskrit on three sides, it was brought to the Shitthaung by its builder, King Min Bin, in the 16th century. The pillar was regarded as having a legitimizing function, and its inscriptions emphasize the continuing power of the royal law, or dharma, of the king. Its erection in successive capitals was part of an ancient mystical tradition which was intimately connected with the function of the king and the well being of the country.



in the region - also followed older traditions connected with their land and the spirits which guarded it. Many of these still survive in fertility and spirit cults, or have been absorbed into the Buddhist pantheon.

Arakan was discovered and forgotten by the rest of the world as its power rose and fell. In the first century AD the Alexandrian geographer Ptolemy knew it as Argyre, the land of silver, which was visited by merchants from southern India. Chinese Buddhist pilgrims of the seventh century knew it and the area of east Bengal within its cultural sphere as A-li-ki-lo or Harikela. The Burmese inscriptions of Pagan and Ava from the twelfth to fifteenth centuries refer to the country as Rakhaing, the Tibetan historians Rakhau, and the Sri Lankan chronicles Rakhanga. Portuguese explorers from the fifteenth century call it Rachani and Aracan, and were followed in this by the later Dutch and English traders. The spelling 'Arakan' became standard in the eighteenth century.

After Arakan was annexed to India by the British in 1826 a number of scholar-administrators began to study its antiquities, and in 1885 Dr Emil Forchhammer, a Swiss Pali scholar employed by the Government of India, undertook a survey of the sites of the old cities and the major monuments. His comprehensive account remains the best to date. Later archaeologists found sites like Pagan in central Burma more accessible and attractive than those in remote and malarial Arakan, although the region was visited briefly by Charles Duroiselle in 1920 and by U Lu Pe Win in 1940. Nevertheless, the sites always attracted Arakanese scholars, especially U San Shwe Bu who worked with British colleagues in the writing of Arakanese history. A resurgence of interest led by key Arakanese in the Burmese central government in the 1970s led to further study being undertaken by Professor of architecture U Myo Myint Sein and to the present writer's work on the cultural history of the early period. Some Vesali sites were excavated in the 1980s by the present Director-General of the Department of Archaeology in Myanmar, U Nyunt Han. Recognising the tourist potential of the region, the government declared the old city of Mrauk-U a Heritage area in 1996. It is now committed to funding restoration of key shrines, and excavation of the palace sites of Vesali and Mrauk-U is underway.



## HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

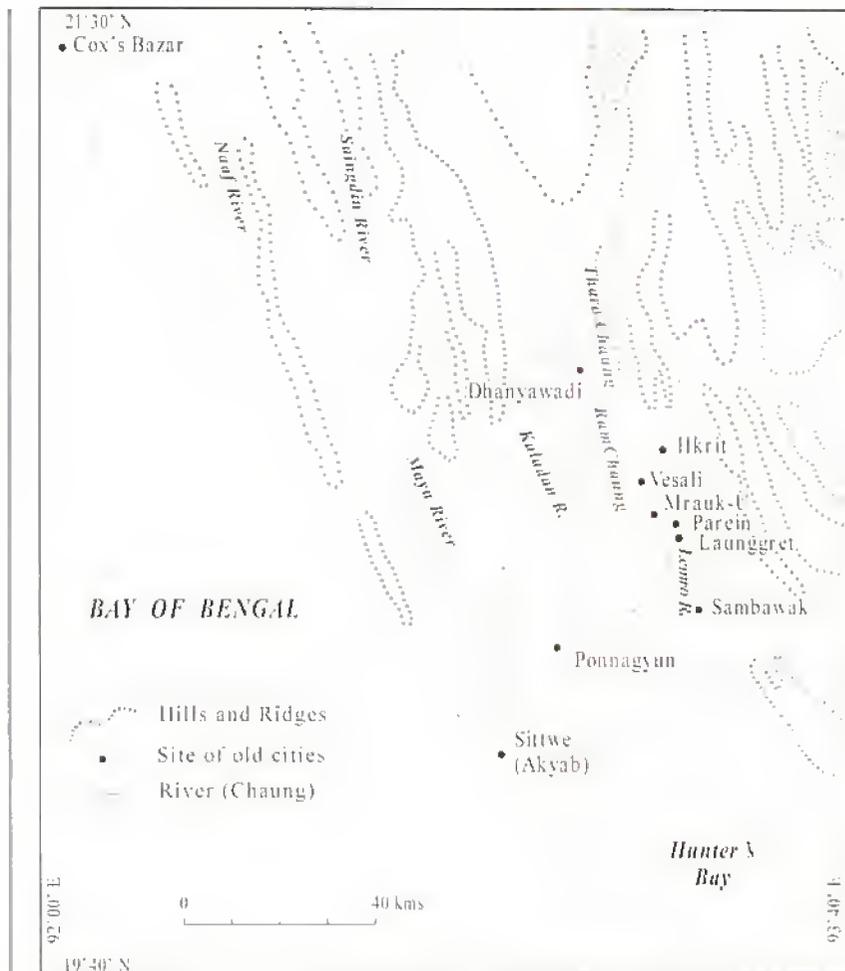
We cannot be sure who the earliest inhabitants of Arakan were. Most probably they included some minority groups still surviving in the remoter areas: the Chin, the Mro and the Sak. The dominant group today, the Rakhaing, appear to have been an advance guard of Burmans who began to cross the Arakan Yoma in the ninth century. The traditional histories of the country claim the origins of the Arakanese people in a remote past when the legendary hero-ancestor of the Arakanese, Marayu, founder of the first city, Dhanyawadi, is said to have married the daughter of a Mro chief and to have cleared the country of Bilus, demon-like creatures who may have been Chins. These histories incorporate earlier traditions and legends.

From around the 4th century other sources begin to contribute to our interpretation of the history of the country. Most important are the art and architecture which tell the story of the development of religious ideas and beliefs and help us locate the origins of these through an analysis of their style. The political history is outlined in the inscriptions of the rulers, notably those of the Shit-thaung pillar, a great stone stele inscribed by kings from the 6th century and carried from capital



*2 The Mahamuni tradition lives on as seen by this group of images representing the Buddha and his 500 disciples arriving in Arakan installed on the southern platform in the 1980s.*





Map 2. Sites of the old Capitals of Arakan

to capital until it reached Mrauk-U in the 16th. The lists of kings the inscriptions contain are verified by coins bearing their names. And we have local histories, mostly written by Buddhist clergy, recounting stories of kings and shrines and drawing in part from an earlier oral tradition.

Buddhist traditions are the most important in the formation of Arakan's culture, as indeed, is the case in the rest of Burma. As with other sites in Burma and in the rest of Southeast Asia, these traditions tell of the Buddha flying to the city of Dhanyawadi, accompanied by his disciples, and converting King Candrasuriya ("Sun-and-Moon"), after which he consented to have an image of himself made in commemoration of the event. This was the famous Mahamuni ("Great Sage") image, known throughout the Buddhist world and desired by



kings who sought to conquer the country in order to carry away this powerful prize. The history of this image is entwined with that of Arakan.

The tradition of the origin of the Mahamuni image can be interpreted as an allegorical account of the introduction of Buddhism to Arakan. The first evidence we have of Buddhism is in the early sculpture of the Mahamuni shrine at Dhanyawadi.

### DHANYAWADI

- CIRCA MID-4TH TO EARLY 6TH CENTURIES AD

Dhanyawadi (Pali *Dhannavati*, "grain-blessed") was a city typical of the earliest phase of urbanization in Southeast Asia during the first centuries of the Christian era. While elements of its culture undoubtedly derived from India, it shares many characteristics with other centres in mainland Southeast Asia linked by the sea, the Pyu polities of present-day Burma, and the Mon of Dvaravati in Thailand and Oc-Eo in southern Vietnam.

Located in country with the capacity to produce three crops of paddy rice a year, Dhanyawadi had access to the hills and the products of the hill tribes such as beeswax and stick-lac, as well as to the sea via the Tharechaung, a tributary of the Kaladan River. During the early centuries of the present era maritime trade between China, India and Europe was stimulated by the interruption of the central Asian overland trade routes. India's demand for gold, and the Roman empire's demand for the exotic products of the Orient, led traders from India and the Middle East - often Arabs - to explore alternative sources. This brought Arakan into new trading networks. Contact with India brought new ideas. Later inscriptions and local historical traditions remember ancestors who were probably local chiefs, who adopted Indian religion and statecraft to increase their power and become kings.

This process, generally referred to as "Indianization" was an extension of the spread of certain aspects of south Asian civilization which had been taking place for over a millennium in India itself, diffusing eastward and southward from its centre in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent until it finally reached western Southeast Asia: what is now Burma, Thailand,



3 An intaglio of Mediterranean origin found at Vesali. Similar finds have been made at early coastal trading centres in southern Thailand and Vietnam. U Oo Tha Tun collection.

4 Gemstone inscribed in southern Indian script of about the 4th century AD, found at Vesali. U Oo Tha Tun collection.





5 Torso found near the Mahamuni shrine. Possibly a Bodhisattva, the crown, earrings and necklace of a prince are worn, and the coil-like projections above the shoulders may illustrate the blazing glory which emanates from a Bodhisattva's body.

southern Vietnam, Cambodia and the western sectors of Indonesia. The concept of divine kingship, which had been implicit in the Indian tradition, became explicit in Southeast Asia where the rulers sought to validate their hold over different ethnic groups and to control the means of production in a context wider than the traditional village.

Professor Paul Wheatley has described the transformation of village culture to the civilization of the city-state in terms of the changes in society which this "Indianization" brought about. The maintenance of a state appropriate to kingship required the ministrations of increasing numbers of craftsmen and artisans, the most skilled of whom were often accommodated within the royal compound. It required the labour of a peasantry who contributed the surplus produce of their fields as a tax in kind for the support of the court, and a band of armed retainers who acted as household guards, organised the peasantry as militia and enforced the authority of the ruler. Material defences - walls and moats protecting the palace and the city - were constructed and the city-state, the *nagara*, evolved. These transformations saw the tribal chieftain replaced by a divine king, shaman by brahmin priest, tribesmen as cultivators by peasants, tribesmen as warriors by an army, and favoured the development of occupational specialisation. They were reflected in the conversion of the chief's hut into a palace, the spirit house into a temple, the object of the spirit cult into the palladium of the state, and the boundary spirits which previously had protected the village into Indianized *Lokapalas* presiding over the cardinal directions.

This process can clearly be traced in Arakan, which received Indian culture by land from Bengal and by sea from other parts of India. The Anandacandra inscription on the Shir-thaung stele, after listing the ancestral monarchs, says that a king called Dvan Candra, possessed of righteousness and fortune, conquered 101 kings and built a city "which laughed with heavenly beauty" surrounded by walls and a moat. From the inscription we can deduce that Dvan Candra ruled from around 370-425AD, and that he was the founder of the Dhanyawadi of the chronicles.

Lying west of the ridge between the Kaladan and Lemro rivers, Dhanyawadi could be reached by small ships from the Kaladan via the its tributary, the Tharechaung. Its city walls were made of



brick, and form an irregular circle with a perimeter of about 9.6 kilometres, enclosing an area of about 4.42 square kilometres. Beyond the walls, the remains of a wide moat, now silted over and covered by paddy fields, are still visible in places. The remains of brick fortifications can be seen along the hilly ridge which provided protection from the west. Within the city, a similar wall and moat enclose the palace site, which has an area of 0.26 square kilometres, and another wall surrounds the palace itself.

As was the case in the contemporary Pyu cities of central Burma, the majority of the population would have lived within the outer city, whose walls also enclosed the fields in which they worked. At times of insecurity, when the city was subject to raids from the hill tribes or attempted invasions from neighbouring powers, there would have been an assured food supply enabling the population to withstand a siege. The city would have controlled the valley and the lower ridges, supporting a mixed wet-rice and *taungya* (slash and burn) economy, with local chiefs paying allegiance to the king.

From aerial photographs we can discern Dhanyawadi's irrigation channels and storage tanks, centred at the palace site. Throughout the history of Arakan, and indeed the rest of early Southeast Asia, the king's power stemmed from his control of irrigation and water storage systems to conserve the monsoon rains and therefore to maintain the fertility and prosperity of the land. In ceremonies conducted by Indian Brahmins the king was given the magic power to regulate the celestial and terrestrial forces in order to control the coming of the rains which would ensure the continuing prosperity of the kingdom.

The renowned Mahamuni shrine is situated on a hill north-east of the palace site. This may have been the location of an earlier fertility cult, controlled by local chiefs and absorbed into Buddhism as Indian influence strengthened. The shrine was to become the centre of a Buddhist cult but would incorporate earlier beliefs surrounding the spirits of the earth and the protectors of the land. While the shrine was attacked, destroyed and rebuilt many times over the centuries, and its holy image finally transported to the Burmese capital of Mandalay after the conquest of Arakan in 1784, many ancient and now badly damaged sculptures still remain. Traditionally regarded as deities protecting the central image, they are stylistically comparable



6 Mahamuni shrine. Bodhisattva  
*Avalokitesvara?*



to the art of the late Gupta period in India, from around the fifth and sixth centuries AD. There are indications that the deities they represent belong to the Mahayana Buddhist pantheon.

## VESALI

- CIRCA 6TH TO 8TH CENTURIES AD

Some nine kilometres south of Dhanyawadi is the next important city, Vesali (Wethali), founded around the beginning of the sixth century and named after the Indian city of Vaisali, famous in Buddhist tradition. We do not know precisely when the centre of power moved to Vesali, but inscriptions and sculptures found in the vicinity of the city can be dated from around the sixth century. Vesali is flanked by the Rann-chaung, a tributary of the Kaladan, to the west, and the ridge between the Kaladan and Le-mro Rivers to the east. As at Dhanyawadi we find an oval-shaped city wall encompassing an area of seven square kilometres, protected by a moat which still fills with water in the wet season. In its centre the palace site, also surrounded by a moat, contains a royal lake. More easily reached by the overland route from India, it also took advantage of increased trade in the Bay of Bengal at the time and its influence spread to southeast Bengal. Its material re-



*7 The moat to the east of Vesali still fills with water during the monsoon. The moat was not only used by the city as a reservoir, but also was part of the defence system. The problem of water supply is acute on the Sittwe plain. The streams are tidal and the water brackish, while the mountain streams are short and swift and hold little water when it is most needed in the dry season. Rainwater stored in tanks and moats were the best solution for the population's needs.*



mains show that it was in contact not only with the Pyu of central Burma but also the pre-Angkorian cultures further east.

As was the case at Dhanyawadi, there was a large temple complex to the northeast of the palace. Excavations in the 1980s unearthed the remains of a Buddhist monastic complex and a royal shrine containing the stone image of a bull. This was the royal insignia of the Candra dynasties which ruled at both Dhanyawadi and Vesali and who claimed to belong to the lineage of the Hindu god Siva, although they themselves professed Buddhism, probably of the Mahayanist persuasion. Such religious synthesis was not unusual in Southeast Asia, where Brahmins of Indian origin have traditionally conducted the royal ceremonial which Buddhism, disdaining class hierarchy, did not aspire to, even in Buddhist courts.

Our knowledge of the history of this period is based not only on the archaeological remains, but also on inscriptions, importantly those on the pillar now preserved at the Shit-thaung temple at Mrauk-U. The Shit-thaung pillar inscription of Anandracandra, who ruled Vesali in the 8th century, records a genealogy of some 22 kings ruling from the late 4th century, the earlier kings probably at Dhanyawadi. Anandacandra is described as a Buddhist who established monasteries, caused images to be



*8 Stone engraved with a bull found at Vesali and now inserted in a silver ring. U Oo Tha Tun Collection.*



made, and welcomed monks from other lands including the Buddhist clergy of Sri Lanka, to whom he sent an elephant and robes. He did not neglect other religions, repairing "*deva*" shrines, probably Hindu in character which were erected by former kings, and establishing buildings for the local Brahmins, whom he also provided with land, servants and musicians.

Amongst the sculptural remains from Vesali there are stone and bronze votive *stupas* which give us an idea of the architecture of the time, Buddha images showing contact with the Pyu of central Burma and the monastic establishments of Bengal, and a remarkable series of Visnu images, indicating the importance of that sect.

Plates 35-38  
Plates 10, 43, 44, 45  
Plates 46, 48



9 Head of Visnu from Vesali. 6th century, Mrauk-U Museum.



Although the extent of the lands controlled by the Dhanyawadi, Vesali, Le-mro and Mrauk-U kings would have changed under differing political and economic circumstances, the spread of historical remains indicates that from around the 6th century most of the Kaladan and Le-mro valleys came within their influence. So, for example, the discovery of a Vesali period Hindu shrine within the walls of Mrauk-U, for instance, gives an indication of the extent of the lands controlled by that city. Contact with the Pyu of central Burma is evidenced by a Pali inscription found in Mrauk-U, and another in Pyu script from Thandwe (Sandoway).



*10 Terracotta votive tablet from the Nibuza excavations, traces of gilding and lacquer. 10th-11th centuries. Mrauk-U Museum.*



From the middle of the 8th century east Bengal, Arakan and the Pyu cities of central Burma were disrupted by waves of incursions of Tibeto-Burman-speaking peoples. These were the Mranma (in modern Burmese, Myanmar) who were eventually to make Pagan their capital, and the people who were to rule Arakan and call themselves Rakhuin (Rakhaing).

In the 9th or 10th century the administrative centre may have moved to the Mrauk-U area. The chronicles record the building of two new cities on the Mrauk-U plain, the last overrun by invaders from the west. Some recent discoveries dating from this period show that close links with Eastern India had been maintained.

### CITIES OF THE LE-MRO VALLEY

11TH-15TH CENTURIES

With the rise of the Burmese capital at Pagan a series of small Arakanese cities, Sambawak, Parein, Hkrit, and Launggret, succeeded each other on the lowlands west of the Le-mro River, while Toungoo Neyinzara was on its eastern side. This location gave these cities more access to Burma than their



11 The 1123 AD inscription of King Kawliu, who having ousted the Burmans proclaimed himself as the greatest king in Suvannadipa, or the Golden Land, as Southeast Asia was referred to. Written on the natural rock outcrop on the Launggret Taung-maw hill, it is the first major inscription in the Arakanese dialect of the Burmese language.



predecessors had. Smaller than their predecessors, almost nothing remains of their walls and palaces.

The first capital, Sambawak was believed to have been founded by a descendant of the Candra kings of Vesali in 1018 AD. The power of Pagan was reaching its zenith at the time, and though access was difficult across the Arakan Yoma, Pagan kings often attempted to raid Arakan and to carry away its palladium, the Mahamuni image. Instead of being a country whose influence was felt in Bengal, Arakan became a tributary of Pagan and her power curtailed. Her cities were small and her hold on more remote territories weak. According to the chronicles, a usurper ultimately ascended the throne and the royal family had to take refuge at the Burmese king Kyanzittha's court at Pagan. When the rightful line was restored with the assistance of the Burmese, King Letya-min-nan moved the capital to Parein in 1118 AD. Launggret was founded in 1237 AD, at a time when Pagan's power was beginning to wane, and after a few years managed to become independent and began to again expand its authority to Bengal to the west and Cape Negrais to the south. The art of this period is strongly influenced by that of Pagan and reflects increasing religious contact with Sri Lanka, then the centre of Theravadin Buddhism.

In 1404 AD Burmese forces occupied Launggret and drove out the king, Min Saw Mun, who fled to the Sultanate of Gaur in Bengal. Islam had been taking hold in Bengal from the 13th century, and the Bengal Sultanate, independent of Delhi, was founded in the mid-14th century. It was natural that Arakan, threatened from the west, should turn to its eastern neighbour with which it had centuries of contact. Weak but strategically desirable, it became a pawn in the struggle for power between the Burmans, now with their capital at Ava, and the Mons of lower Burma, with their capital at Pegu.

It is said that Min Saw Mun returned to Arakan with the assistance of an armed levy from the Sultan of Gaur. Following the advice of his astrologers he left the ill-omened Launggret and founded the last of the old great capitals, Mrauk-U, in 1433.

#### MRAUK-U 1433-1785 AD

The Portuguese Jesuit, Father A. Farrinha, SJ, who travelled to Mrauk-U in 1639, wrote

*12 (following pages) The Bandel, or foreign settlement at Mrauk-U. From Schouten, Voyages (1676)*





BANDEL of *Ronde*  
over de *Stad* ARAKAWA





13 Coins of the Mrauk-U period. In the middle of the 15th century coins were inscribed in Persian. By the mid-16th coins were inscribed in Bengali, Persian and Arakanese and from the mid-17th only in Arakanese.

*Arakan is a second Venice; its streets are rivers; its gardens, valleys; its ramparts, mountains. For, as the natives of the country are naturally weak and timid, they have chosen for their city a site fortified by nature, and impregnable by force of arms.*

Mrauk-U, called Arakan by the many foreigners who visited it, occupies a unique site. Situated in low land within a series of parallel ranges it commands both the Kaladan and Le-mro valleys and has access to the two main rivers, and therefore the Bay of Bengal, by both land and water.

After Min Saw Mun's return, the country remained tributary to the Bengal Sultanate for a hundred years. The kings, though Buddhists, used Mohammedan titles in addition to their own names, some issuing coins bearing the *kalima*, the Muslim declaration of faith, in Persian script. Min Saw Mun's brother, Ali Khan, managed to occupy the Bengali coastal town of Ramu and his son Ba Saw Pru, also known as Kalimah Shah, is said to have occupied Chittagong.

The twelfth king of the line, Min Bin, who ruled from 1531 to 1553 saw Arakan reach the height of its power. Two factors assisted him in this: the arrival of the Portuguese and civil war in Bengal.

In the sixteenth century the Portuguese were the world's finest mariners. They arrived in the Bay of Bengal seeking to convert the heathen to Catholicism, and in doing so to promote trading opportunities. The Arakanese saw that by granting territorial concessions and trade openings, they could benefit through the Portuguese mastery of seamanship and their modern knowledge of arms and fortification. Min Bin thus turned Mrauk-U into the strongest fortified city of the Bay of Bengal, employing Portuguese to lay out his walls and moats and to forge and mount his cannon. He appointed them as military officers to train and equip a mercenary army of many races, and built, with their aid, a large fleet manned with his own men. It was during his reign that the Mrauk-U architectural style, drawing on Burmese, Mon and Bengali prototypes, developed.

The Rakhaing navy became the scourge of the Bay of Bengal, taking slaves from up and down the coast as well as trading rice for luxury products for its aristocracy. The Portuguese recorded that the navy comprised three hundred and fifty vessels. Ships coming from the Bay of Bengal usually approached via the Mayu River. There was a customs checkpoint at Kwede,



at the beginning of the river of that name which joins the Mayu with the Kaladan. Upriver were trading posts for the produce of the region, cotton goods and rice.

That Mrauk-U controlled the economy of the Kaladan and Le-mro valleys and their hinterlands can be seen not only in the widely scattered remains of religious buildings and Buddha images of the period but also in signs of occupancy of other centres essential for trade and the defence of the city. In 1630 the Portuguese traveller Sebastian Manrique found a massive image of the Buddha at the head of a pass guarding the land route to Bengal. Punnakyun, on the left bank of the Kaladan River, was strategically placed to control access by water to Mrauk-U, and was the site of its naval base. The Urittaung pagoda stands on a low, but steep and rocky hill opposite Punnakyun. To the west of the pagoda are two large and several smaller tanks. The ground here is strewn with earthenware shards indicating a long period of settlement.

Meanwhile, in Bengal, the Mughals had arrived. The emperor Humayan conquered the Sultanate of Gaur, thus initiating a



14 The Hnyaw-taw-mu "Awaiting" pagoda built in 1641. It was here that wives would come to wait for their husbands returning from war.



long period of civil war. Min Bin took advantage of this opportunity and occupied east Bengal with a combined fleet and army movement. The province remained a vassal of Arakan for the next one hundred and twenty years, till 1666. Its administration was left in the hands of twelve local rajas, who paid an annual tribute to the Arakanese king's viceroy at Chittagong.

From the west, Min Bin was threatened by the powerful Burmese king Tabinshweti, who had already conquered the Mon country and was making war against the Thais at Ayuthia. Tabinshweti invaded Arakan in 1546-7 with the help of his Portuguese mercenaries and Mon levies. When the Burmese penetrated the eastern defences of the city, Min Bin opened the sluices of his great reservoirs and halted their advance. The Arakanese chronicles tell us that the Burmese, unable to make headway, accepted the intercession of the Buddhist monks. The opposing leaders met, had amicable discussions and the Burmese returned home.

The Portuguese Jesuit Sebastian Manrique, describing a similar procession before the coronation of King Sanda-thudhamma wrote

*The Nobles and the other men of rank gathered at the palace whence, amongst music of all kinds, a huge elephant emerged, richly caparisoned, with his ivory tusks adorned with rings of gold and jewels. He carried on his back a howdah made of silver. It was open on all four sides except for curtains of green and gold silver veiling. Inside it was a tray of gold set with precious stones of immense value, which bore the royal order containing the proclamation of the coronation. Just in front, before the howdah, sat the Chique, or chief-justice at the Court, clothed in white silver cloth covered with plaques of gold. In front of him was the elephant-driver or cornaca in his usual place. He was dressed in red damask and carried in his hand the accustomed implement with which that land vessel is guided, in this instance of the finest gold. He was followed in due order by thirty-two war elephants, dressed in silken cloths and ornamented with gold, bearing the usual uncovered howdahs on their backs, made of wood but covered with silver plates. They carried huge silver bells around their necks and had rings of this same metal on their tusks. Each elephant had four silken banners of various colours fastened to the howdah which trembled in the light breeze and acted as flapping fans for their heated bodies.*

When, in the east, the Mughal Emperor Akbar consolidated his hold on central and western Bengal, Min Bin's successor Raza-gri protected his eastern frontier with the aid of a menacing group of Portuguese slavers and adventurers settled near Chittagong, to whom he gave trade concessions.

In 1595 the Arakanese besieged and conquered the Mon capi-

tal of Pegu, deporting 3,000 households, and taking back a white elephant and a daughter of the fallen king, bronze cannon and the thirty bronze images which the Burmese king Bayin-naung had earlier seized when he conquered Ayuthia. They left in charge Felipe de Brito y Nicote, one of their Portuguese mercenaries. For a short period Arakan extended from Dacca to Moulmein, a narrow coastal strip some thousand miles long.

But the causes of Arakan's greatness were also the causes of its downfall. The thousands of Mughal, Burmese, Mon, Siamese and Portuguese mercenaries and prisoners of war did not bear a strong allegiance to the king. With mercenary support a pretender, Narapati, came to the throne in 1638, and Arakan's power began to decline. The influence of the Portuguese also waned as the Dutch gained commercial advantage in the Bay of Bengal. King Sanda-thudamma temporarily restored the country's glory by allowing the Dutch to settle at Mrauk-U. Wanting to strike at Catholicism in Ceylon, the European newcomers facilitated the sending of Arakanese monks there to revive the Buddhist ordination rites which had been in decline under the Portuguese.

Father Sebastian Manrique recorded that

*... the city of Arracan according to general opinion must have contained one hundred and sixty thousand inhabitants, excluding foreign merchants, of whom there was a great influx owing to the large number of ships trading with this port from Bengala, Masulipattam, Tenasserim, Martaban, Achem and Jacatara. There were some other foreigners, too, some being merchants and some soldiers, the latter being enlisted on salaries, and were, as I have said, Portuguese, Pegus, Burmese and Mogors. Besides these there were many Christians of Japanese, Bengal and other nationalities.*

Meanwhile, in India, Shah Shuja, the Mughal pretender who had been provincial viceroy in Bengal, was defeated by his brother Aurangzeb who became Emperor at Delhi. Shah Shuja sought refuge at the Arakanese court, where King Sanda-thudamma is said to have lusted not only after his immense treasure but also his daughter. Shuja in desperation attempted to overthrow the city, but was defeated and executed along with his family. In retaliation the Mughals broke the power of the Arakanese in east Bengal, enslaving many who had been slavers and inducing the Portuguese to change their allegiance.

Many of Shuja's Indian followers are said to have remained in Arakan, where they were employed as archers of the guard

Plate 12

*15 (following pages) Urritaung pagoda. The Buddha is said to have lived here in a former existence, when he was a Brahmin of high birth. Today the pagoda has the appearance of most pagodas in Burma, a conical spire with a golden hti, or umbrella, at its zenith. It is often mentioned in the Rukhaing histories. Many kings of Mrauk-U maintained and repaired the shrine, and today it is supported by public subscription.*







and proceeded to murder and set up kings at will. Mrauk-U's decline continued for a century. The country was beset with civil war and by a series of natural disasters such as awesome earthquakes, although the Arakanese continued to raid the Bengal coast as late as the middle of the eighteenth century. As soon as the kings of Burma regained their power under the Alaungpaya dynasty, the Peguan territories were lost and Arakan's southern borders were withdrawn to Cape Negrais.

After Sanda-thudhamma Arakan survived as a polity only because it had no aggressive neighbour. The Moghuls had ceased to be an expanding power, and Burma was becoming preoccupied with the British. The power of the last of the many kings of this period could extend only a few miles beyond the walls of Mrauk-U. It came to an end in 1784 when the Burmese king Bodawpaya invaded and removed the protector of the country, the Mahamuni image, to his capital at Amarapura. Two hundred thousand Arakanese are said to have fled to India. These events laid the seeds for the first Anglo-Burmese war, fought in Arakan in 1825. The conquerors found the old city of Mrauk-U pestilential to its troops, and removed them to a small fishing village at the mouth of the Kaladan River, which today remains the capital of Rakhine State, Sittwe.



16 A group of three late 17th century Buddha images in a ruined stupa east of the Le-myet-hna.



PART II

CITIES, SHRINES AND  
SCULPTURES

The art and architecture of Arakan resonates with its history as a state between two cultures. Indian influence came from the west, mostly from Bengal but also from the Buddhist centres visited by monks and pilgrims, especially Nalanda and Bodhgaya in northeast India. Through Buddhism it was in contact with countries as far south as Sri Lanka and as far north as Nepal and Tibet and even China. To the east were the many early kingdoms of Southeast Asia, which over the centuries were succeeded by major polities: the Burman, Thai and Khmer empires. Arakan's culture illustrates how Southeast Asia from the beginning of the first millennium AD adapted and reinterpreted Indian beliefs and art forms in a new environment shaped by its dependence on the sea for its trade and for religious interchange, the concern to regulate the monsoons and to conserve water for the long dry season, and local traditions which were intimately connected with the land itself.

While Arakan has been predominantly Buddhist throughout its history its Buddhism received inspiration from many parts of the Buddhist world, and these different influences are reflected in its art. For the first centuries the people followed both the Theravada, the older, more austere branch of Buddhism, and the Mahayana, the later branch which stressed the concept of salvation through the efforts of others, especially the Bodhisattvas who forswear *nirvana* in order to help others attain enlightenment. Its images were modelled on representations of the Buddha renowned for their importance in India, and later in Sri Lanka and in other Southeast Asian lands. Local workshops were set up by about the 5th century. Their artisans were initially concerned to reproduce the forms and styles of the Indian schools associated with the monasteries where many of the clergy had studied. This reproduction was possible when transportable images such as terracotta votive tablets and bronzes which had been brought from India and elsewhere in the Buddhist world. When no prototypes were to hand the workshop could resort to the Indian *silpa-sastras*, illustrated instruction manuals on the making of shrines and images. Artisans would also have been conversant with those Buddhist texts which taught the visualization of the Buddha's manifestations, and those of his entourage. The freedom of interpretation this allowed led to some of the most original and exciting work produced in Arakan,



such as the earliest sculpture at the Mahamuni and the 7th century Buddhist reliefs and Visnu images.

While no early shrines survive, some assumptions about their construction and decoration can be made from the few architectural fragments and sculptures found at the old city sites. Some reliefs with depictions of features of the buildings they adorned also provide clues as to their form and to the influence of neighbouring cultures.

Because Buddhism remained strong throughout the history of Arakan and its images were perceived to impart religious strength and power, they were not forgotten for centuries as were Hindu shrines in Thailand and Cambodia. Being continuously in worship they were neglected only in times of war or extreme poverty. In more prosperous times the faithful gained merit by restoring and beautifying the historically most significant images and shrines so that today in many cases their original features have become distorted by the addition of gilt, paint, plaster, mirror-work and glass. Older images have often been removed from ruined shrines and reinstalled in others, their original provenance often forgotten. These factors can complicate the art historian's task of discussing the context in which the artifacts were produced.

Hinduism was significant both as the religion of the royal ceremonial and of the Indian traders in the cities. Indeed, at Vesali, Hindu remains outnumber Buddhist, although this might change as archaeological excavations continue. As in Bengal, the worship of Visnu in his form of Vasudeva, hero-deity of the Bhagavata cult espoused by the Gupta emperors, gained ready acceptance by the Candras of Arakan anxious to emulate the glorious imperial tradition. The royal line, however, claimed descent from the lineage of Siva, which may explain the bull, Siva's mount, on the obverse of the coins and the figure of a bull found at Vesali at the centre of a structure which was apparently connected with a royal cult.

In the Le-mro period, from the 11th to the 14th centuries Theravada Buddhism predominated under the influence of Pagan. This, according to the local histories, was a time when the Mahamuni shrine was continually under attack and the Mahayanist icons were deprived of their attributes. But this iconoclastic behaviour was limited compared, for instance, to

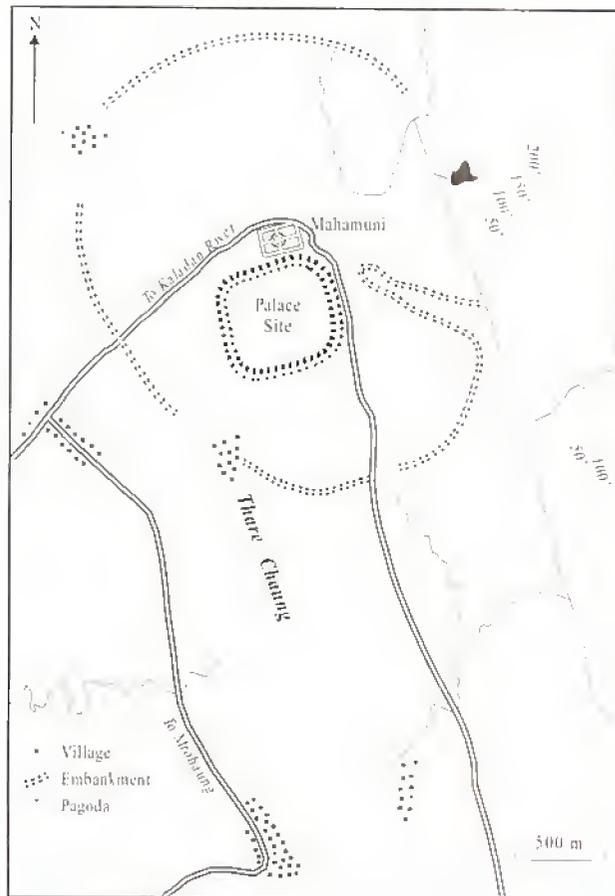
Plates 46, 47

Plate 28



the destruction of Catholic art in Tudor England. The earlier images remained revered for their power to protect the shrine long after their original significance was forgotten. Hinduism persisted until at least the 12th century as is demonstrated by one remarkable image of Visnu and Laksmi. (plate 58)

In the 15th and 16th centuries Arakan was the recipient of dynamic cultural influences from the Islamic world and Europe which resulted in a renaissance expressed in the originality of its shrines and sculptures. The close proximity of Bengal and the initial dependence of the Mrauk-U rulers on their Islamic counterparts saw Muslim influence even in Buddhist architecture. The iconography of the Shit-thaung shrine relief sculpture, however, reflects the Theravadin Buddhist cosmology as it developed in the lands to its west, rather than to India. But always underlying these influences from outside were the local spirits, protecting the land and its cities and which continue to be propitiated now as then.



Map 3. Dhanyawadi



## 1 DHANYAWADI

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The city of Dhanyawadi is the oldest site yet discovered in Arakan, dating from around the 4th century and typical of the earliest phase of urbanisation in Southeast Asia. Contemporary with the Pyu cities of Burma proper, the early Mon cities of modern Thailand and the sites of the Oc Eo culture in south Vietnam, its art shows that it was linked with these by both trade and religion. Although its closest neighbouring states were small Indian kingdoms and its trade was around the Bay of Bengal, there are no direct prototypes for the art of Dhanyawadi in eastern India.

The only remains we have of the art of Dhanyawadi are the sculptures which have survived around the Mahamuni shrine, northeast of the palace site. The inspiration for these came from the northern fringes of the Gupta empire, which was soon to disappear in the wake of the Hun invasions. The sculptures document a period in Buddhist art which is otherwise known to us only through texts preserved in China. But the beliefs which they illustrate continue to evolve today, so an account of the tradition surrounding the Mahamuni's central image, a tradition developed over centuries, will help to explain the development of Buddhism and its art in Arakan.

The story of the making of the Mahamuni image has similarities with traditions associated with other images throughout the Buddhist world said to be copies made of the Great Sage during his lifetime. So in both the Mahamuni tradition and the legends about an image in Kosambi in northwest India said to have been made when the Sage went to the Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods, the Buddha breathes life into his likeness, and an array of miracles occur. He endows the image with the supernatural powers of a Buddha, and prophesizes that it will survive the 5,000 years of the religion, the means of the salvation of men and *nats*. It is significant that stories of this nature were being conveyed to China in the 5th century, at the time when the Mahamuni shrine was being built.



## THE MAHAMUNI TRADITION

The Mahamuni image, believed by the Arakanese to be the only true copy of the Great Sage in existence, is the core of all Arakanese history. The chronicles incorporate traditions current after Theravada Buddhism had, under the influence of Pagan, become the state religion, and have accretions obviously derived from the Pali literature of Sri Lanka.

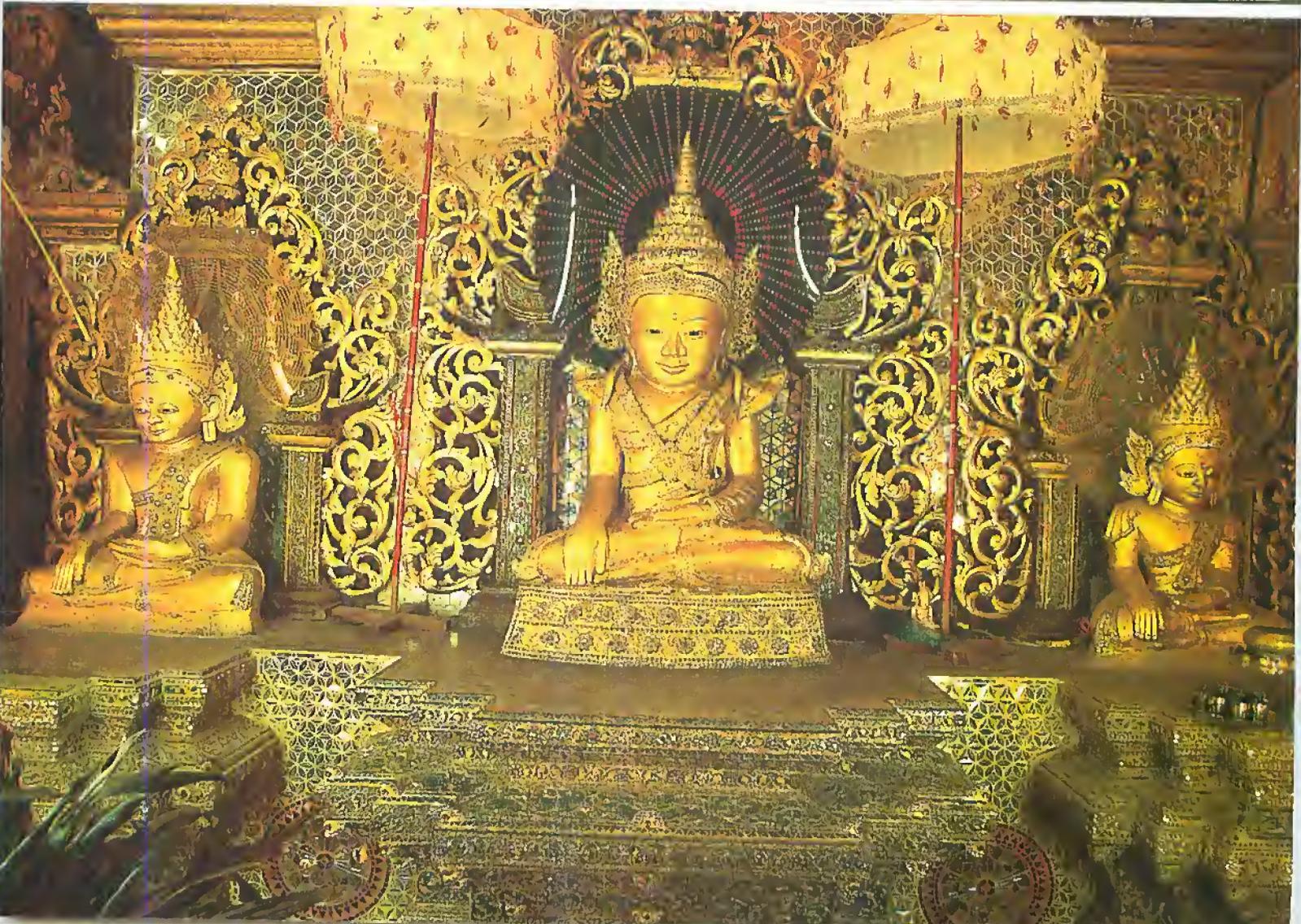
The tradition places the casting of the image in the time of the Buddha, when King Candasuriya ruled the country. Candrasuriya is said to have heard of the Buddha's teachings, and wished to pay homage to him. The Buddha, dwelling in Sravasti in India, became aware of this and said to his disciple Ananda that such a journey would be dangerous for the King, as large rivers and seas ruled by fearsome *nagas* or serpent demons would have to be crossed. Thus, together with 500 of his disciples he flew through the air and alighted on the Selagiri hill opposite Kyauktaw. Here he prophesied that throughout the country many pagodas would be built to enshrine relics of his former existences when he lived there. The earth trembled and the oceans boiled at this utterance, and King Candrasuriya took alarm, asking his astrologers the meaning of these portentous signs. On being told of the arrival of the Buddha he went to Selagiri with his chief Queen, Candramala, several hundred maidens and his ministers. The King having paid due homage, the Buddha instructed him in the Law, after which he agreed to come to the capital for seven days. Before he left he agreed that he would leave behind his image and hair, which would be venerated for 5,000 years following his Nirvana.

The sacred image was constructed by Sakra (Indra), King of the Gods and Visvakarman, the celestial architect, on Sirigutta hill, northeast of the palace. When the Buddha, the Great Sage, breathed life into the image it appeared as if there were two Buddhas. Many miraculous signs appeared: the earth shook, and the image slowly rose as if possessed of life and stood in the attitude of welcoming his elder brother Gotama. The Buddha then rose with his disciples and flew in the direction of Sandoway. Meanwhile, the king, together with his court and subjects, celebrated with festivals and worshipped this only true image of him. The power of the image was such that six rays of

17 (opposite) Selagiri hill, where the Buddha is said to have landed when he flew to Arakan.

18 (opposite) The main image of the Mahamuni shrine, which today replaces the renowned Mahamuni image taken by Bodawpaya when he conquered Arakan in 1784.





light issuing from it flashed when the faithful approached and faded when heretics worshipped. The stone figures placed around the image house at the cardinal points kept away persons who approached it with evil intent.

Nothing further is recorded until the first king of Vesali is said to have rebuilt the shrine and erected a new stone altar for the image. His successor also made repairs and priests from Pagan and Sri Lanka came to worship. Pyu, Burman and Mon kings are said to have invaded Arakan with the intention of obtaining the sacred image in the Mahamuni temple. None succeeded, but some undertook repairs of the shrine. By the 12th century the shrine and the image were lost, but were re-discovered and rebuilt by a Le-mro king, whose successors continued to support the cult.

The founder of the Mrauk-U dynasty, Min Saw Mun, constructed a road from his city to Mahamuni and began a tradition of royal pilgrimages. In the 16th century King Min Bin ordered numerous images resembling the original to be sculpted and placed in various shrines around the country, including the Shit-thaung temple at Mrauk-U.

In 1784 the Burmese King Bodawpaya conquered Arakan. The Mahamuni image, the palladium of the country, was taken to Mandalay where the shrine in which it is housed is still today regarded as one of the most sacred in Burma. The loss of the relic deeply affected the Arakanese people, who surrendered to British rule soon after. In 1867 a Lao settler in the area had the jungle cleared, and erected a shrine for the stone images found in the vicinity. Further restoration was undertaken some 80 years ago, when the lower terraces were restored and a new bronze image copied from the original at Mandalay was installed. Today, the temple is again an important pilgrimage centre, with its helicopter pad receiving dignitaries from all over Burma and beyond.

The Mahamuni shrine encompasses a hillock at the north-east corner of the palace site. Over the centuries it has either been a pilgrimage centre or has been forgotten when the country suffered under invaders. Nothing remains of the original structure, but from aerial photographs it can be seen that the plan today closely resembles its original form. The shrine was contained within a rectangular wall, with openings at the four



cardinal points, the most important being at the east. The temple proper was square, set towards the east, and raised over two broad, almost square terraces. In the southeast and southwest corners of the first terrace are large tanks or ponds used for the ablution rituals of the main image. No obvious Indian prototype for an image shrine over stepped terraces exists, although the most likely origin may be found in the pre-6th century phases of the main temple at the famous Buddhist monastic centre at Nalanda in northeast India.

### THE SCULPTURES

We do not know what the original Mahamuni image looked like. Today the image in Mandalay is covered with so much gold leaf applied by devotees its original appearance is indiscernible, although the face follows the Mrauk-U style. The tradition itself, however, gives us some clues. Allusions to its frequent reinstallation may refer to the making of a copy of its immediate predecessor. All Buddha images must trace their lineage back to one of the legendary "authentic" likenesses, and the models for all new commissions will be those which have a reputation of displaying magical power. The hundreds of copies of the Mahamuni distributed around the country and installed at the Shit-thaung by Min Bin are in the style of the middle period of Mrauk-U.

While the Mahamuni image now resides in Mandalay, where it continues to exert spiritual and political power, many of the images which once guarded the shrine remain and are still regarded as having a protective function. During one of the more recent restorations of the shrine most of these figures were placed in specially erected individual brick enclosures on the terraces, open to all directions in order that they might continue to exert their protective power.

One remaining image, fortunately typical of the main group, is inscribed, in a script identical to that used by the eastern Guptas around the middle of the 5th century, with the name Yaksasenapati Panada, one of the 28 Yaksa generals led by Kuvera, the heavenly guardian of the northern direction. This





19 Architectural fragment.  
One of the few remaining fragments of the original structure, this lintel fragment with a caitya arch framing a face derives from the late Indian Gupta tradition, as can be seen from the wig-like hair, rounded face and downward-looking eyes. Mahamuni Museum.

date places the group within the reigns of the earliest Candra kings, and it can therefore be assumed that one of these built the shrine which housed them.

The images have been wrought in fine-grained warm red sandstone, possibly quarried in the hills west of Mrauk-U. They were originally placed around the shrine, many probably in niches. Although much damaged, they can be seen to derive from the late Gupta style of Indian sculpture. Their faces are rounded, their expression, where discernible, calm and contemplative, with downcast eyes and full lips slightly upturned. Bodies are smoothly curved, and the planes fluid despite the often angular postures. The composition of each sculpture is serenely balanced according to a geometric prescription. Behind the figures the ground remains plain, in contrast to the jingly compositions of Indian sculpture. The backslab often tends to dominate, rising well above the figures, a trend also noticed in the early Buddhist sculpture of the Pyu city of Sriksetra, near modern Pyay (Prome).

Each image was designed to be seen alone, but recognised to be part of the whole complex. Hence the distinguishing characteristics, in particular the headdresses, are ornate and highly decorative. The costumes and posture, in contrast, are almost



identical. Each has large *cakra* or wheel-shaped rings inserted in the ear lobes. All have plain upper armbands and rigid, wide necklaces. A belt is always worn, tied around the waist in various fashions. A scarf is often discernible around the hips. Most of these ornaments are worn by the earliest Bodhisattva images in India, where they were modelled on those worn by royalty. Apart from the standing door guardian, all sit with their right knee raised, foot pointing forward and the left leg folded under. All are two-armed, although these were often broken at the elbows.

While the images which survive today are not in their original positions, their identification and function in the original temple structure can sometimes be deduced from their attributes. Often, however, the characteristics which once identified them have been deliberately destroyed. This desecration may have been the work of Theravadin Buddhists who wanted to eliminate evidence of the Mahayanism which existed before. King Anoratha of Pagan is said to have ordered the "*deva*" images to be recut as Buddhas and some Mahamuni sculptures show evidence of this.

Those images remaining can be divided into categories which give some indication as to their original function and placement. *Dvarapalas* or door guardians once guarded the main entrance, and a single specimen with a ferocious appearance can now be found on the upper terrace, standing holding a long sword. There are crowned *nagas* and *naginis*, male and female demi-gods absorbed into Buddhism from earlier times, distinguished by their serpent canopies. These creatures, whose home was in the bowels of the earth, and who were associated with underground wealth, were perhaps originally placed around the base of the shrine.

Two *Lokapalas*, guardians of the directions, carry in their left hands the swords which identify their protective function. Originally there must have been four figures in this group: Kuvera or Vaisravana, guarding the north, Virudhaka the south, Dhrtarastra east and Virupaksa west. The *Lokapalas*, like the *nagas*, have headdresses with diadems at the forehead, above which are tall, conical *usnisas* or turbans. Behind their heads are coil-decorated halos and on either side elaborate, wing-like projections issue. Smaller renditions of the *Lokapalas*, with simi-

Plates 5, 6, 20, 21, 22, 23

Plate 20

Plate 21





lar headdresses but with flags flying over their heads, were part of their retinues. The *yaksa* general Panada described above was one of these.

We know from the Buddhist literature of the time that by the 5th century the four *Lokapalas* who guard the four quarters of the universe were also seen to protect the four quarters of the kingdom. They were regarded as the adjutants of Indra, king of the gods. When called upon by the recitation of the appropriate Buddhist *sutras* they would arrive with their armies and could thus protect a country against national perils such as famine, invasion, plague and revolutions. They would also report to Indra, the king of the gods, on the conduct of all the living creatures in the country, whereupon guardian spirits would be appointed by him to protect the righteous. In this way local spirit cults could be absorbed into the Buddhist pantheon. In the Buddhist hierarchy the *Lokapalas* were placed on



a plateau halfway up Mount Meru, the mountain at the centre of the world. As the shrine was considered to be the earthly equivalent of Meru, the *Lokapalas* would have been placed in a corresponding position, their armies arrayed beneath them.

The largest group, some twelve extant images, comprises celestial beings again distinguished by their headdresses. They probably represent Bodhisattvas, the compassionate and enlightened beings who forswear *nirvana* in order to help others attain enlightenment and which are known only in Mahayana Buddhism. Behind their shoulders are wing-like projections decorated with a coiled motif, illustrating the glowing aureole which emanates from the body of a Bodhisattva. Their five-

Plates 5, 6, 22



21 Mahamuni shrine. Lokapala.





pointed crowns are surmounted by a particularly tall *usnisa* consisting of three coils topped with a high rounded projection which is sometimes decorated. On the sides of the crown and the *usnisa* are flower-like appendages from which ribbon shapes fly upwards. In a 5th century *sutra* prescribing the meditation technique to visualise a Bodhisattva a similar crown is described:

“The *usnisa* on the crown of his head holds *mani* jewels like



the *sakrabhilagna* [worn by Indra]. All four sides of the *usnisa* are luminescent, emitting golden rays of light; between each pair of rays are four jewelled blossoms with all the colours of a hundred jewels...”

Such a text would have been available to the Mahamuni sculptor, who without bronze models or illustrated texts to copy from created this ingenious literal rendition in stone. Two of these celestial figures have longer, more elongated bodies, oval halos and taller, more elaborate headdresses, and may represent a superior Bodhisattva type.

The majority of the sculptures in this group are difficult to identify as most of their identifying attributes have been lost. That they represent Bodhisattvas is corroborated by the fact that one holds in his right hand the stem of a much-damaged lotus. This identifies him as a form of Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion and Purity, for just as the lotus grows from the mud but is not soiled so Avalokitesvara works for the benefit of beings within the defilements of ignorance and passion, but is not sullied. Others hold either a rosary or a noose, both Bodhisattva attributes.

During this period the importance of the various Buddhist divinities was changing so rapidly that artists were usually unable to keep pace with the storytellers. The demise of Buddhism in north India and the accompanying destruction of its relics have left little to help in identifying the schools which might have influenced the sculptors.

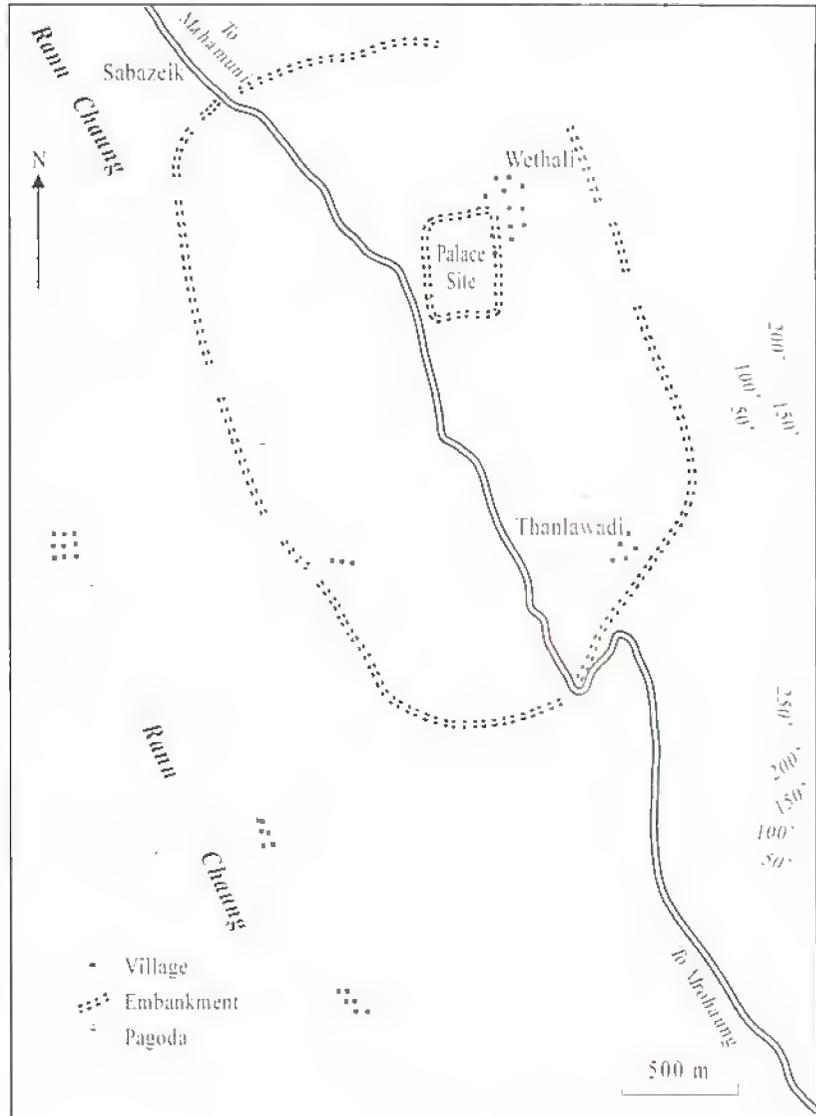
From its position in relation to the palace site and the traditions which surround it, it is evident that the Mahamuni was the royal shrine of the earliest kings of Dhanyawadi. Unlike the royal shrines being erected at the same time in other parts of Southeast Asia, it was not Hindu but Buddhist. While we do not know what the aspirations of the king who built it were, nor much about the nature of kingship in Arakan in the 5th century, we can speculate that the king sought to position himself as a *cakravartin*, a turner of the wheel of the Buddha's law on earth. In this he was assisted by the central image of a Buddha in his royal shrine, and by the celestial hierarchy represented by those images which still remain.



23 Head, probably of a door guardian, following the Mahamuni style, discovered during the 1997 excavations of the Mrauk-U palace site. While the rounded shape of the face and the beehive headdress continue the style established at Mahamuni, it is somewhat coarser in execution. Guardian images were considered to exert great power, and were often moved from capital to capital, or seized in war. This head may have been brought to Mrauk-U from Dhanyawadi.



မြို့စကားသိန်း (စကားသိန်း)  
 ရေစုဆရာ (ထိုင်းသုကေသီ)  
 အမှတ်-၁၂၁၊ ဝါယံ (၂)၊ သမ်း  
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Map 4. Vesali



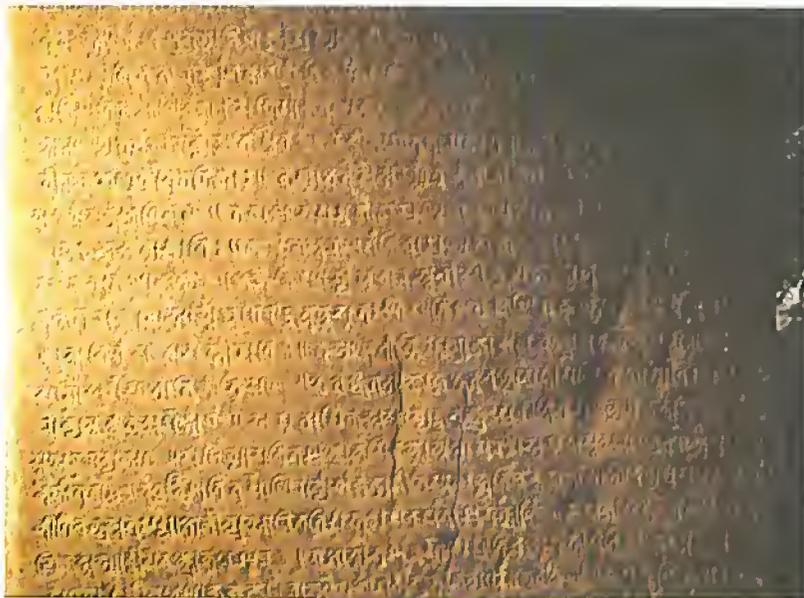
## 2 VESALI

While current research does not tell us when the centre of power moved from Dhanyawadi to Vesali, from the style of its sculpture and the palaeography of its inscriptions we can assume that this happened around the beginning of the sixth century.

The Mahamuni shrine at Dhanyawadi retained its importance as a sacred centre, as remains of later structures in the vicinity bear out. Vesali was even more open to Indian influence than was Dhanyawadi. More easily reached by the overland route, it also took advantage of increased trade in the Bay of Bengal.

### THE CANDRA KINGS

From this time we can reconstruct the history from contemporary written accounts. The inscription of Anandacandra, written around 729 AD, gives the names and reign periods of eighteen of his predecessors, the earlier of whom may have ruled at Dhanyawadi. The kings of earliest Candra dynasty, who ruled from end of the 4th to the beginning of the



24 Anandacandra's inscription on the Shit-thaung pillar.



7th centuries, are said to have descended from the lineage of the Hindu god Siva, and the lineage is mentioned again in connection with Anandacandra's grandfather, Vajrasakti. The inscription describes Anandacandra and his immediate predecessors as Mahayana Buddhists. This would not, however, have precluded the existence of a Hindu royal cult as was the case in both India and elsewhere in Southeast Asia. The Candra kings certainly did not neglect to support the local Brahmins, the bearers of Sanskrit culture at court. Anandacandra says that he built four temples, named after himself, for the Brahmins as well as providing them with land, servants and musicians.

The nature of Arakanese kingship during this period is illustrated by an interesting plaque discovered together with a round-based bronze vessel during the construction of the road from Vesali to Mrauk-U. The plaque aptly illustrates the symbolism behind the *abhiseka* or lustration ceremonies performed to consecrate Buddhist kings, but which is derived from Hindu ritual and practice. The significance behind the symbolism is that the king during the royal consecration became a future Buddha as well as a *dharmaraja*, a ruler of the law, responsible for the spiritual and temporal well being of his people. The country was seen as a microcosm of the universe whose maintenance was ensured by the *dharm*a of Indra, the king of the gods who as one of the chief assistants to the Buddha controlled the cycle of the seasons and consequently the fertility and prosperity of the country.

The square plaque has a round indentation in the centre into which the bronze vessel fits. Around the indentation is a ring of lotus petals, then twelve auspicious signs connected with the function of kingship. These are a *srivatsa* diagram representing the goddess of fertility and prosperity Sri, who was believed to enter the king during the royal consecration; the winged conch, double fish and vase of abundance, symbols also associated with prosperity; an umbrella, pair of fly whisks, elephant goad and a bull, the auspicious royal symbols; a pillar, which was erected by the king to symbolically link heaven and earth thereby ensuring the procession of the equinox; a gander which also symbolised link between the heaven and earth, and a peacock and a deer representing the sun and the moon, the heavenly bodies which rule the universe. The corners of the



plaque are filled with lotus buds and leaves, the whole being surrounded by a beaded border.

The plaque is a representation of the universe, within which is a *mandala* which establishes the king as its centre in his country, seen as the microcosm of the universe. In Hindu-Buddhist cosmology, the circular universe was thought to be surrounded by an enormous rock wall, represented on the plaque by the square border. This encloses an ocean with four island continents, here represented by the lotuses set in each of the four corners. In the centre of the universe is Mount Meru, the axis of the world and the abode of Indra with whom the king was identified, denoted on the plaque by the central ring of lotus petals. The twelve symbols arranged within a circle around the centre are intimately associated with the establishment of the royal *dharmā*, the king's given power to maintain the fertility and prosperity of the country. In the ceremony of the royal consecration, the properties of these symbols were absorbed into the waters contained in the central vessel, which were ritually poured over the king. As a consequence of assimilating these properties, the king therefore became a god on earth, a *cakravartin* or turner of the wheel of mundane and supra-mundane law which would guarantee his country's protection and wealth. Later texts describe the participation of both Brahmins and Buddhists in this ceremony.

The Shit-thaung inscription describes Anandacandra's most important activities as the building of Buddhist foundations and commissioning objects of worship and records his building many monasteries and providing them with slaves, fields and buffaloes. His religious donations also included gold and silver *caityas* containing relics of the Buddha, Bodhisattvas, the goddess Cunda and others, and Buddha images made of brass bell metal and copper, as well as ivory, wood, terracotta and stone. The inscription relates that he had innumerable clay models of *stupas* made, and commissioned the writing, or copying, of holy scriptures. He made donations to monks who came to his city from many parts of the Buddhist world, and indeed sent gifts including an elephant and robes to the congregation of monks in Sri Lanka. His subjects benefited through public works such as the building of wells and pleasure gardens, and through the justice he administered daily from the palace.



25 Abhiseka plaque, found during construction of the Mrauk-U-Vesali road in 1965, "about one furlong before one reaches the Thinkyattaw junction pagoda", together with a round-based bronze vessel, three bands around its neck and a detachable lid. Steatite, 17cm. x 17cm. Mrauk-U Museum.



Following the example of the Imperial Gupta emperors, he always released capital offenders.

## ARCHITECTURE AND SCULPTURE

Mounds strewn with broken sculptures, dressed stone and bricks, suggesting that these were the sites of ancient shrines dot the site of the old city of Vesali. Shwe-daung-gyi, "the Great Golden Hill" is northeast of the palace site, in the same relationship the Mahamuni has to the palace at Dhinnyawadi. It may, therefore, be the site of a royal shrine. In local legend it is the burial ground of a Pyu king and his army which unsuccessfully attempted to invade the city in the 10th century. At Letkhat-taung, east of Vesali village, a number of very damaged life-sized images have been found. Sanghayama hill, reputedly the site of a Buddhist synod, has also revealed architectural fragments and sculptures.

The excavations undertaken at Vesali in the 1980s have begun to uncover some of its former splendour. The four sites between Tharlawaddy and Vesali villages within the city walls have revealed a Buddhist ordination hall, a monastery, and a building which may have been connected with a royal cult, as a damaged stone image of a bull on a brick throne was recovered there. We have seen that the royal cult of the Candras may have been Shaivite as was the case at Sambor Prei Kuk in Cambodia, the pre-Angkorian city of Isanapura, where a build-

26 *The remains of a monastery and Buddhist ordination hall at Vesali.*

27 (opposite page) *Head of a deva from Vesali site 1. Sandstone. H. .26m. The rounded face, finely shaped features and calm, enigmatic expression recall the art of the late Gupta period in India and the 7th century sculpture of Khu Bua in western Thailand.*







28 Coins of the Candra dynasty found at Vesali. The obverse always has the dynastic emblem, a recumbent bull and the name of the king in Sanskrit, while the reverse has a srivatsa, emblem of fertility and prosperity. Mrauk-U Museum.

ing was designated as a stable for Nandi, the riding bull of Siva who inhabited the central shrine there.

Two lintels found at Mrauk-U appear to belong to the Vesali period. Both bear a strong resemblance to the 7th century lintels found in Thailand and Cambodia. On either side ornate *makara* heads spew forth an arcature interspersed with medallions. Hanging from the arcature are loops of pearls or garlands. This lintel type, while ultimately deriving from a form found in the rock-cut Buddhist architecture of Ajanta in western India, has no immediate Indian precedents. The influence of the Indian-influenced schools to the west at this time illustrates the shared artistic vocabulary used in mainland Southeast Asia before the eighth century.

Another lintel fragment was found during the 1996 excavations of the Nibuza pagoda at Mrauk-U. The Ni-buza surmounts a hill even today regarded as sacred and the fragment might have belonged to an earlier structure there. It is decorated with a *caitya* arch flanked by two bulbous serrated pillar capitals. Within the circular niche of the arch the sun god Surya stands holding a lotus in each hand. The form of the arch is typically post-Gupta in style and the capitals resemble those found in the western Indian rock-cut caves at Ellora dated in the 8th century.

Also found at Mrauk-U, and now in the excellent Museum there, is a column sculpted on three sides which once was engaged against a wall at the entrance to a shrine. The base had addorsed, realistic elephant forequarters at the corners, and in the centre of each face is an ogre's face with bulging eyes, teeth horribly bared and a long curling mane. Above the base, framed in an archway, the river goddess Ganga, carrying a flywhisk, stands on her vehicle, the *makara*. Ganga is commonly found among the deities at the entrances of both Hindu and Buddhist shrines in India, although the only other depiction of a river goddess in Southeast Asia is on a mid-7th century pre-Angkorian pilaster from Isanapura or Sambor Prei Kuk. Here too the figure is depicted alone within a frame which Professor Boisselier contended is a representation in miniature of the temple itself. Both the figure and the architectural frame follow the style developed from the Gupta art of Ajanta by the Western Calukyan kings in south India in the second half of





29 Red sandstone lintel fragment with Surya framed in a caitya arch from the Ni-buza excavations. Mrauk-U Museum.



30 (left) Engaged pillar from Tezarama monastery, Mrauk-U. Mrauk-U Museum.



31 (right) Side view of the engaged pillar.



Plate 31

the 7th century. As in the lintel described above, *makara* heads disgorge the arcature.

On the other two faces identical half arches each frame a lithe male figure which appears to step from behind. Probably door guardians, they wear clothes and ornaments similar to those found in the Calukya sculpture of southern India, as well as a "Scythian" conical helmet often adopted by temple guardians of the south. Above these guardians of the door is a continuation of the reduction of the main body of a building of the type to which the column belonged. The general shape suggests the form of a South Indian temple fronted by a columned hall on a plinth, the whole surmounted by a vaulted roof with upturned eaves. Above this "shrine" is a panel depicting a lotus, and the uppermost panel has *vyala* caryatids at the corners flanking a small figure of Garuda apparently emerging from a sea of intricate foliage.

The form of the shrine from which the column ultimately derived is southern Indian of the late 7th or early 8th centuries AD, although there are similarities with the contemporary architecture of Thailand and Cambodia. The column, which would have formed part of the main doorway, illustrated in miniature the main features of the temple proper, so we are able from these fragments to get a glimpse of the style of temples yet to be uncovered at Vesali.

In addition, some sculptures discovered at other sites have come from religious structures. A number of these are kept in a shed at Vesali village. All are in the red sandstone typical of sculptures of this period. They include a massive image of Visnu, some two metres tall, as monumental in conception as pre-Angkorian Visnu images of the same period. The god's head and upper arms are missing, and his lower hands rest on the heads of Cakradeva and Gadadevi, his personified attributes. Others include the goddess Ganga and door guardians, but most are too damaged to allow identification. Most can be seen to belong to the late and post-Gupta periods in style, and the

Plate 34

32 Grey Sandstone lintel at Mingalanaung Monastery in the Cambodian Sambor style of the 7th century.

33 Grey sandstone lintel on the hill behind the Laung-pan-prauk following the Cambodian Sambor style, 7th century.





garments indicate that the sculptors were variously influenced by the art of northeast India and the Pallavas of the south around the seventh century.

While most of the Buddha images found at Vesali are damaged or fragmentary, some show connections with the northern Buddhist centres of India and the Pyu sculpture of Sriksetra in Burma proper. The recent discovery of a group of red sandstone images in high relief at Selagiri, the hill where the Buddha is said to have landed opposite modern Kyauktaw, is important in that it shows how the Arakan sculptor reinterpreted Indian models. The attempts at rendering perspective were only achieved in some paintings in the Ajanta caves in western India. Although Selagiri is closer to Dhanyawadi than Vesali, their style places them in the Vesali period and shows the importance of the Selagiri to the Buddhism of the time.

The reliefs, now at the Mahamuni Museum, originally surrounded a brick *stupa* at the base of the southern side of Selagiri hill. Most depict events in the life of the Buddha, while a related image found 70 years ago shows the Buddha preaching to a royal figure. Like the Mahamuni sculptures, the figures are depicted against a plain background and are surmounted by a plain, oval-shaped halo. The hair is treated as rows of coils, dipping slightly over the forehead and the facial features show a tendency to portray local physiognomy, with a longer nose and fuller lips than is usual in Indian sculpture. The bodies

Plates 35-38

*34 Images kept in a shed at Vesali village, where they are venerated as nats or spirits.*





35 Enlightenment of the Buddha from Selagiri stupa. Mahamuni Museum.



36 The First Sermon, from Selagiri stupa. Mahamuni Museum.



37 The Parinirvana, from Selagiri stupa. Mahamuni Museum.



38 Bodhisattva, from Selagiri stupa. Mahamuni Museum.

present a continuous flowing surface and there is no attempt to define muscles.

Two sculptures representing the Enlightenment are identical. The Buddha sits in *padmasana*, right leg crossed over left in the Northern Indian manner, with the right hand touching the ground in the attitude of calling the earth to witness his victory over the demon Mara, the personification of desire and death. The figure is surrounded with a scalloped reredos, similar to some found in Bengali bronzes, illustrating the light which emanated from the body of the Buddha after he attained Enlightenment. He sits under a stylized Bodhi tree on an unornamented throne which recedes into the backslab in an attempt to indicate perspective.

The next image shows the Buddha delivering the First Sermon. He is seated in the so-called "European position" on a rectangular throne with his feet placed on a lotus pedestal, his hands in *dharmacakramudra*, the attitude representing the turning of the wheel of the Law. To his right kneels a bearded ascetic and to his left a monk, both with hands clasped in adoration. The first of these may represent the forest monks noted for their ascetic practices, while the other may represent the monks living in cities or major monasteries. Below deer sit on either side, indicating that the First Sermon took place in the deer park at Benares. This image type is found in the 6th century art of Ajanta and later at Nalanda, and further west at Dvaravati in modern Thailand.

In the rendition of the final episode of the Buddha's life, his death or Parinirvana, the dying Master lies on his side, hand under head, under three *sala* trees signifying the grove in which this event took place. Below are three remarkably life-like mourners, seated in attitudes of extreme grief. Perspective is attempted through portraying the mourners in the foreground larger than the Buddha, who is shown reclining on a ledge sloped to emphasize depth through the play of light, and by the *sala* trees in the background, illustrated in an appropriately smaller scale.

Plate 38 depicts a crowned figure of a male standing in an hieratical, frontal pose on a round base. Both arms are broken so any identifying attributes have been lost. The ornaments and garments are similar to those found both at Vesali and



Nalanda. The plain aureole behind the head indicates divinity, and this together with the royal ornaments and the masterfully achieved serenity of the face suggests that the figure may be a Bodhisattva. Another similar image holds a lotus, identifying it as the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. In the later Mahayanist Buddhist art of eastern India the scene of the Enlightenment, the Buddha in *bhumisparsamudra* is often flanked by the Bodhisattvas Padmapani Avalokitesvara and Vajrapani, and this may have been the case here.

Stylistically the Selagiri images ultimately derive from the classical Gupta tradition, and this group shows similarities with the art of Ajanta, especially. While the Buddha figures continue this tradition, there are strong links with the later Buddhist art of Northeast India. The Buddha seated in *padmasana*, rather than the *virasana* preferred in the south, indicates an east Indian connection. The rendition of the robe, especially the flap over the left shoulder, shows a connection with Buddhist practice at the Indian schools of Kurkihar and Nalanda, as well as Dvaravati in Thailand.

The Selagiri reliefs illustrate the spread, in the sixth or the seventh century, of Mahayanist influence from the schools of northeast India to Arakan, as indeed is well documented in the neighbouring polities of Pyu Sriksetra and Mon Dvaravati. The paucity of Buddhist remains from this period in India does not, unfortunately, allow us to be more specific about the nature of this influence. Other sources attest to the spread of the Mahayana to Arakan and its neighbours during this period. The Tibetan historian Taranatha includes Rakhan, which must be Arakan, in his description of the Koki countries where, he tells us, the followers of Vasubandhu, the 4th century Buddhist philosopher, spread the Mahayana. The Chinese traveller Yijing (635-713) recorded that the four principal schools of Buddhism were known in the Eastern frontier countries of India, as well as over the mountains, in countries including Dvaravati and Sriksetra, in modern Thailand and Burma.

Two bronze Buddhas found in a ruined *stupa* near Vesali and now kept at the Let-kauk-zay monastery at Mrauk-U typify the style of the period. Both are stylistically related to the Selagiri reliefs but appear to be slightly later in date. Both were originally covered with a protective substance giving the sur-

39 (opposite page) Buddha in the attitude of elucidation from Vesali, Let-kauk-zay monastery.







40 Standing Buddha in the attitude of reassurance from Vesali, Let-kauk-zay monastery.

face a glazed appearance. One sits, legs crossed in *padmasana*, the left arm broken at the elbow and the right raised in *vitarkamudra*, the gesture of elucidation. The Buddha's garments are depicted merely by indications of folds around the neck, the waist and over the legs, and he sits on a low waisted throne decorated on the upper portion merely with a row of rather crudely drawn circles. The treatment of the hair, the rounded face and the supple smooth modelling of the body again show a connection with the late Gupta, Pyu and Dvaravati Mon styles.

The second image, whose protective surface was removed by the monks, stands erect, the right hand in the gesture of reassurance, *abhayamudra*, and the left holding the hem of his robe. The figure is placed on a plain, drum-shaped pedestal which has been broken at the base but a few characters indicate a Sanskrit dedication of around the 7th century. While the face, body and garments compare with those of the previous image, the stance is interesting in that it is clearly linked with a series of images found throughout Southeast Asia and in Sri Lanka dating from the around the same time. Sometimes called "missionary" images as they were previously thought to be among the earliest Buddhist relics in the region, those from Sri Lanka and Java are copied from South Indian models, but this and some Mon examples from both Thailand and Burma have more in common with the late Gupta art of north India. All ultimately derive from a famous image at Kosambi in north-west India believed to be a true likeness of the Great Sage made during his lifetime and possessing miraculous powers, in much the same way as the Mahamuni image was regarded in Arakan and beyond.

Some images were obviously made at well-known workshops in India and were brought to Arakan by monks, travellers or traders. A bronze Buddha standing under the Bodhi tree found at Vesali belongs to the type made at the Bengali Buddhist centre of Mainamati. The standing Buddha, his left arm broken and his right raised in *vitarkamudra*, is rather crudely depicted and somewhat damaged. He has a detachable *prabhavali* or flaming surround of some interest. In the centre is a Bodhi tree encased within a beaded border from which stylized flames issue. The apex is crowned by a flaming *cakra* or Wheel of the



41 Bronze Buddha standing under the Bodhi tree from East Bengal, Mainamati style, 8th century. Found at Vesali, Mrauk-U Museum.





42 The Bodhisattva Manjusri. East Bengal, Mainamati style, 7th-8th centuries. Silver alloy. Found in an old stupa at the northeast corner of the Dhanyawadi city wall. Mahamuni Museum.

Law on a pedestal, flanked by two birds. Over 100 Buddhist images with similar *prabhavalis* were found during excavations of the Salban vihara at Mainamati in Bangladesh, where coins of the Arakanese Candra kings were also discovered. Those with similar treatment of the figures have been dated in the 8th century. Mainamati Buddha images of this period have also been found in Java and Thailand.

A seated Bodhisattva image, now rather damaged, was found in the ruined Mrunchaungwa *stupa* at the northeast corner of



the outer wall of Dhanyawadi and is now at the Mahamuni Museum. The Bodhisattva is seated in *maharajalilasana*, the position of royal ease, reminiscent of the images at the Mahamuni shrine. The right hand, possibly holding a small round object, rests on his raised knee. His left hand also rests on his knee from behind which a springs a blue lotus with a book laid on top. This identifies him as the Bodhisattva Manjusri, popularly associated with knowledge, who was one of the better known Bodhisattvas worshipped in East Bengal during this period. The horseshoe shaped halo behind is typical of the Bengal Mainamati bronzes of the 7th-8th centuries. The pedestal on which it was originally placed is now unfortunately missing.

Anandacandra listed votive tablets in terracotta among the religious objects he commissioned. These were the postcards of the day, souvenirs of visits to famous shrines, and were regarded as having absorbed some of the power of the shrine. It is not certain whether those which have been found were produced in Arakan. One type is well known at Sriksetra, and might have come from there. Here the Buddha sits in *padmasana*, hands in *dharmacakramudra*, and the attitude of turning the Wheel of the Law, on a lion throne with a lotus base from which elephant forequarters protrude. He is flanked by two *stupas*, and a multi-tiered parasol rises above his head. There are traces of gilding in the crevices. The symbolism suggested by the royal throne, parasol and elephants is that it is the Buddha's Law which rules the world.

A later tablet found during the Nyi-daw excavations has the Buddha sitting in *dhyana* or meditation *mudra* on a lotus base. There are indications of drapery in the robes falling over his chest. The figure is paced within an arched reredos with rampant lions standing on elephants on either side and *makaras* at head level. Three medallions above the head contain sacred syllables in proto-Bengali script. The reverse of the tablet is rounded, widening towards the base, which has a small hole in which a relic would have been placed. The influence of the Pala-Sena art of Bodhgaya is apparent here.

We have seen that the worship of Visnu as Vasudeva, practiced by the Gupta emperors, gained ready acceptance by the Candras of Arakan, anxious to emulate their imperial tradition.



Plate 10

43 Terra cotta votive tablet in the shape of a leaf from the Bodhi tree, probably from Sriksetra, 7th-8th centuries. The tablet has traces of gilding, and impressions of fabric on the reverse. Mrauk-U Museum.





Plate 9

44 Standing Visnu image from Wuntitaung. Red sandstone. 6th-7th centuries. Mrauk-U Museum.

As in eastern India, the most frequent sculptural form was four-armed, standing erect with the lower arms resting on the heads of *ayudhapurusas*, the personified weapons of the god. While there are many fragments of Visnu images found at Vesali and Mrauk-U which may be dated from the 6th to 8th centuries, only one survives intact. Those remaining are often regarded as benevolent or malevolent spirits by the local people, who retain almost no memory of what once was an important cult.

A headless standing image of Visnu was found at Wuntitaung, a site locally known as the dwelling place of a spirit which protected the country. The figure is worn and the two upper arms are broken above the elbows. Visnu stands erect in the posture known as *samapadasthanaka*, his lower hands on the heads of two chubby personified weapons. The figure at his left gazes at the god, his right arm passing over his body and holding a *camara*, the flywhisk, symbol of royalty, which appears behind him. Behind his head is a weathered *cakra*, identifying him as Cakradeva. The figure at the right offers a cylindrical object, the *gada* or mace of Gadadevi. Visnu wears a broad necklace, armbands and the Brahmanical cord, waistband and a scarf knotted at his hips, the folds falling gracefully.

The body is well proportioned and smoothly modelled, while the decoration, although ornate, is restrained and the drapery is treated in a naturalistic manner. An attempt to relieve the static posture of the main figure is achieved by the flexed posture of the *ayudhapurusas* and the *contraposto* of their arms and attributes. The inspiration for this image came from the 5th century Gupta sculpture of Mathura, a style which lived on in Eastern India for two or three centuries afterwards. Visnu with his two personified attributes was his best-known form in Eastern India, although it was not adopted elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

One of the most beautiful sculptures remaining from this period is a damaged Visnu head, its contours gently rounded in the manner of the best tradition of Gupta sculpture. The calm and benign expression, partly closed eyes and slightly smiling lips, illustrate what the historian Harle described as the definition of the Gupta style, "a turning inward, an ability



to communicate higher spiritual states." While the headdress is not found in India, it does have counterparts in pre-Khmer art of the 6th century.

A better-preserved sandstone Visnu, now in the Mrauk-U Museum, has been limed and painted in recent times. The god stands erect. His upper arms are now missing, the lower right hand rests on a *cakra* which is supported by a pillar with a square base and a rounded capital, the left on a *gada* with a lotus base, a row of diminishing coils and a ring at the top. Visnu's ornaments are elaborate. His headdress, the *kiritamakuta*, curves in at the sides, and has a three-pointed fillet decorated with a row of tear shapes. Behind the head is a large oval halo. Around his waist are a series of ornate belts, while his *yajnopavita*, the Brahmanical cord, falls from the left shoulder around the right knee, and his *vanamala*, forest garland, is looped twice, between the hips and around the knee. His legs are apparent beneath his lower garment, with the back panel draped rather stiffly in three tiers behind.

The facial features of the image are sharply defined, arched eyebrows meeting in the middle, a sharp pointed nose and thin lips curved in a smile. The graceful proportions of the earlier images have been forgotten. The head is a fifth of the total height, the arms are long and the legs short.

While the image is basically dependent on earlier forms, a new wave of influence from northern India is apparent. The proportions, facial features and elliptical halo can be traced to the art of Nalanda during the late 7th and early 8th centuries. The hard surfaces and elaborate ornamentation are typical of early Pala art at Paharpur at the same period.

Towards the end of this period the local chronicles record the establishment of a new city where Mrauk-U now stands. This is borne out by a number of finds in the Mrauk-U area. Recent excavations at the Ni-buza pagoda, which stands on a hill still today regarded as sacred, and discoveries at Tharapabbatta hill indicate occupancy in the 9th and 10th centuries.

By the middle of the 10th century Arakan was invaded by the Tibeto-Burmans who still dominate. Their cousins, at the same time, were conquering the Pyu and Mon of central and lower Burma and establishing their capital at Pagan. In the succeeding centuries Pagan dominated the cities and the culture of Arakan.

Plate 60





45 (above) Bronze Hanging Lamp with birds in flight from Vesali. One of several bronze lamps incorporating bird motifs found at Vesali, this has triangular projections for wicks issuing from a circular bowl which held oil, each of which alternated with a bird with outstretched wings.

46 (right) Standing image of Visnu from Phara-baw monastery. Sandstone, upper arms broken, figure and attributes now limed and painted. 8th century. Mrauk-U Museum.



### 3 CITIES OF THE LE-MRO VALLEY

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Little apart from the remains of city walls survives from the Le-mro period. Over its five centuries the capital changed at least five times. Four were founded on the west bank of the Le-mro River - Sambawak or Pyinsa, Parein, Hkrit and Launggret, and one on the west, Toungoo Neyinzara. The changing course of the Le-mro River contributed to this frequent change, as did the political uncertainty of the period. The Buddha images which have been recovered show a strong connection with Pagan, reflecting Burma's suzerainty over Arakan until the mid-12th century. Burmese script appears for the first time, on votive plaques and on a massive inscription recording the deeds of the king.

Arakan, by virtue of its geographical position, must have played an important role in transmitting the Buddhist imagery of Pala Bengal to Pagan. The metal casting industry which had devel-

*47 The Le-mro valley*



oped during the Vesali period now flourished. It is possible that Indian craftsmen found their way to the Le-mro cities and to Pagan following the onslaught of the Islamic Turks on the monasteries of Bihar and Bengal in the late 12th and early 13th centuries, for the majority of the better bronzes date from this period. Like their Tai and Burman neighbours they also had contact with Sri Lanka, the heartland of Buddhism after its demise in India.

### THE BUDDHA IMAGES AND OTHER SCULPTURE

The Le-mro Buddha images exhibit a quality of calmness and serenity found only in countries where Theravada Buddhism held sway. Initially they display the sharp, somewhat stylized features inherited from Pala art, with an almost linear rendition of the facial features. In the course of time, this type softens, the face becomes rounder, and its expression more contemplative and the posture more relaxed. Iconographically it becomes less diverse. Standing images in bronze are not found, and the ornate thrones and surrounds of the Pala bronzes disappear.

The main type comes directly from the Pala-Sena art of Bodhgaya, and is directly descended from the great cult image of the Mahabodhi temple known as the "Lion of the Sakyas", a title recalling the Buddha's clan name. While this image was lost long ago, numerous facsimiles have been found in the temple compound. King Kyansittha of Pagan himself ordered the restoration of Bodhgaya at the end of the 11th century. Following the "Lion of the Sakyas", the Le-mro Buddha and his successors sit in *padmasana*, legs crossed in the lotus position and almost invariably his right hand touches the earth in the attitude of calling it to witness his victory over Mara, the demon personifying desire and death. The head is always bent slightly forward and the eyes look downwards in meditation. Ears are usually long, often reaching to the shoulders. The hair, represented in tight curls, is surmounted by an *usnisa*. As at Pagan, the crown of the *usnisa* takes various forms: a lotus bud, an elongated knob or even a small *stupa*, and in the larger bronzes can be the repository for sacred relics.

The style continues over into the Mrauk-U period with only

48 (opposite page) Le-mro-style Buddha seated in *bhumisparsamudra*, now in the Mrauk-U Museum. The *usnisa* ends in a knob, and the hair is separated from the face by a narrow band. From Ratana-bon shrine, Mrauk-U.

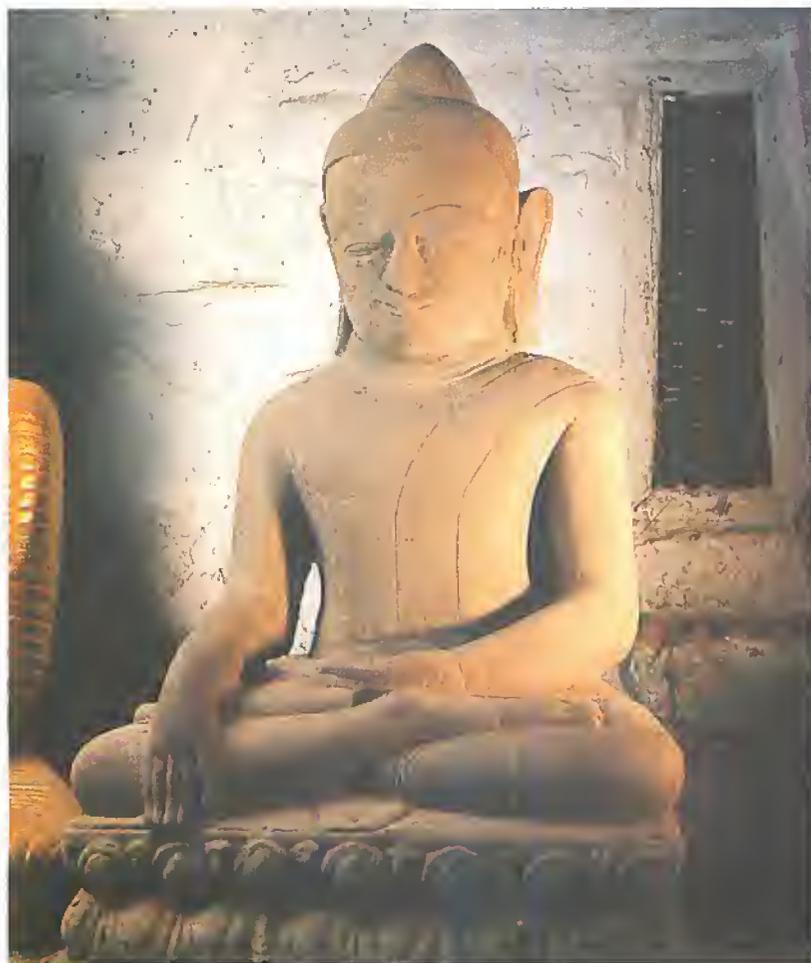






minor changes, making the bronzes difficult to date. Similarities with the 14th century art of the Lan Na and Sukhothai kingdoms in Thailand become apparent, indicating an active interchange between Buddhist communities in this part of mainland Southeast Asia. But the Le-mro images are not, as in the high classical art of Sukhothai, the superior beings created by a great state, but have a more human, accessible nature.

Images in stone tend either to copy the bronze type or to be influenced by the squatter figures of the late Pagan period. An image brought to the Shit-thaung shrine from Launggret demonstrates this transition. The Buddha and his double lotus throne are made from the same block of grey sandstone. He sits crossed-legged, right hand touching the ground, with the robe depicted in the usual way, showing the form of the body it covers, the right shoulder bare and the folded lappet over



49 (opposite page) *Le-mro style Buddha seated in bhūmisparśamudrā, now in the Myauk-U Museum. Flames burst from the apex of the usnisa. Found at Htiak-wa-pyin village.*

50 *Stone image from Launggret in the entrance hall of the Shit-thaung shrine. Possibly 13th century. H. 1.65m. Base 74cm.*



the left shoulder reaching to the waist. The head has become larger in proportion to the body and the neck is beginning to disappear, the shoulders become squared and the chest and limbs broaden. The hair is treated more smoothly and the *usnisa* is a conical lotus bud, decorated with incised vertical lines.

An image at Mrauk-U, the Pizi-phara or Testes Relic Pagoda on a hill south of the Koe-thaung on the road between Pyinsa and Mrauk-U, is interesting in that the original image is said to have been erected by King Kawlia of the Pyinsa dynasty in the mid-12th century and it certainly can be ascribed to that period. The style is clearly derived from the squat later Pagan type. The Buddha has an elongated *usnisa* or topknot, a head large in proportion to the body, and a wide chest narrowing towards the hips. The facial expression is more benign than the ethereal early Pagan type. The hill below the image was excavated by King Min Phalaung in the late 16th century and the four Buddha images within the round shrine, which is discussed below, were installed then. The tendency towards heavy, solid Buddha images in stone towards the end of the period is not noticed in bronze images.

Towards the end of this period a new type of Buddha image appears. These images are crowned, and wear other ornaments associated with royalty. The crowned Buddha image first appeared in the Pala art of Bengal and was introduced from there to Pagan and other parts of Southeast Asia in the 11th century. The evolution of the form was partially the result of Mahayana

Plate 54



51 The Pizi-phara said to have been erected by King Kawlia (1133-1153). Min Phalaung (1571-1593) excavated the hill below for an image shrine.



Buddhist concepts which combined in one image the earthly form of Sakyamuni dressed in monk's robes and his heavenly form as the future Buddha Maitreya, adorned with royal ornaments. In Theravada Buddhism, too, Sakyamuni gradually acquired the attributes of a *cakravartin*, the ideal world ruler. Adherents of both schools could therefore use the same images in their worship despite their differing perceptions of the deity.

An image found at Vesali but stylistically attributable to the 13th century appears to have evolved from the Pala style of Bengal through the Sino-Tibetan tradition. The Buddha sits in *padmasana*, in the attitude of subduing Mara, on an undecorated waisted throne typical of Le-mro bronzes. The hair is covered with a *stupa*-shaped *mukuta* surmounted by a jewel in the form of a lotus bud. His crown is five-pointed with short ribbons rising behind, and he wears two necklaces, one beaded around the neck and the other over the chest, a wide band beaded on either side and hung with jewels. The ornaments are similar to those found in Nepalese manuscript illuminations of the 11th century, and to Mahayanist bronzes of late Yuan dynasty China. Also derived from Yuan art are the flames emitting from the shoulders. The monk's robes worn by Sakyamuni are, by comparison, sketchy, having been merely incised after casting. The upper garment is folded and laid over the left shoulder in a long lappet, following the Le-mro convention, while the lower garment is denoted by a single curve at the waist and double lines above the ankles. Similarly, the downcast eyes, finely etched



52 This image, in a shrine on the road from Myauk-U to Launggret, is attributed to King Nangyagri who ruled Launggret in the second half of the 13th century. Now restored and painted, enough of the original form remains to see the elements of the Le-mro style.





eyebrows almost meeting at the centre and slight smile indicate the Le-mro period, while the hands and feet are so fluid as to appear boneless, suggesting familiarity with the Tibeto-Nepalese school. The image may well have been produced locally as the facial features seem to be Arakanese.

While stucco was the favoured medium for the sculptors of central Burma, it is rarely found in Arakan where stone of good quality was plentiful. However the lower half of a Buddha image now in the Mrauk-U Museum further illustrates the influence of the art of Pagan during the Le-mro period. Here, as at Pagan, the stucco has been applied in layers over a terracotta base. For the first time in the art of Arakan we find the earth-goddess Vasundhara at the base of the image, wringing her hair in order to drown the armies of the Demon Mara. On either side are squat figures, probably demons, while a worshipping monk sits on each side of the Buddha.

This form of Vasundhara is unknown in India, and derives from a Pali text well known in Cambodia and Thailand but rare in Burma, the *Pathamasambodhi*. Here it is said that after Siddhatta, under the Bo tree, called the earth to witness, it emerged from the ground in the form of a woman, who placed herself before the Bodhisatta as if to say "O, Great Man, I know that thou hast fulfilled the necessary conditions for the attain-



53 (opposite page) Le-mro period crowned Buddha image, Mrauk-U Museum.

54 Lower half of a seated Buddha image in stucco on a terracotta base, Mahamuni Museum.



55 Bronze Avalokitesvara, perhaps imported from Bengal. U Oo Tha Tun Collection.

56 Le-mro period terracotta votive plaque from Saw-nan-min-phyu pagoda. Mrauk-U Museum.

ment of supreme wisdom, my hair is soaked with the water poured upon the earth to ratify thy gifts, and now I will squeeze it out." The earth squeezed her hair and disappeared, but the water flowing from it like the waves of the Ganges could not be withstood by Mara's hosts, who fled and were scattered to the four points of the compass.

A small worn image is the only known bronze Avalokitesvara yet found in Arakan, although similar statuettes are known from Pagan. The Bodhisattva is sitting on a double-lotus throne in *lalitasana*, one foot folded and the other resting on a lotus coming from the base of the throne. He once held a lotus in his left hand, while the right is held in *varamudra*, the gesture of giving. He wears a tall conical *makuta* which recalls the headdresses of the earlier Mahamuni Bodhisattvas. An interesting feature is the use of silver inlay for the vertical mark on the forehead, the sacred thread and a dot on the right hand. This image, in its posture, throne and technique is strongly reminiscent of the art of Pala Bengal and may well have been brought from there.

Some particularly fine votive plaques, the souvenirs of the day, survive from the Le-mro period. These show a slight development from the type popularised by the Burman king Aniruddha of Pagan. The Buddha sits in earth-touching posture within a shrine representing the Bodhgaya temple. This can be recognised by the branches of the Bo tree which spring from either side. Three *stupas* are found on either side, and a further rim enclosing more small *stupas* is contained within a flame-like reredos. There is a dedicatory inscription in archaic Burmese at the base.

Small relief sculptures in steatite illustrating scenes from the life of the Buddha displayed around a central depiction of the conquest of Mara are well known in the art of Pagan. Derived from Pala India, they are exquisite examples of the miniaturist's art, and have been described by Professor Luce as having "a general effect like filigree, with restless interplay of light and shadow". An example from U Oo Tha Tun's collection has, placed around the earth-touching Buddha scenes from his life in a clockwise direction from the top: the Buddha's Parinirvana, where the dying Buddha lies under a *stupa*; the Descent from Tavatimsa Heaven, where the standing Buddha is flanked by two figures; the *Yamakapatihariya*, where he is seated in *dharmacakramudra*; the Nativity, with his mother, Queen Maya holds a tree as she





gives birth; the Parileyya Retreat, with the Buddha sitting, holding an almsbowl; the First Sermon, where he is shown again in *dharmacakramudra*, and the Nalagiri incident, with the standing Buddha subduing the elephant. The treatment of this example is rather coarse, and suggests mass manufacture.

A recently discovered image of Visnu and Laksmi, now in the Mahamuni Museum probably dates from this period, and demonstrates the persistence of the Visnu cult followed at Vesali. Its style indicates that contact with Bengal has become minimal. The two figures, of equal size, have disproportionately large heads, although the curves of the bodies follow the Le-mro aesthetic,

57 Eight-scene plaque, steatite. U Oo  
Tha Tun Collection.





58 Visnu and Laksmi in the Le-mro style from Selagiri. Mahamuni Museum.

59 Bronze reliquary in the form of a stupa from Pyinsa. Mrauk-U Museum.

60 (right) The Ko-nawin, "Pagoda of the Nine Elements" from the southwest.

with broad shoulders slimming to the waist. Visnu's upper hands carry a disc and a conch, while the lower rest on the heads of smaller figures which in earlier times would have represented his personified attributes. Visnu and Laksmi are equal in height. This never occurred in India, but reflects the more equal status of women in Arakan, and in Southeast Asia generally.

A small bronze reliquary in the form of a *stupa* found at the site of Pyinsa, the first Le-mro city gives some indication of the influences on the religious architecture of the period. It follows the Sri Lankan style introduced to Pagan at the end of the 11th century, with a series of five circular terraces at the base, a hemispheric dome surmounted by a square crowning block or *harmika* over which is a ringed conical spire topped with a lotus bud. Similar reliquaries have been found in Sri Lanka, and this object may well have originated there.

One shrine at Mrauk-U, the Ko-nawin or Pagoda of the nine elements is attributed to this period. Often restored, most recently in 1982, it is a solid stone structure with a porch at the east containing the central image and has seven smaller shrines in each of the other directions, each now containing images in different *mudras* which may not be original. Of particular interest is its bell-shaped dome, constructed in eight segments, the sides joined by ridges - a feature noticed in Pagan at the Pahtothamya built around the beginning of the 12th century and found in the earlier Mrauk-U shrines. The ringed conical spires crowning its subsidiary shrines are also close to a Pagan type.



## 4 MRAUK-U

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The Dutch traveller Gautier Schouten who visited Arakan in 1660 wrote:

*As we ascended sufficiently high up the mountain we could descry the city of Aracan and the golden roofs of the palace, which shone magnificently in the rays of the sun. Here and there, both on the mountain and in the valleys the eye fell on many pagodas, which made the view most enchanting. To the other side lay our settlement and our Residence, with lakes, fish-ponds, orchards, and country houses. On the opposite side of the mountain was a descent into a lovely country which in the far distance was seen to be encircled by yet other mountains doited with townships, villages and beautiful fields, indeed, it would be difficult to imagine a more entrancing landscape.*

61 View of Mrauk-U.



Handwritten text in the top left corner, likely a title or description in a non-Latin script.



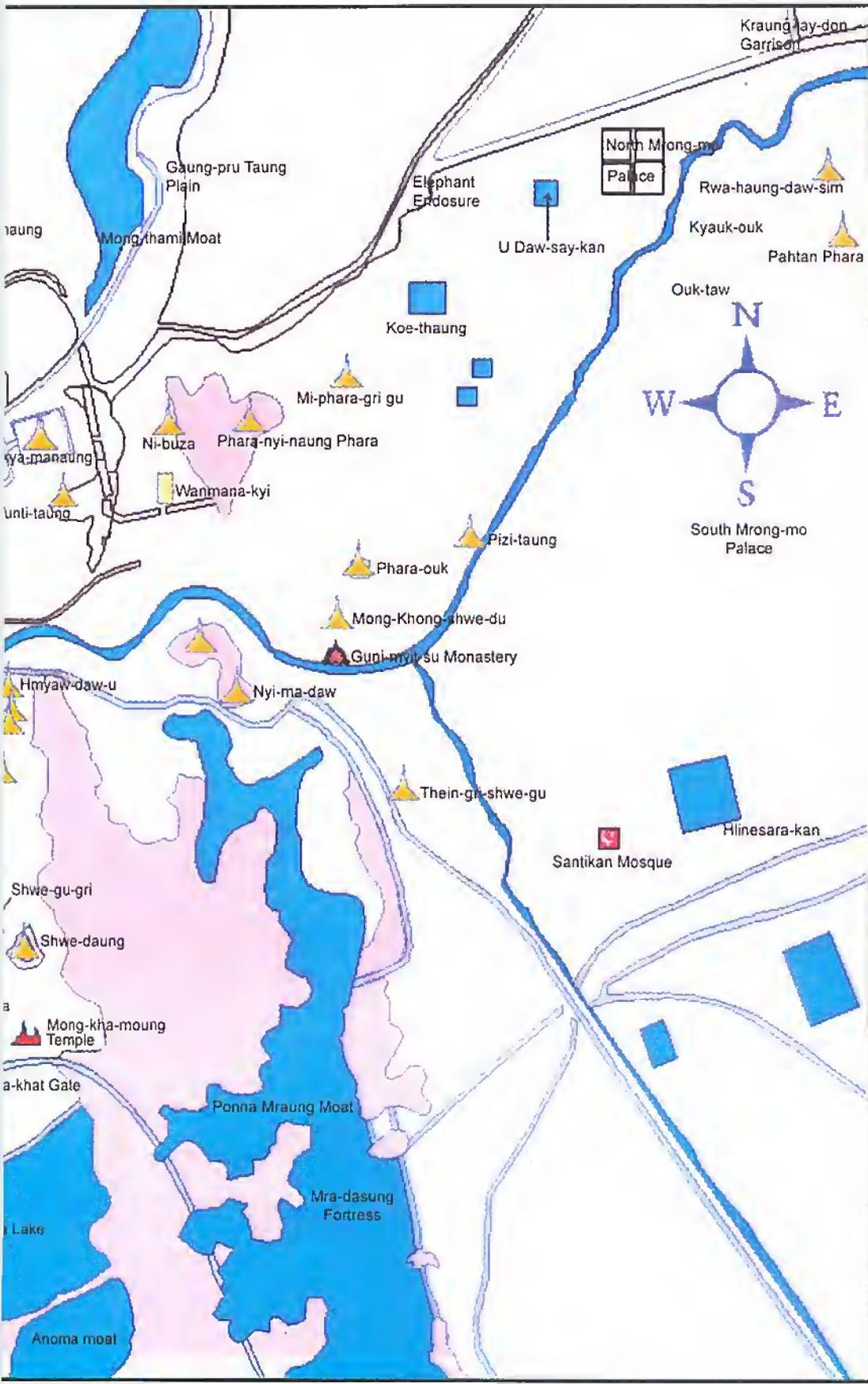
62 An Amsterdam artist's impression drawn from sketches made by Schouten.  
From Schouten, Voyages (1676).



Coninklycke Geschiede.  
ARRAKAN.







Map 5. Mrauk-U



## THE CITY AND ITS DEFENCES

At its height in the mid-16th to mid-17th centuries Mrauk-U was no longer a provincial but a world city. It drew its wealth from the coastal trade with its neighbouring countries, Bengal and Burma and beyond. Its planning, landscaping, architecture and sculpture were influenced by developments from beyond its shores. Its architects knew of the other great cities of Asia, their impressive advances in engineering, especially hydraulics and their complex defence systems using rivers and tanks, earthen ramparts and forts to protect the central citadel or palace complex. But most importantly Mrauk-U shared the tradition of the Buddhist cities of the Burmans, the Mons and the Thais, where the city was regarded as the earthly counterpart of Tavatimsa, the heaven inhabited by Indra or Sakka, king of the gods. This concept, which had developed in Arakan at least from Vesali times was quite explicit in 14th century Burma where the king, as Sakka's microcosmic counterpart, built a royal palace which was a replica of Sakka's in Tavatimsa, constructed a lake like the Mahananda in Tavatimsa, and built a shrine for the Buddha's hair relic as Sakka was believed to have done. The palace walls enclosed the microcosm of Indra's palace, as the city walls enclosed the microcosm of his city. These were guarded by the four *lokapalas* who had their counterparts in the officials responsible for the four quarters of the country. The spirits of people sacrificed at the palace and city gates, too, were thought to protect the city in perpetuity.

At the mundane level Mrauk-U's defences utilised its natural topography. Its site is characterised by hills and valleys separated by numerous streams joining natural or artificial lakes. To the west is the Kaladan River with its many arms, in the north are impassable hills and in the south are more hills, not as high as those in the south but steep and rocky and difficult to climb. The eastern side is most vulnerable, and here the most elaborate defences are found. In the weak points there are as many as four walls one behind the other, each with its moat.

Much of the complex defence system, built with the assistance of Portuguese and other mercenaries, still remains. The defences were strengthened whenever a threat from Burma or





the west was perceived, for Arakan was, in the words of the Viceroy of Goa, “both rich and weak, and therefore desirable”. Taking advantage of the ridges the city walls were built by joining their higher points with earthen ramparts and local sandstone. Even today cannon are found projecting from these walls. Moats were made by damming the streams between the ridges. The remains of strategically placed fortresses may still be seen around the perimeter of the city. Within the city, and also part of its defences, are the beautiful Anoma and Kassapa lakes which functioned as moats and were formed partly through the excavations for the walls and the bunds which regulate the influx and efflux of the tides from the Kaladan and Le-mro rivers. Apart from providing the city’s water supply, the complex sluice system could reputedly be operated to drown an invading army. Not taking into account the outermost defences the area of the city is about eight square kilometres.

*63 The Letsekan lake, gate and city walls of Mrauk-U. The city’s complex defence system incorporated moats, fortresses and massive walls as protection against the Burmese, Mons and Portuguese who coveted its great wealth. The Jina-manaung pagoda, built in the mid-seventeenth century, is in the background.*



## THE PALACE SITE

An inner wall surrounds the palace site, itself with an area of nearly two square kilometres and situated on the Taungnyo hill. Excavations in 1997 have confirmed earlier accounts which say that after Min Saw Mun began construction in 1430 it was rebuilt at least twice, in the middle and at the end of the sixteenth century. In all 49 kings are said to have resided there for 354 years. The site itself is made up of three terraces, the highest about 20 metres above the lowest. The earliest outer walls were constructed of brick, while later work strengthened these with sandstone blocks on two occasions. The latest of these is around two metres thick at the base and one and a half at the top. Only one gate remains, at the south-east corner entrance to the second enclosure, although more are in the process of being uncovered. The palaces of Burma throughout history had twelve gates, three opening to each cardinal point, and this may have been the case at Mrauk-U. By analogy with the Mandalay palace and from contemporary accounts we can assume that the lowest terrace contained buildings such as the arsenal, stables for elephants and horses, guard houses and barracks, watch towers and possibly the mint and royal tombs. The second terrace would have contained audi-



64 *Mauk-taw gate.*

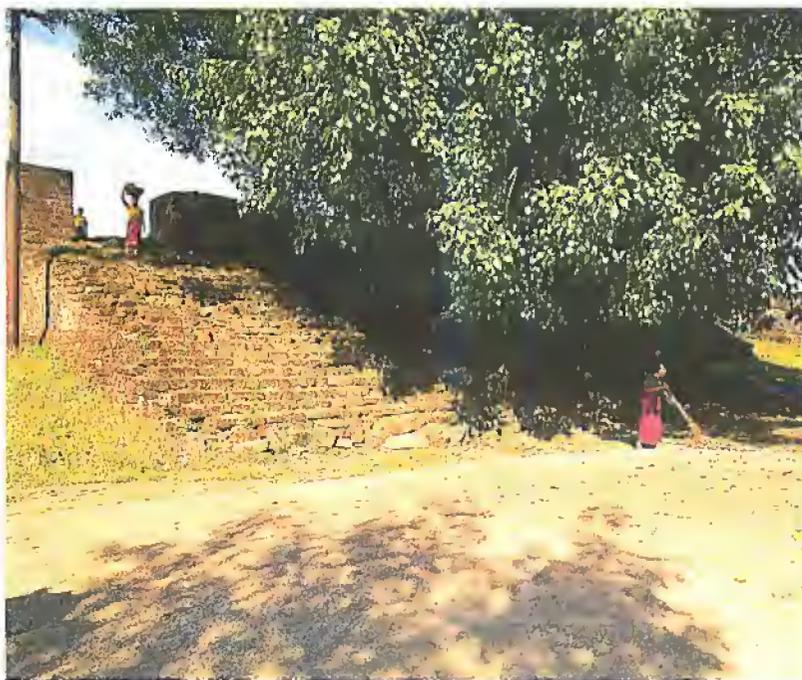


ence and coronation halls, the residences of courtiers and officials and some members of the royal family, lesser queens and concubines, while the third held the royal apartments. The current excavations will elucidate this.

While the palace itself, being made of wood, has not survived, some indication of its architecture can be discerned from the stone relief sculptures of the royal shrines. Of note is the use of flame-like arch pediments over entrances, windows and thrones, a feature which developed in the architecture of Pagan and is still to be found at wooden monasteries throughout Burma. We are fortunate, too, in having an account of the palace by the Augustinian monk Fra Sebastian Manrique, who was in Arakan from 1629 to 1637. Manrique says that the palace buildings

*...have great wooden pillars of such length and symmetry that one is astonished that trees so lofty and straight can exist. ...those inside the houses are entirely gilded over. Such palaces also contain rooms made of odiferous woods such as white and red sandal-wood and forest or wild eagle-wood, which thus gratify the sense of smell by their own natural fragrance....there was one room known as the 'House of gold' as being entirely ornamented from top to bottom in that metal. It had in it a creeper along the ceiling made of the finest gold, with a hundred or more gourds of the same metal...In this chamber were also seven idols of gold, each of the size and shape of a man...ornamented with many fine precious stones....*

The reference to the "creeper of gold" is interesting in that it appears to refer to a design better known in China than in India. The "idols of gold" were the booty of war, Khmer bronzes



65 Gate inside the palace.





66 This relief at the southeast corner of the outer corridor of the Shit-thaung shrine gives an impression of the wooden construction of the palace. Below is Indra, king of the gods, carrying his thunderbolt or vajra, seated on his three-headed vehicle, the elephant Airavata. Like their counterparts in India and Southeast Asia, the kings of Arakan were likened to their heavenly counterpart Indra, who had the power to control the rains on which the country's prosperity depended.



taken in war from Cambodia to Thailand and thence to Pegu before they were seized by the Arakanese king Min Raza Gri when he invaded the Mon country in 1600. Considered to possess the power to protect the country, they were taken from Arakan by Bodawpaya when he invaded Mrauk-U. They were placed together with the famous Mahamuni image in the Mahamuni pagoda at Mandalay, where some remain today.

Door guardians sculpted in fairly low relief guarded the palace entrances. Those surviving today belong to the later period. Strictly frontal and highly stylized, they carry arms and are dressed in the apparel of the royal guard. Two are now in the Mrauk-U museum, which itself stands on the palace site. Another is in worship at the excavation site. The residents of



67 Artist's impression of a royal procession through Mrauk-U. From Schouten, *Voyages* (1676)

68 (top) Palace door guardian from the time of Pazamin or Sanda-thudamma (1652-1684). Mrauk-U Museum.



69 a,b Glazed terracotta tiles from Ratana-pon.

Mrauk-U today recount stories of the woes which have beset those who interfere with the guardian in even recent times.

## THE SHRINES

A part from the palace remains, over seventy important monuments and hundreds of smaller shrines in various states of repair remain today.

The Government Archaeologist Emil Forchhammer remarked in 1885 that

*The marked difference between the pagodas of Mrohaung and their Burmese prototype is that the former are built of stone, the latter of bricks; all ornamental designs on the former are wrought on the unplastered stone, whereas on the latter decoration is executed on the plaster-coating of the bricks while it is still soft. In durability, architectural skill, and ornamentation the Mrohaung temples far surpass those on the banks of the Irrawaddy. A brick temple is ancient when 50 monsoons have passed over it and becomes a complete ruin if not repaired; the stucco must be renewed every two to three years; the stone pagodas of Mrohaung were built three and four centuries ago, and many have been totally neglected for the last 150 years; the sides of the ponderous stone blocks fit compactly and are joined with cement, thus resisting the absorption of moisture, the penetrating force of the tenacious creepers, and the roots of the ficus, which are capable of reducing a brick pagoda in a few years to a number of detached, shapeless heaps of bricks.*

The technique of facing a brick core with stone slabs, common at Mrauk-U, was used by the builders of Bengal in the early Muslim period. These builders also used lime as mortar, and in Arakan mortar was given a greater cohesiveness by mixing sand and clay, adding a gum-like substance made by boiling buffalo hide, tails and hoofs in water. This is still used today for covering surfaces of temples and making them watertight. The great difference between the monuments of Bengal, Burma and Arakan at this period was the ready availability of stone in the latter, dark grey sandstone brought from the coast. By combining the lessons learnt at Pagan with the Muslim experience in building arches, domes and vaults, in which mortar played the dominant part in keeping the masonry together, the Arakan architects were able to conceive massive hollow pagodas surmounted by domes, whose central shrines were entered through long vaulted passages. This development, which took place after Min Bin's conquest of east Bengal in 1546 led to the unique style of buildings like the Shit-thaung and Htu-kan-thein shrines.



Another Islamic innovation was the use of glazing, for stone and terracotta tiles and for stone reliefs. While the glazing of bricks and decorative architectural components was known at Pagan, the Arakanese used another technique, the Middle Eastern lead glaze, for the tiles found covering the platforms of its shrines, for expanses of stone relief sculpture and for domestic utensils. The designs on the tiles, often geometric, sometimes depicting birds, floral motifs or auspicious symbols, are both Indian and Sassanid in origin.

#### THE FIRST PHASE 1430-1531

Few monuments remain from the first century of Mrauk-U. The earliest was the Santikan or Sindhi Khan mosque, said to have been built by the Muslim followers of Min Saw Mun after he returned from exile in Bengal. This mosque has been recently destroyed, but was described by Forchhammer as a rectangular building surmounted by a hemispherical low cupola. Other early shrines are in ruins. The Mukseitaw "Holy

*70 The Le-myet-hna pagoda with the Nyi-daw in the background.*



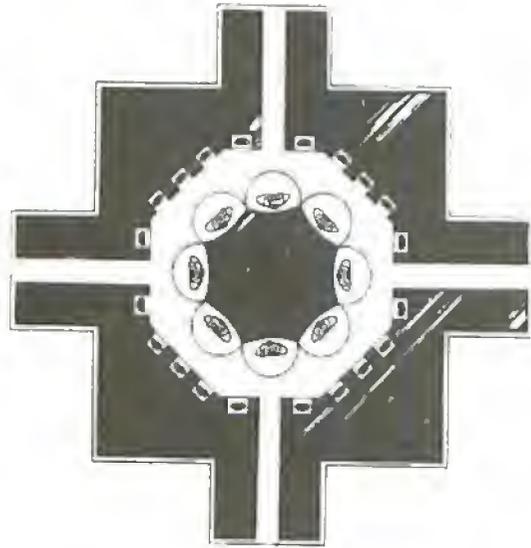
Beard Relic pagoda” and the East and West Myatanzaung “Emerald Appendage” pagodas, on hills northwest of the palace, are also attributed to Min Saw Mun. These shrines were regarded as having the power, through their religious force, to protect the city from aggressors. They follow the Burmese tradition of circular bell-shaped *stupas* and have solid brick cores faced with stone slabs.

#### LE-MYET-HNA

The Le-myet-hna “Four-sided” pagoda is also said to have been built by King Min Saw Mun. Square in plan, it has four projecting vaulted entrances, one to each cardinal point, with the main entrance at the east. This too recalls the architecture of late Pagan: a temple in the enclosure of the Lemyethna monastic complex there has a similar cruciform plan, and four Buddhas seated back to back where the Mrauk-U Le-myet-hna has eight seated on thrones around an octagonal central column. Opposite these are twenty niches which originally held

*71 Inside the octagonal central chamber of the Le-myet-hna identical seated Buddhas face the eight directions. The eight-sided central solid core to which their thrones are attached supports the superstructure above.*





Buddha images, bringing the total number to twenty-eight. The number twenty-eight signifies the Buddhist belief, often illustrated at Pagan, that twenty-eight successive Buddhas have appeared over the successive cycles of time to guide mankind.

#### NYI-DAW

The Nyi-daw “Younger Brother” pagoda, attributed to Min Saw Mun’s brother, Min Khari is now undergoing restoration. This is a small circular stone temple with a brick core. It has a vaulted entrance at the east, opposite which is a Buddha seated in the usual attitude of calling the earth to witness. Twenty-eight niches within the wall of the temple once held similar images representing the Buddhas of the past.

#### MAHABODHI SHWE-GU

The Mahabodhi Shwe-gu temple, on a hill northwest of the palace is attributed to Ba Saw Pru in the second half of the fifteenth century. The temple is octagonal in plan, with a bell-shaped dome faced with cement and divided into sections in the manner of the Ko-nawin pagoda attributed to the Le-mro period. The dome is guarded at each of its thirty-two angles by *lokapalas* and *devas*, some with Hindu characteristics, remarkably similar to those found at the Mahamuni shrine. The finial is in the form of a lotus bud.



P. 1 Plan of the *Le-myet-hna*. The architectural historian of Pagan, Pierre Pichard, has noted that, like Pagan, the architecture of Mrauk-U “manifests an intensive formal research” in the cruciform, apsidal, octagonal, circular or oval plans of its shrines.

72 The central image of one of the earliest cave temples at Mrauk-U, the Nyi-daw “Younger Brother” built by the brother of the founder of the city. The image is seen through the vaulted entrance passage at the east of the shrine.





An entrance passage to the east leads to the central shrine. The passage has, on either side, six tiers of low relief carving. These appear to represent, at the base, depictions of Hells, where damned souls are undergoing torture, then, in no particular order, the abodes of animals and men and scenes from the early lives of the Buddha. Above these are the world of the *devas* or the *brahmas*, superior celestial beings, and at the top is a row of Buddha figures, each seated within an arbor. These reliefs depict the Three Worlds of Buddhist cosmology at the time, thirty-one realms layered one over the other, high into space. At the bottom of this hierarchy is the World of Desire, which includes the Hells, the realm of animals, realms of demons, the human realm ruled by the *cakravartin* king, and Indra's Heaven. In the next, the World with Partial Form, reside the different levels of *brahmas*, or gods, and at the summit is the World Without Form, the realms of Infinite Space, Infinite Mentality and Nothingness. This early period relief sculpture foreshadows the more complex reliefs of the Shit-thaung, where the subject matter is similar.

In the central shrine the main image, seated on an ornate stone throne, faces east. While the image has been repaired, glass "Mandalay" eyes added and the face gilded a certain elegance of form is still discernable. The ornate throne, which may not be original, is remarkable. Waisted and broadening to a wide base, its sides are covered with finely sculpted panels in low relief with figures surrounded by an intertwining floral





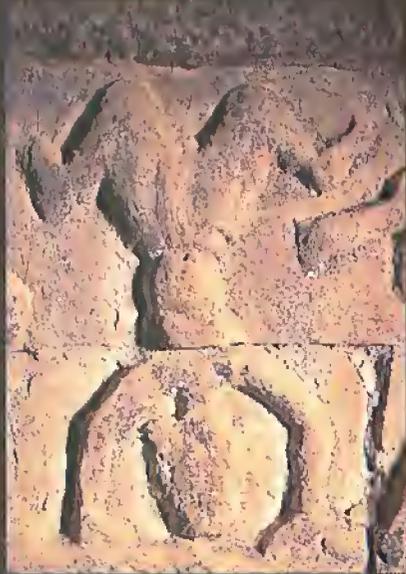
74 Mahabodhi Shwe-gu.  
Lokapala on dome.



75 Mahabodhi Shwe-gu.  
Entrance passage.  
Sinners boiling in a cauldron in Hell.



76 Mahabodhi Shwe-gu.  
Lokapala with the head of a bird on dome.



77 Mahabodhi Shwe-gu.  
Entrance passage. Acrobat in the abode of man.

78 Mahabodhi Shwe-gu. Entrance passage.  
Elephants mate in the World of Desire.



79 Mahabodhi Shwe-gu.  
Lokapala on dome.



80 Mahabodhi Shwe-gu. Entrance passage.  
Hunting scene with a mythical animal.



81 Mahabodhi Shwe-gu. Entrance passage. Abode of the devas.



82 Mahabodhi Shwe-gu. Entrance passage.  
Earth-touching Buddha.



83 Mahabodhi  
Shwe-gu. Central  
image.



84 Mahabodhi  
Shwe-gu.  
Central image.  
Detail.

86 Mahabodhi Shwe-gu. Amorous couple on throne panel.



85 Mahabodhi  
Shwe-gu.  
Vessantara  
Jataka on  
throne panel.





pattern found in Pagan painting. These are interspersed at each angle with guardian figures. Prominent at the front of the base is the earth goddess Vasundhara wringing her hair.

Another four identical Buddha images are placed in niches facing the central figure. These, together with the central image, denote the four Buddhas of the present era and Mettaya, the Buddha of the future who is yet to come. The central Buddha image may, then, represent Mettaya and could reflect the King's desire to be reborn as a Buddha.

*87 Htupayon from the east.*



### HTUPAYON

In the northern sector of Mrauk-U is the Htupayon, an octagonal *stupa*, unornamented apart from a lotus petal motif around its terraces. Its construction is ascribed to Min Ran Aung, who reigned for six months in 1494, and it was renovated and gilded by Min Khamoung in 1631. Two enclosures surround the shrine platform on which are remains of four small *stupa* shrines at the corners. The shrine was considered particularly auspicious. The kings of Arakan are said to have visited its precincts after the coronation ceremony to take an oath for the well being of the country during their reign.

### NI-BUZA

The Ni-buza "Offering to the Nats" stands on a hill regarded as a dwelling place of spirits and Hindu sculptures found there were venerated as *nats*. Excavations in 1997 revealed that a shrine existed here during the late Vesali period, and both Hindu and Buddhist remains were uncovered. The present structure, one of three built on the hill by Min Saw Oo in 1527, is a solid *stupa*, but having often been rebuilt its original form is uncertain.

### THE MIDDLE PHASE 1531-CIRCA 1600

Under Min Bin the first of the great monuments of Mrauk-U were built. The remarkable architectural achievements



88 Ni-buza hill.

89 Buddha figure among the ruins of the Htupayon.



90 The Shwe-gu "Golden Cave" on Shwe-gu-taung hill northeast of the palace site is said to have been one of several built around the country by King Min Bin in 1531, the year he came to the throne. Like the Le-myet-hna it is square in plan. The stupa-shaped roof is raised over three receding terraces. A brick stupa-shrine within the enclosure wall houses a Le-mro period Buddha image.

of this time led the archaeologist Forchhammer to conjecture, wrongly, that they were the work of Indians, and that they were used as fortresses and places of refuge in times of war, which may be right.

#### SHIT-THAUNG

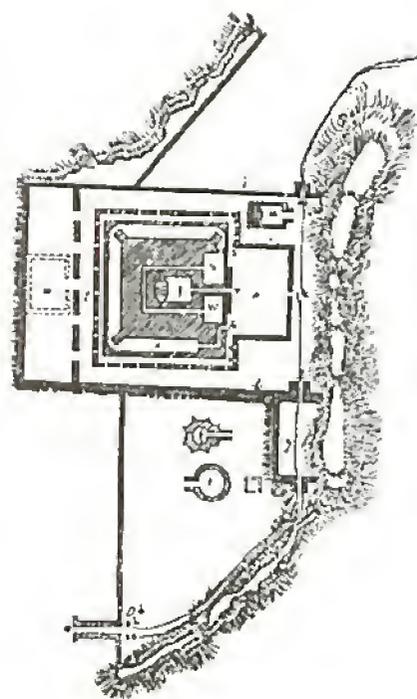
The remarkable Shit-thaung "80,000 Images" shrine was erected in 1536, after Min Bin conquered Bengal. A massive Buddhist statement of a Buddhist king who saw himself as a *cakravartin* world conqueror who had triumphed over the forces of Islam, it incorporates elements from Burmese Buddhism and the late Buddhism of north-west India in its ico-



nography, illustrating the power of the king and his religion. Like many important Southeast Asian monuments connected with royal cults, it may have also had a cosmic dimension, the shrine being seen as a microcosm of the Three Worlds which comprised the Buddhist universe.

Built on a promontory halfway up the west side of Pokhaung hill, north of the palace site, the west side facing the valley rests on massive stone walls which continue on the north and south connecting the promontory with the hill. The shrine is approached through a flight of stairs from the south, leading to the main platform on which it stands. It is entered through a large hall on the eastern side, today covered by multiple receding roofs of corrugated iron. On the northern side of the entrance is a massive four-sided pillar of red sandstone, inscribed on three sides with histories of the rulers of Arakan from the sixth to around the twelfth centuries, and which must have been brought to this royal shrines from an earlier capital. Without further research we cannot speculate on the original plan: Forchhammer's plan, made before the restorations of the 1920s and 1950s and the bombing during World War II shows a square within a rectangle.

The platform is bordered by solid turret-like *stupas* to the south, north and the northwest corner. The roof is crowned with a large, bell-shaped *stupa*, four smaller corner *stupas* and a further twenty-four arrayed around the centre, not all of which are original. A three-arched stone screen stretches across the western side of the platform, the total effect being remarkably similar to the mosque architecture of sixteenth century Gaur, then capital of Bengal. Both the Lattan Masjid and the Bara Sona Masjid, for instance, have multi-arched faces and are surmounted by series of domes. Three parallel vaulted passageways extend from the southeast to the northeast around the central image, which is in an inner shrine, facing east opposite a large entrance hall. From this hall we pass first to the outer passage, where the outer wall is interspersed with twenty-eight niches each with life-size images of the seated Buddha placed back to back, one facing the outer platform and one the inner passage. These no doubt represent the successive Buddhas of the past and present eras.



Scale. 1 Inch = 100 Feet  
 0 10 20 30 40 50 Feet

E. F. Forchhammer

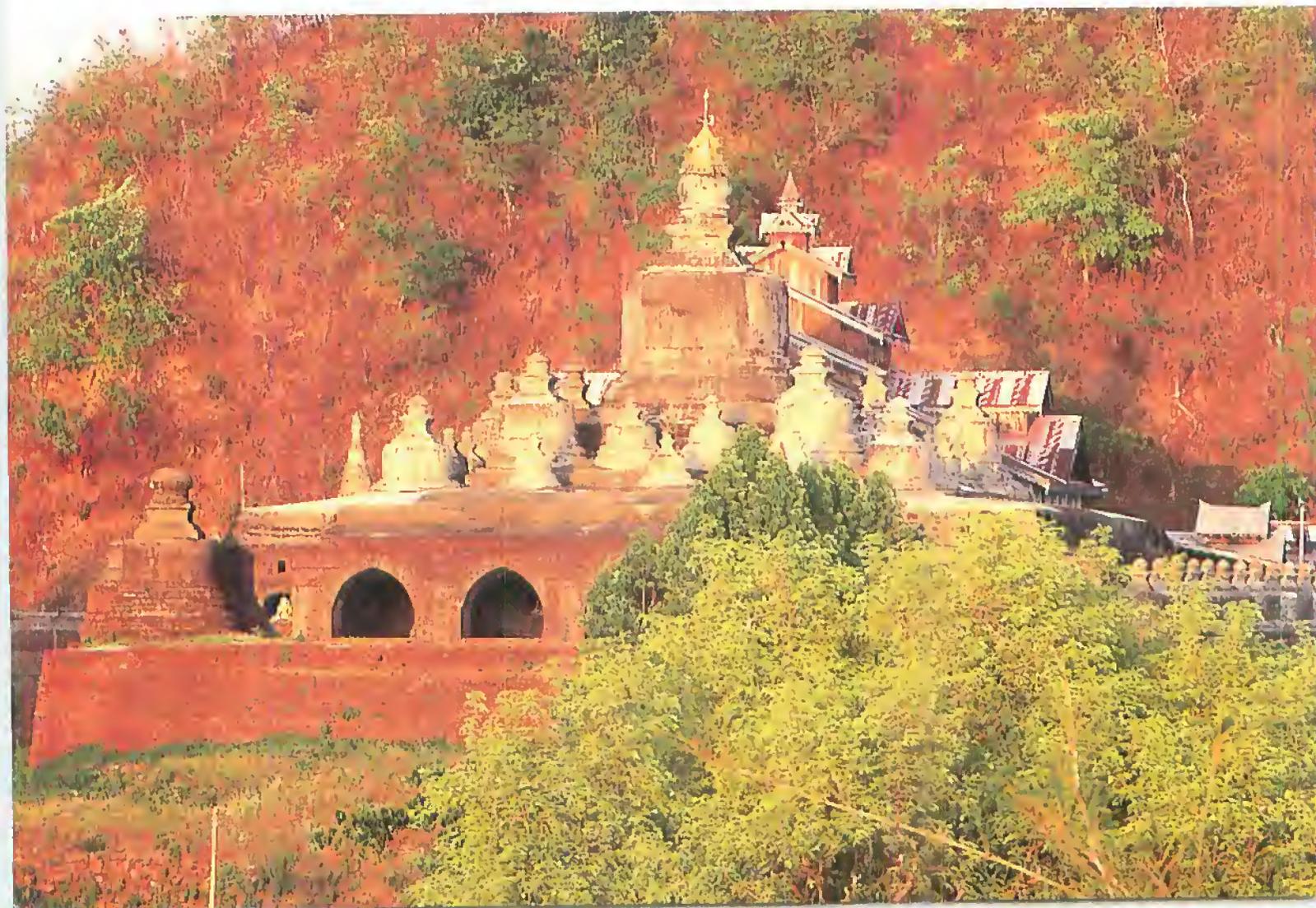
P. 4 Forchhammer's Plan of the Shitthaung.

The light from between these images falls on the inner wall, made from sculpted stones which form six tiers of bas-relief. Traces of glazing on the stones indicate that they were coloured before being placed. The reliefs can be seen to represent the world of King Min Bin and his perception of himself as a world conqueror or *cakravartin* after his military successes in Bengal. In this it expands on the iconography of Ba Saw Pru's Mahabodhi Shwe-gu and its depictions of the Three Worlds: The World of Desire, the World with Partial Form and the World without Form. The iconography follows a text similar to the treatise on the Three Worlds, the *Trai Phum* written for King Luthai of Sukhothai in the mid-14th century. The six tiers of bas-relief may correspond to the six heavens of this world of desire. The most important aspects of the *Trai Phum* are the chapters dealing with the *cakravartin* king, whose *karma* acquired through meritorious actions in previous lives enable him to become a world-conqueror.

91 *Shit-thaung*. Western face. The arched facade and the dome shapes of the roof stupas recall the pre-Mughal Islamic architecture of East Bengal.

92 (opposite page) *Shit-thaung*. Turret-like stupas of the northern face.

93 (opposite page) *Shit-thaung*. Buddha images seated back to back within the arches of the outer wall of the first circumambulatory passage.





At intervals around the plinth are figures of the earth goddess Vasundhara wringing her hair, as she did to drown the army of Mara, the personification of evil, at the time of the Buddha's enlightenment. The Vasundhara figures are connected to fantastic composite animals which emerge from the plinth, the luck-bringing *vyalas*.

The lower levels of the reliefs depict animals of all kinds, people dancing, hunting, cooking and wrestling and generally enjoying life in this world of desire. The central levels depict a higher level of existence but still in this world, the former lives of the present Gautama Buddha from the Jataka tales and other edifying stories from Buddhist literature and old Arakanese foundation legends. The *Lokapalas*, guardians of the quarters, are represented at the fifth level, while the uppermost has nobly-clad figures, some carrying lotuses in the attitude of worship, who could represent *Brahmas* or gods introducing us to the next World of Partial Form.

At the four corners the reliefs are interspersed by life-size images which appear to represent King Min Bin as the earthly counterpart of Indra or Sakka, King of the gods. This symbolism underlay all royal ritual in Burma and Arakan. Apart from being emphasised in the coronation ceremony, the king also dressed as Sakka when he reenacted the annual plowing ritual before the monsoons, demonstrating his power to ensure the coming of the rains and the fertility of the country. In a ceremony when his lords were made regents of the four quarters of the country they were seen to become the earthly counterparts of the *lokapalas*, who were Sakka's assistants, and then took the oath of allegiance, and, significantly, the king's elephant was named Airavata, after Sakka's.

In the Shit-thaung corner relief sculptures all wear crowns and other ornaments and elaborate lower garments in the royal Arakanese fashion of the day. Three have six arms, each carrying various divine attributes: the flywhisk, a disc, an elephant goad, and so on, all connected with the functions of power and protection. At the northeast corner we can identify Sakka himself, seated on his three-headed elephant Airavana and holding a *vajra* or thunderbolt. Groups of women sit on either side. In the southeast corner a figure recognised locally as Min Bin is standing on the elephant-headed god Ganesa (Mahapienne



94 Shit-thaung. The southern platform.

95 Shit-thaung. Outer western passage.

96 Shit-thaung. Buddha image within the outer wall.

97 Shit-thaung. The southern approach.

98 Shit-thaung. Near the outer passage entrance on the inner eastern face is the sun god Suriya on his horse-drawn chariot. The Thai Phum states that Suriya rotates around Mount Meru starting from the right. Parts of the god's chariot retain the original green glaze.

in Burmese), the remover of obstacles invoked by both Hindus and Buddhists. Min Bin, six-armed, holds a disc, the *cakravartin* symbol par excellence, as well as a club and other weapons. On either side two women stand on lotus pedestals, two in Indian saris and two in Arakanese dress, referring to his wives brought from India and his local wives. More women, perhaps minor wives, sit in attitudes of respect below. The remaining two sculptures are less complex but similar.

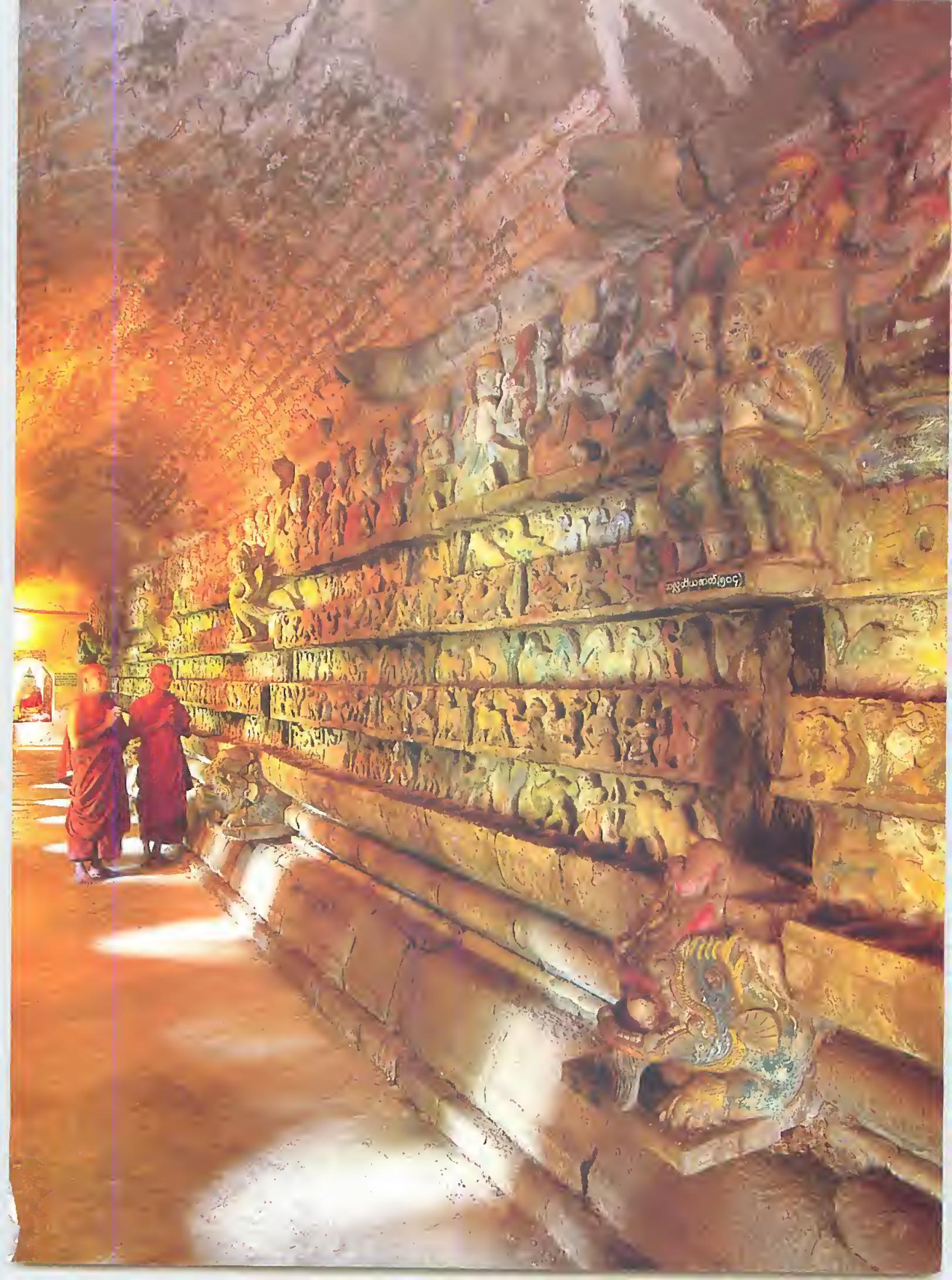
The second of the labyrinthine passages has a series of smaller images in rows on the inner side, and leads to a chamber which, the temple trustees say, is the place where Min Bin and his successors meditated annually to ensure the fertility and prosperity of the land. This ritual recalls others in Southeast Asia where the ruler communes with the spirit of the soil. The Chinese traveller Zhou Daguan, for instance, recorded such a practice at Angkor. From the meditation chamber is yet another passage, lined on either side with twenty-eight identical larger Buddha images in niches. Galleries of similar Buddha images were also known in fifteenth century Sukhothai art, and their incorporation in the Shit-thaung may reflect parallel developments in religious practice at the time.

A hundred years ago the temple was totally neglected. It had been bombarded by the Burmese during their conquest of Arakan in 1784, and again by the British in 1825 in the first Anglo-Burmese war. Since then, however it has come into worship again. Its trustees have made successive repairs and alterations, and the entrance hall now boasts paintings showing the history of the state and the shrine, as well as a sculpted doorway to the main shrine decorated with motifs borrowed from the Mahamuni and the art of Pagan. A coronation hall in the Burmese style was added in the 1970s. The reliefs have often been painted, somewhat detracting from their antique appearance but perhaps coming closer to the original intent of the architects.

Given the many additions, particularly those made during the last hundred years, the symbolical significance of the Shit-thaung cannot be totally reconstructed today. It is possible that originally the building was conceived as a mandala delineating the king's power, which was linked to that of the Buddhist *dhamma* (law). As the French savant Paul Mus has demonstrated, Buddhist cosmology is to be explained by the fact that it was laid

99 (opposite page) Shit-thaung. Light coming through the arches of the outer wall falls on six tiers of bas-reliefs, the lower five depicting life in this world of Desire and the sixth Brahmas or gods in the higher World of Partial Form.





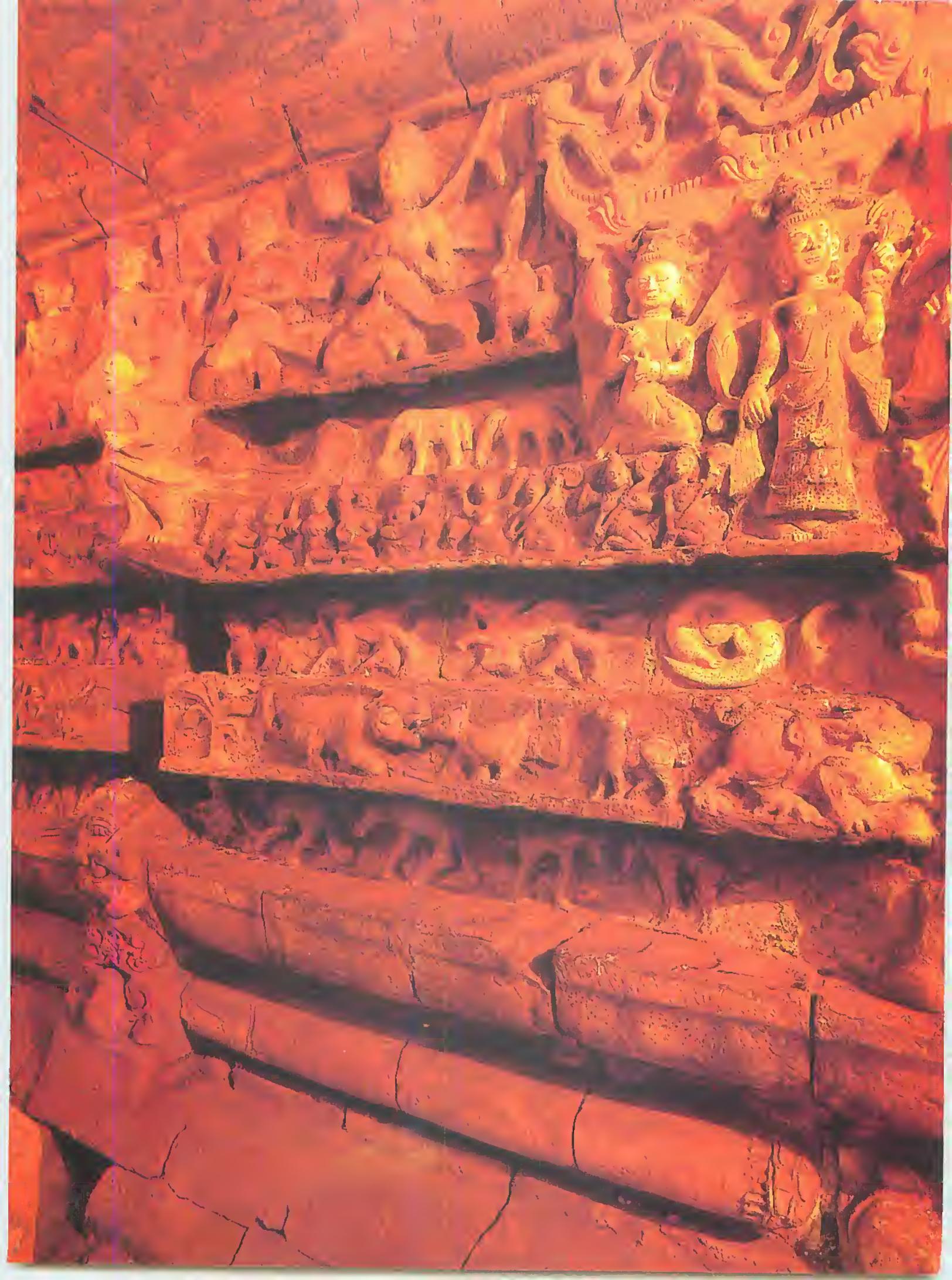
နိဂါးဝေသာလီနိဂါး ( ဝေသာလီနိဂါး )  
 စာရေးဆရာ ( သီရိပင်သုတေသီ )  
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 ( ၁၁ ) ရပ်ကွက်၊ ရန်ကင်းလမ်း၊ ရန်ကင်းမြို့  
 နံ၊ - ၁၁၇၇၃၀

out and developed in such a way as to found a magical art adapted to the secular needs of royal power. At the Shit-chaung there are numerous references to the function of the king as the earthly counterpart of Sakka, King of the gods who resides on the summit of Mount Meru. As a *cakravartin* king he turns the wheel of dhamma, justifying his rule and providing his subjects with the means to enlightenment. Thus, the reliefs depict the lower levels of the cosmos: the worlds of desire, in which the king who is the earthly counterpart of Sakka holds sway, where the events of the former lives of the Buddha took place, and which are protected by the guardians of the directions. At the uppermost level *Brahmas* lead us to the world of partial form. The surmounting dome and subsidiary *stupas* symbolize the highest world without form, the goal of the seeker of enlightenment.



100 Shit-chaung. Figure of Vasundhara at the base of the plinth.

101 (opposite page) Shit-chaung. Detail of the six-tiered relief, western face.





102 *Shit-thaung*. The half-human, half-bird Kinnara and Kinnari, whose story in Buddhist legend tells of their eternal love.



103 *Shit-thaung*. Vyala at the base plinth.



104 *Shit-thaung*. Composite animal with traces of original brown glaze.



105 Shit-thaung. King Min Bin, depicted as a god, with his Indian and Arakanese wives stands on Ganesha, the elephant-headed god who is the remover of obstacles.

106 Shit-thaung. Buddha images in the second circumambulatory passage.

107 Shit-thaung. The central shrine today.



#### KOE-THAUNG

Excavations at Koe-thaung pagoda, "the shrine of 90,000 images" began in 1997. The shrine is the largest in Mrauk-U, and was built by the son of Min Bin, Dikkha, who ruled between 1553 and 1556. It stands northwest of the palace towards the outer forts and walls, on marsh lands which later caused the foundations to subside. The Koe-thaung is square in plan, measuring about seventy-seven metres on each side. It was built of brick faced with sandstone said to have been brought up the Kaladan River from the coast. As is the case with most other shrines at Mrauk-U, it is oriented to the east, and its central image faces that direction. The outer body of the shrine is composed of five receding terraces each ornamented with small pagodas, originally 108 in all. Its central image was approached via a two-tiered stairway on the east side. The first tier reaches a wide open platform from which two ambulatory passages, similar in concept to those of the Shit-thaung, can be entered. These passages were originally vaulted, and enough remains to allow us to observe the construction technique. The passageways are connected by further passages in the middle of the north, west and south sides. The second tier of the entrance stairway leads to an upper platform having at its centre a large stone Buddha image seated on an ornate throne. Behind this image is an octagonal brick *stupa* which would have contained the holy relics enshrined when the pagoda was built.

It is Buddhist practice to worship the Buddha by walking around the central image of his shrine three times, at all times keeping the image to the right. At the Koe-thaung this ritual circumambulation would therefore take place around the inner and outer passages and then the image itself in the centre of the upper platform.

The sculptures on the walls of the passageways depict nothing but identical seated Buddhas, in relief or in the round. All are seated cross-legged, right over left, with the right hand touching the ground in the earth-touching attitude. Their placement has been determined by Arakanese numerology. Whether large, small or in relief, their groupings are all connected with the number nine in this shrine of 90,000 images. For instance, in the only completely excavated section of the outer passage there are nine life-size Buddhas, each sitting on a waisted throne divided into three sections horizontally and three sections ver-

Plates 108-112



tically, nine in all. Behind each of these images is a stepped niche where smaller images, also in the round, are found. No doubt these too were originally placed in groups associated with the number nine. In between each of these are panels of bas-relief. Those still intact have nine rows of five Buddha images, forty-five in all. According to Arakanese numerological practice at the time, forty-five, which is five times nine, can also have the value of five plus four, nine.

The inner passage differs from the outer in that either side has three receding tiers, on each of which were placed rows of myriad smaller Buddha images which again would have had a numerical significance.

These Buddhas are flatter in their treatment and more stylized than those at the shrines immediately preceding the Koe-thaung. This perhaps reflects the haste in which the building was undertaken. The chronicles relate that this took only six months, which may be a slight exaggeration. The images, however, can be seen to belong to the middle-Mrauk-U style: massive in conception, broad-shouldered and with a bulging chest with prominent nipples. Their large heads are bent slightly forward, and the faces have a somewhat abstract quality. The eyebrows are joined, heavy eyelids are half closed and the lips are full. The long ear lobes sometimes reach almost to the shoulders. There are differences in the shape of the hair, which finishes in a rounded or square topknot. Garments are thin, and scarcely delineated, the Buddha's robe passing over the right shoulder leaving the left bare. It is probable that many sculptors were needed to produce the thousands of images required for this pagoda. Some are very obviously better executed than others.

The central Buddha image is superior in quality to the rest. Slightly larger than life-size, it is seated on a round waisted throne whose lower portion is decorated with animals and guardian figures. The image itself was originally first coated with red lacquer and then gilded, a technique still used in Burma today, as the red colour enhances the gold applied over it.

Some images discovered do not represent the Buddha. At the cross sections of the passages are various types of door guardians. Standing almost life-size in pairs on either side of the door, they are dressed as warriors. Some carry shields, some blow conch shells as if in a royal or religious ceremony or pro-

Plate 115

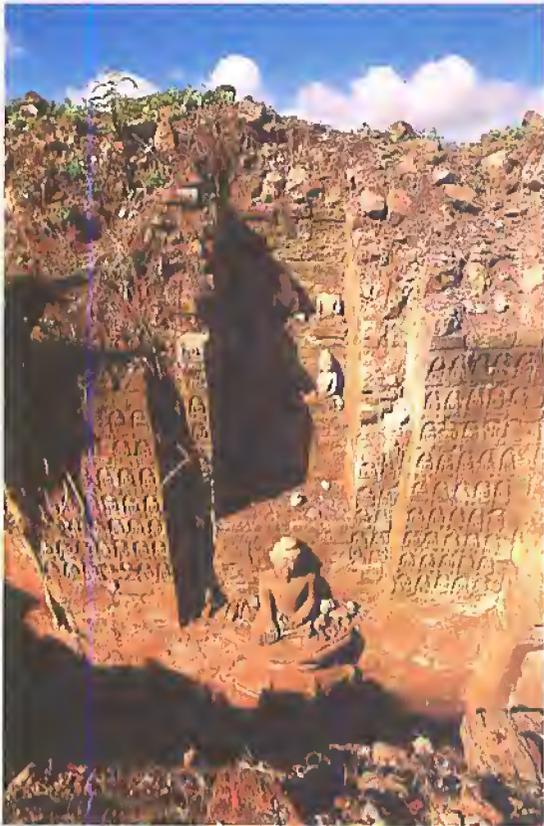




108 Koe-thaung. The southeast corner of the outer passage from the north.

109 Koe-thaung. Outer northern passage from the east.





• 110 Koe-thaung. Small Buddha images in a stepped niche which would have allowed light and air into the outer passageway

111 Koe-thaung. Bas-reliefs of the outer passage.

112 Koe-thaung. Inner passage from the northeast, with three tiers holding Buddha images.



cession. Some on the outer sides have quite a ferocious aspect, to deter malignant spirits. One type is different. Short, squat figures with large heads and knees and elbows bent outwards, they are the demons which have been appropriated by Buddhism to drive evil away from the shrine. There are also figures of worshippers, hands joined together in prayer, who wear court costume and may portray royalty or aristocracy.

The terraces were covered with tiles glazed in the Middle Eastern manner common to shrines from the time of Min Bin's conquest of Bengal. Originally a terracotta-tiled roof supported with massive wooden pillars covered the interior. Wide holes left by the pillars after they rotted away, are found at the exterior corners of each of the terraces and on either side of the entrance stairway. We can imagine that the pillars in this royal shrine were gilded as Manrique described the immense wooden pillars of the royal palace. Large quantities of fragments of terracotta tiles have been found amongst the debris on the platforms. Until today no other shrines covered by terracotta-tiled roofs have been found in Arakan. Tiled roofs were known in earlier in Sri Lanka, and also at Pagan and Sukhothai. While the shape of the roof is difficult to determine on the present evidence, it is possible that the small *stupas* on the terraces reflect the form of the shrine as a whole. Paranavitana has shown that in Sri Lanka the pillars at the Thuparama and other shrines sustained a roof over the *dagabalstupa*. It is probable that a Sri Lankan precedent was followed at Koe-thaung.

During the excavations a number of non-structural remains

113 Koe-thaung. Door guardians at the western cross-passage.

114 (opposite page) Koe-thaung. Small stupa on outer terrace showing the form of the whole structure.

115 (opposite page) Koe-thaung. Central image with relic stupa behind.





were also unearthed. These include hundreds of stone and terra-cotta oil lamps, used to illuminate the Buddha images for personal devotion and in ceremonies. A few terra-cotta votive plaques were also found, usually depicting a seated Buddha within a decorative surround. Among the various small bronze images discovered is an interesting standing Buddha from Sri Lanka, further evidence of contact between the Arakanese and Sri Lankan Buddhist communities during the 16th century.

#### ANDAW-THEIN

Close to the northwest corner of the Shit-thaung is the Andaw "Tooth" shrine, built by Sajata, who reigned between 1515 and 1521. It was restored between 1534 and 1542 by Min Palaung and again in 1596 by Min Raza Gri to house a tooth relic of the Buddha reputedly brought from Sri Lanka. Although additions and restorations have been carried out until

116 Andaw-thein.  
View from the Shit-thaung.





117 Andaw-thein, Buddha image in the outer passage said to be Mon, taken to Sandoway in southern Arakan during the Le-mro period, and brought to Mrauk-U by Min' Bin. His grandson Raza-gri installed them at Andaw-thein.



today, it is possible to discern the original form, an octagonal central shrine temple with two concentric octangular ambulatory passages around a solid core. Sixteen smaller shrines, each containing a Buddha image, are placed around the northwest and southwest corners. A large prayer hall has been added in front of the eastern entrance.

The main shrine is crowned by a bell-shaped *stupa*, its dome segmented in the manner of the Mahabodhi Shwe-gu and other early Mrauk-U temples, but surmounted by a ringed conical spire with a lotus-shaped finial. Around this at each corner are another eight *stupas* of identical shape, the roof again recalling the multi-domed architecture of pre-Mughal Bengal. Mughal influence in the construction, too, is perhaps apparent in the vaulting of the passages where half-capitals of western origin support the super-structure.

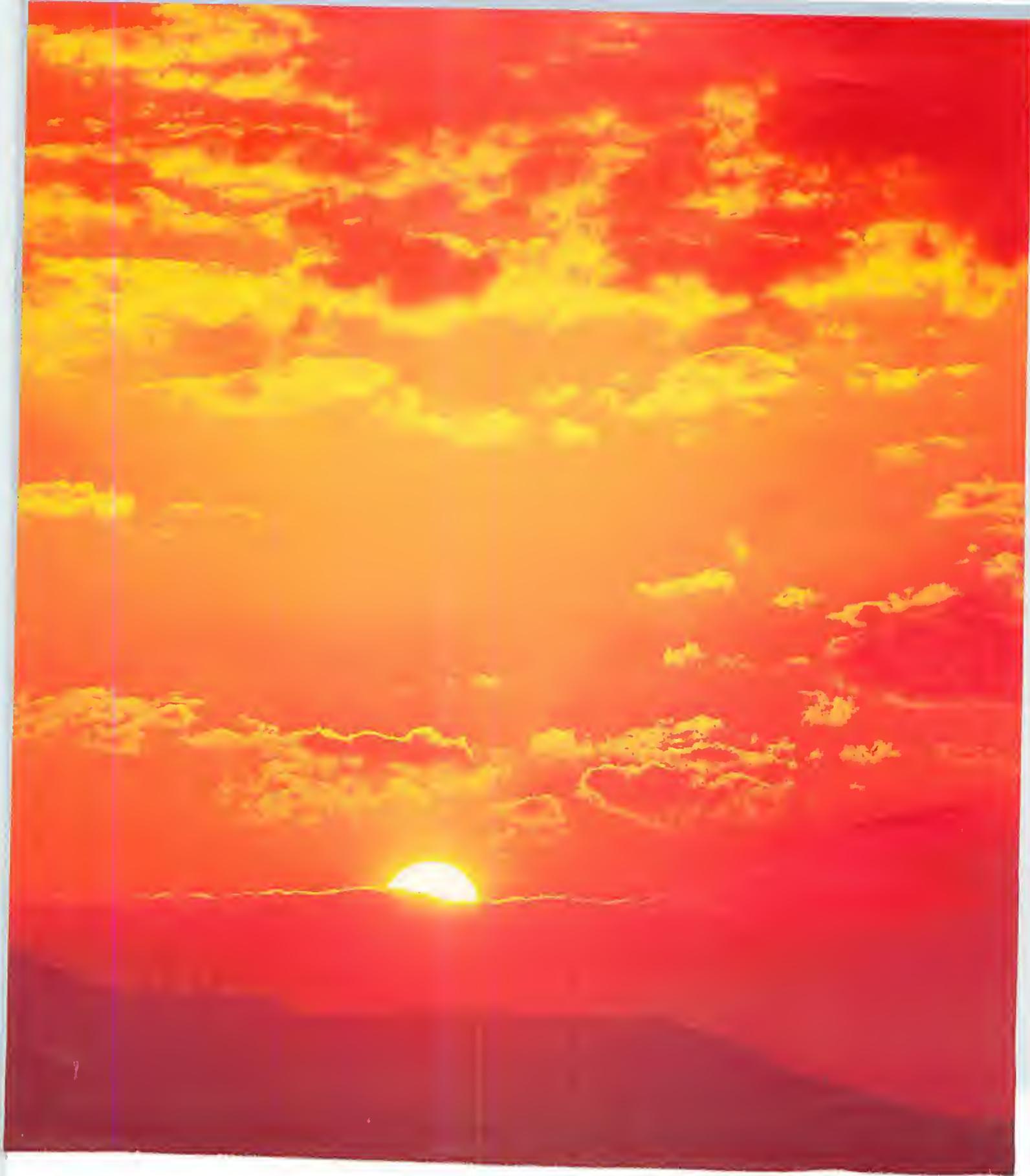
The first passage has thirty-two niches on the outer side containing Buddha images of the Mrauk-U type, apart from five said to have come from the Mon country at the end of the 12th century. In the centre is an eight-sided solid core, each side with an image enshrined in a niche. These niches are elaborately decorated at their bases with protector deities, including Ganesa and Brahma, and with ornate reredoses incorporating

Plate 117

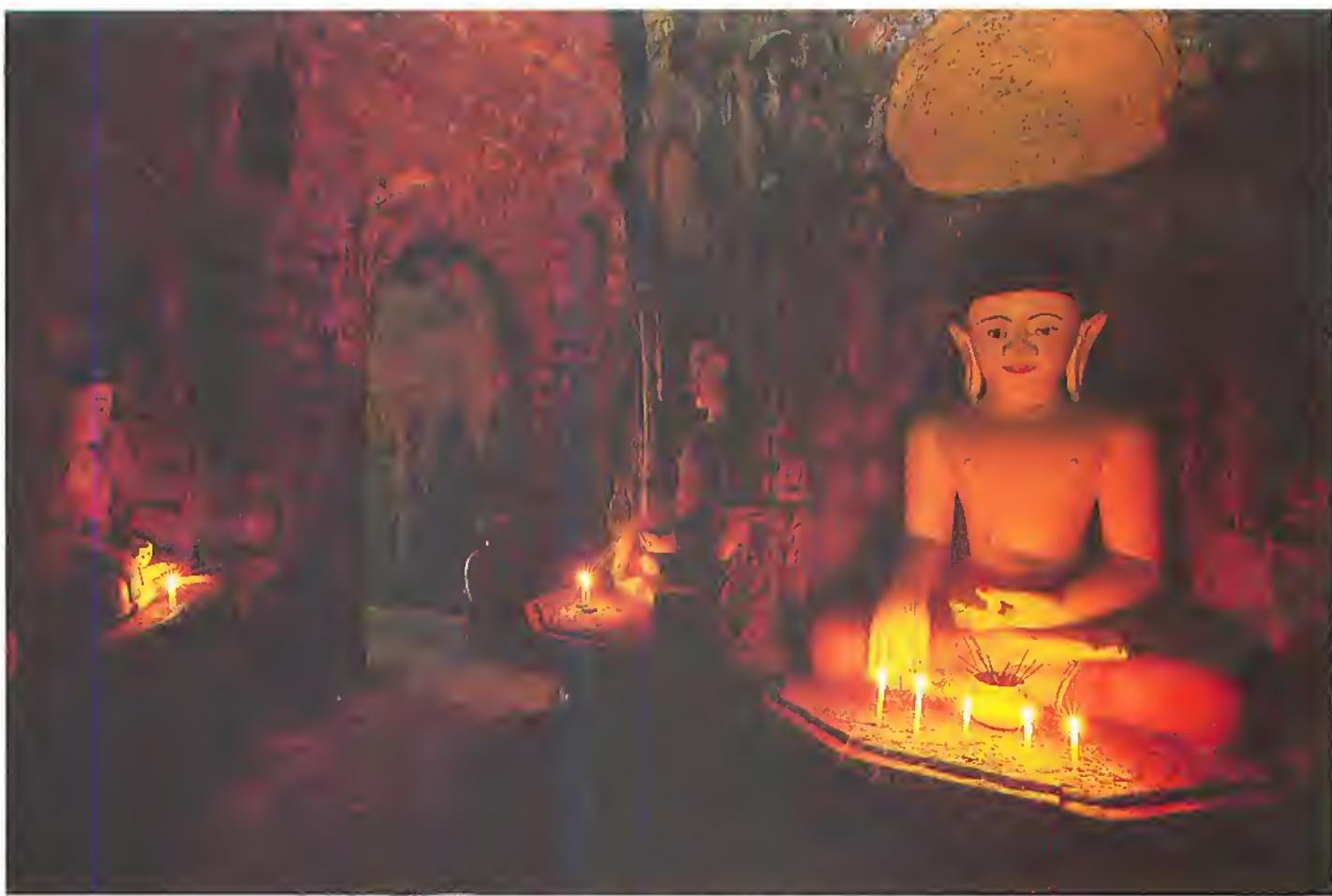


118 Andaw-thein. Inner passage, entrance to the western cross passage with ornate surround. A half-column of Indian Saracenic derivation supports the superstructure. The obtrusive mortar is the result of recent restoration.







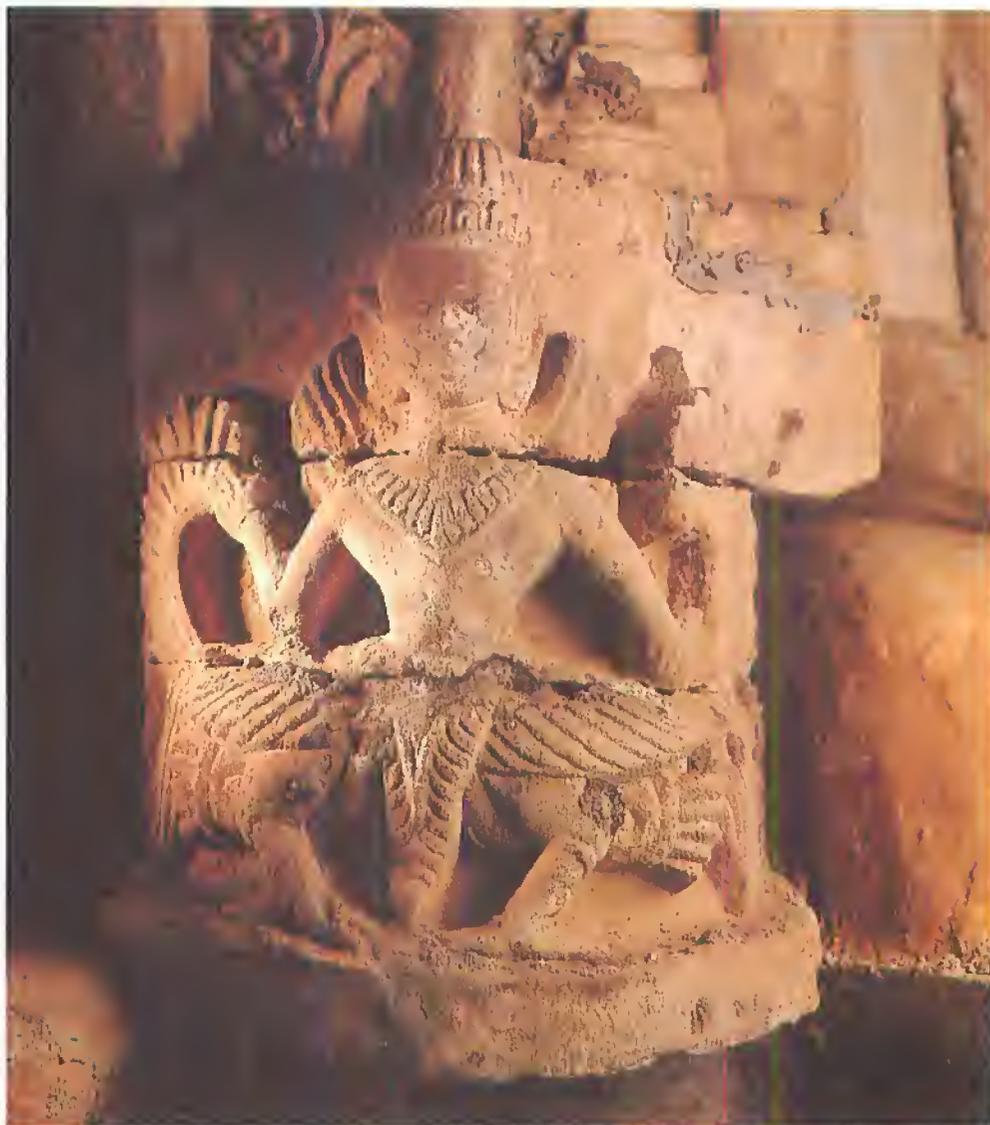


119 Andaw-thein. Buddha image in one of the eight niches of the central column.

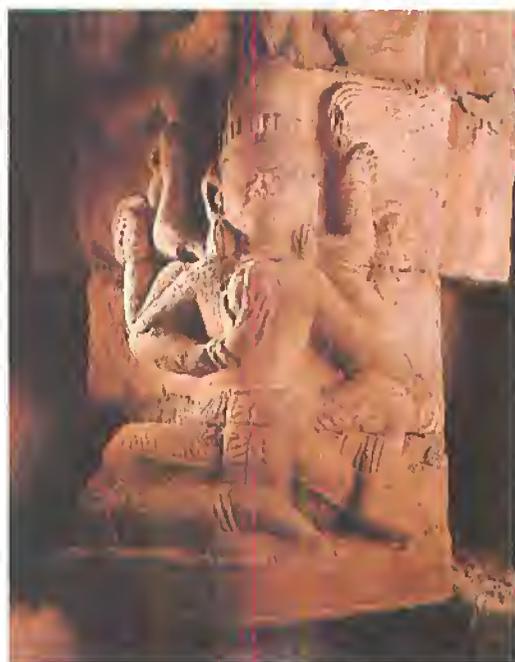
120 Andaw-thein. A vyala, the auspicious composite animal at the upper corner of one of the image niches in the central column.

121 Andaw-thein. Kirttimukha above an image niche.





122 Andaw-thein. Garuda at the base of the decorative surround between two image niches.



123 Andaw-thein. Six-armed deva, probably Visnu.

complex animals, decorated pillars and auspicious symbols like the vase of plenty. The Buddha images, now gilded and painted may not be original. They wear robes tied over the chest, probably based on the garments of a particular sect. Local tradition, however, has it that Gotama tied his robes in this fashion to facilitate his flying through the air to reach Selagiri on the occasion of the conversion of King Candasuriya.

#### HTU-KAN-THEIN

The forbidding Htu-kan-thein ("Cross-Beam Ordination

*124 Htu-kan-thein. The eastern side seen from the Shit-thaung. There is only one entrance to this forbidding structure, which together with neighbouring shrines could have formed part of the palace's defence. The central image, reached through a series of winding passages, is lit through the clerestory window.*



125 Htu-kan-thein. The  
labyrinthine ambulatory passage  
with niches for Buddha images line  
the sides.

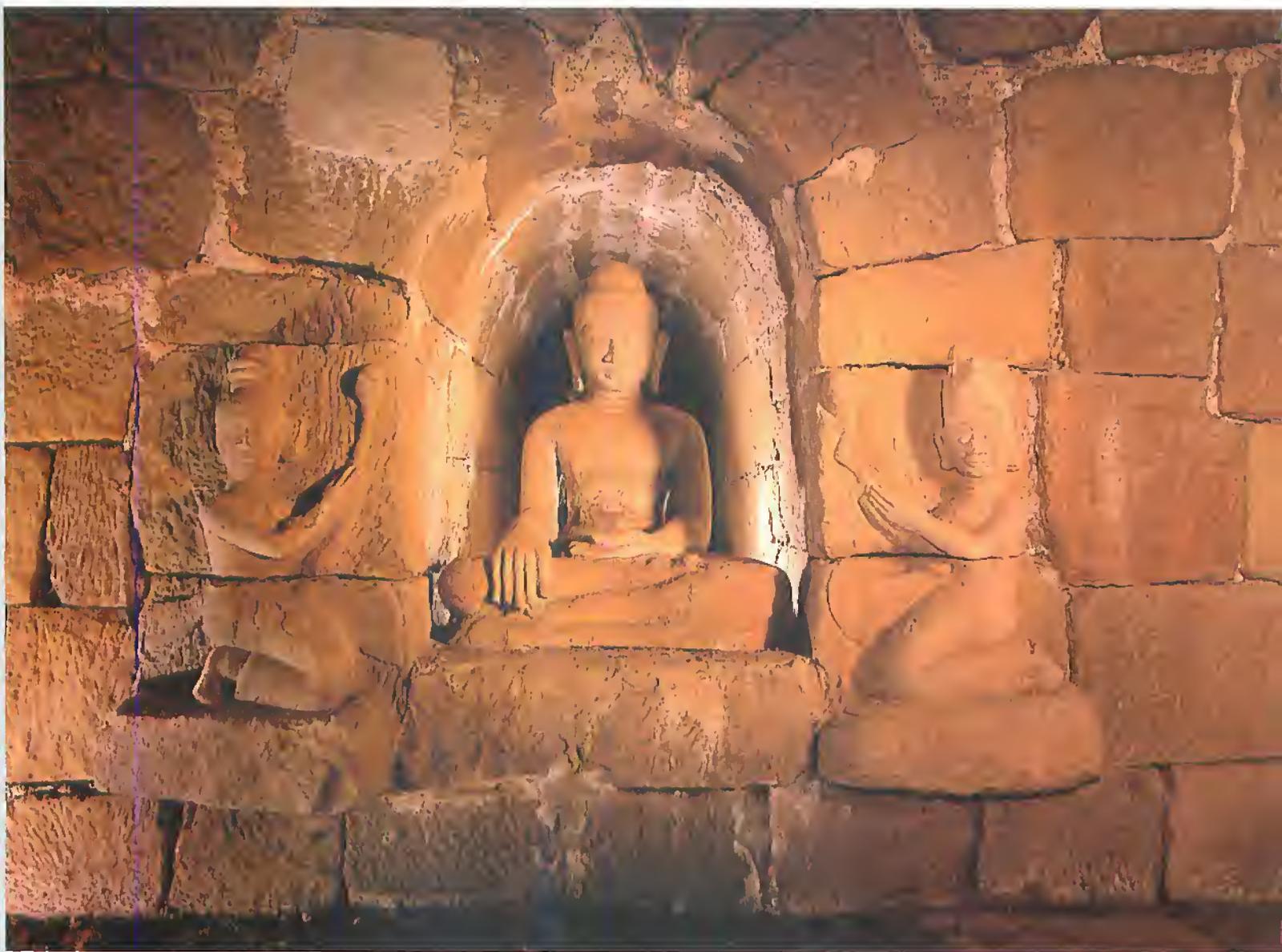
Hall”, referring to the lintel over the entrance) is dark and mysterious. Said to have been built in 1571 by King Min Phalaung, it stands alone on a hill opposite the Shit-thaung. Apsidal in plan, it is surmounted by a central *stupa* surrounded by four smaller corner *stupas* each crowned with a distinctive mushroom-shaped *hti*. The one entrance opens into a two-tiered winding vaulted passage, leading to a central shrine where the seated Buddha image is lit through an arched aperture in its eastern wall. The passages are flanked by 179 Buddha images in niches, which together with the central image brought

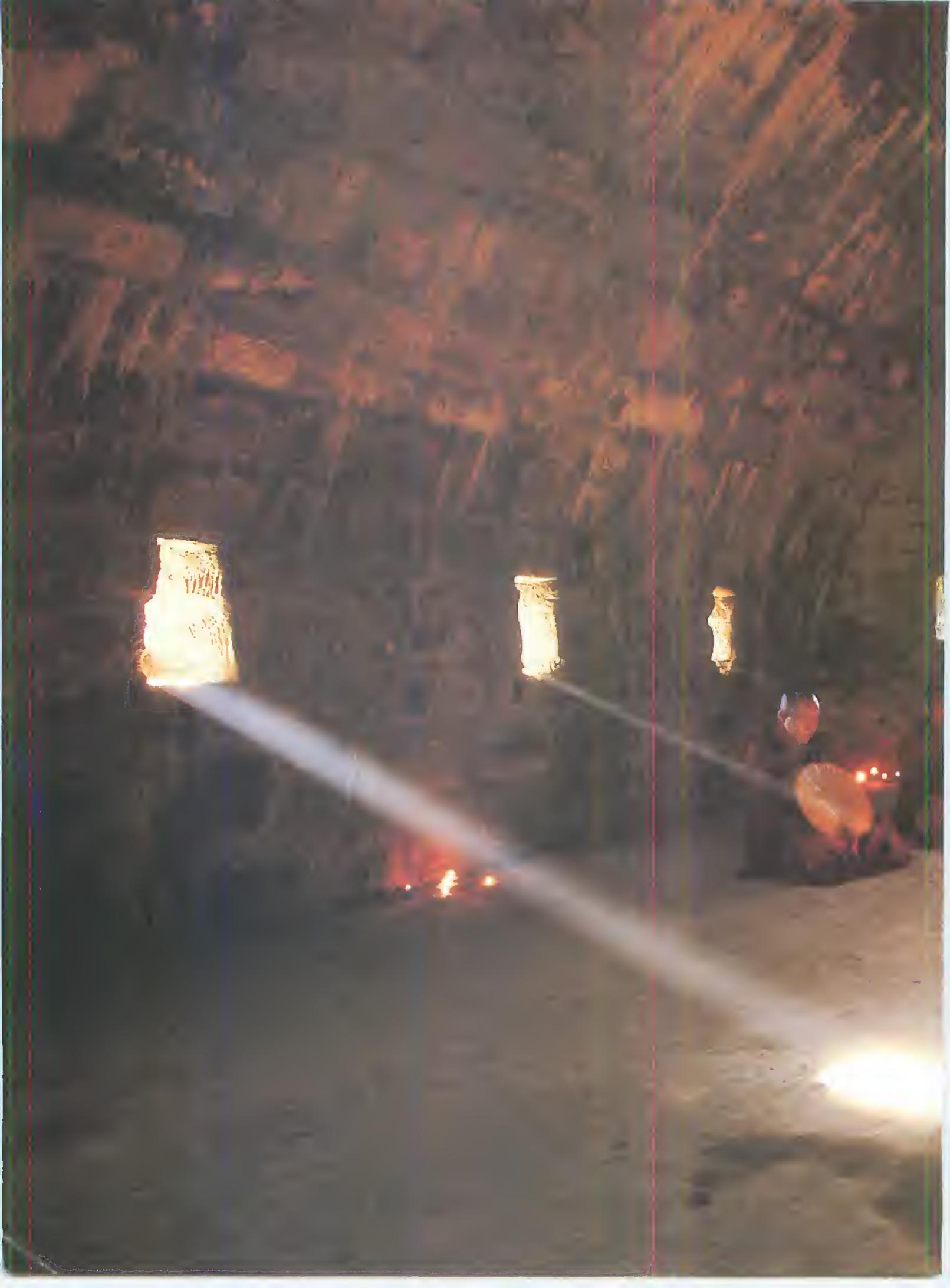


the total to the auspicious number of 180.

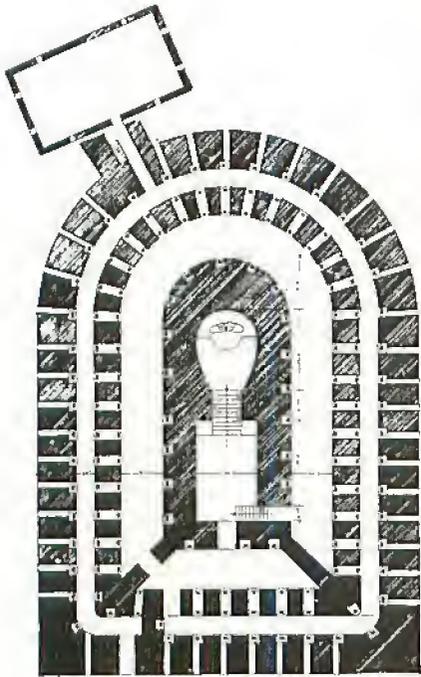
On either side of the niches are a male and a female worshipper holding lotuses, said to be depictions of the nobility whose donations the king demanded to build the shrine. The hair styles, headdresses and garments of these figures give us an indication of the costume of the period. Of particular interest are the conical caps and tunics worn by the men. These derive from the Persian *kulah* and *qaba*, worn by the aristocracy throughout the Islamic world in the 15th and 16th centuries and adopted in non-Islamic states around its periphery, in coun-

*126 Htu-kan-thein. The niches in the lower section of the passage are flanked by worshipping male and female donors sculpted in low relief. Tradition has it that the king built the shrine on the advice of his astrologers to avoid an incipient revolt against him by his officials. The figures depicted here are said to be the nobility from which he demanded donations for its construction, now suitably subservient to the king who as a dhammaraja was responsible for the promulgation of the Buddha's Law throughout the land.*









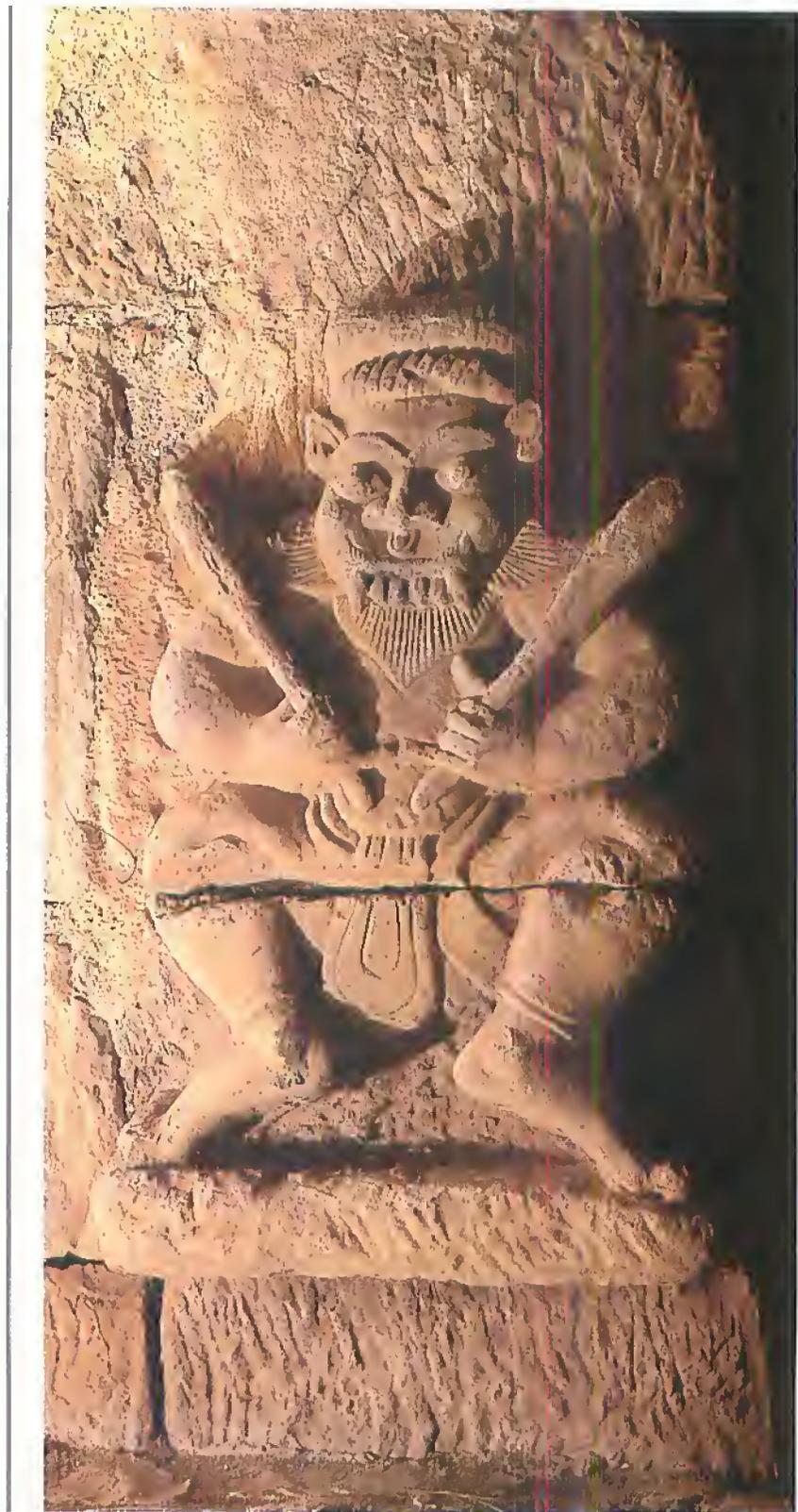
128 Plan of the Htu-kan-thein.

127 (previous page) Htu-kan-thein. Monks pray in the vaulted meditation hall. The earliest archaeological report on Mrauk-U, written by Dr Forchhammer after his visit in 1885, conjectured that the Htu-kan-thein was a place of refuge for the monkhood in time of war.

128 Htu-kan-thein. Guardian in the form of a demon.

129 (opposite page) Htu-kan-thein. Door guardian.

130 (opposite page) Htu-kan-thein. Central Image.





tries as far apart as Hindu Vijayanagar and Norman Sicily.

A vaulted hall which may have been used for prayer and meditation or for royal ceremonial is entered by a passage to the southwest. The snail-shell shaped passage eventually reaches an elliptic chamber, the central shrine, its dome-shaped roof formed of stone laid in ellipsoid courses ending with a rounded stone at the apex. The main image, placed on a high altar, is stone of the usual Mrauk-U type. Dr Forchhammer suggested that like the Shit-thaung, the Htu-kan-thein could have been used as a fortress or place of refuge in time of war.

#### PHARA -OUK

The originality of design displayed at the Shit-thaung and the Htu-kan-thein continues on a smaller scale at the Phara-ouk temple shrine, also said to have been built during the reign of Min Phaloung (1571-1593). Standing east of the lower Ni-buza on a low hill, only the plinth remains. This suggests that the architect attempted, unsuccessfully, to build a new form of superstructure. The plan is a circular *stupa*-shrine, its solid core entered through a narrow passage leading to a single undistinguished central image. Perhaps because of omens suggesting that the country was threatened from outside, the outer wall has 29 life-size identical earth-touching Buddhas seated in niches and facing outwards in all directions.



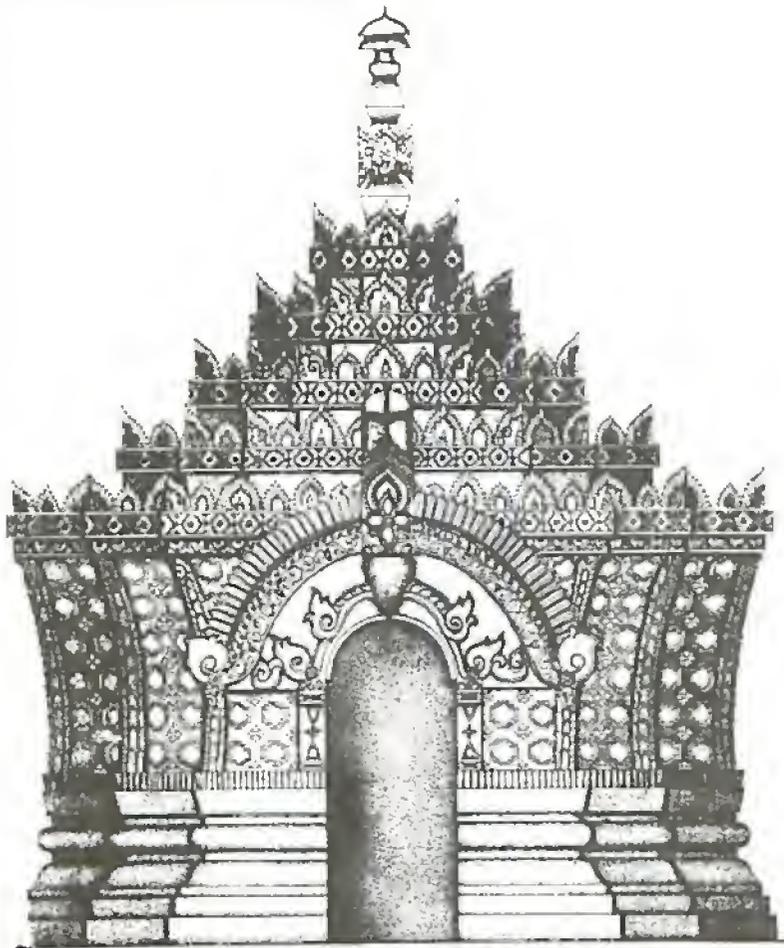
131 Phara-ouk temple shrine from the south.



#### PITAKA-TAIK AND THET-TAW-RA

The Pitaka-taik, north of the Htupayon and south of the Shin-kait wall was built as a depository for the Buddhist scriptures, which King Min Phalaung received from Sri Lanka at the end of the 16th century. Like other libraries in Laos and Northern Thailand, it is square in plan with an entrance passage to the east. The main body of the structure widens in a curved line towards the top, so that the upper part is wider and broader than the foundation. Built entirely of stone, the outer walls are decorated with ornate floral and geometric designs carved to a depth of about fifteen centimetres and with leaf-shaped glazed terracotta tablets coloured red, green, blue, yellow and white let into the stone.

Similar in conception, but less ornate than the Pitaka-taik is the Thet-taw-ra, also thought to have been built in the 16th century by Min Khaung Raza.



*P. 6 Eastern face of Pitaka-taik.*



132 *Thet-taw-ra, eastern face.*



133 *Thet-taw-ra, northern face.*

#### THE LATE PHASE CIRCA 1600-1784

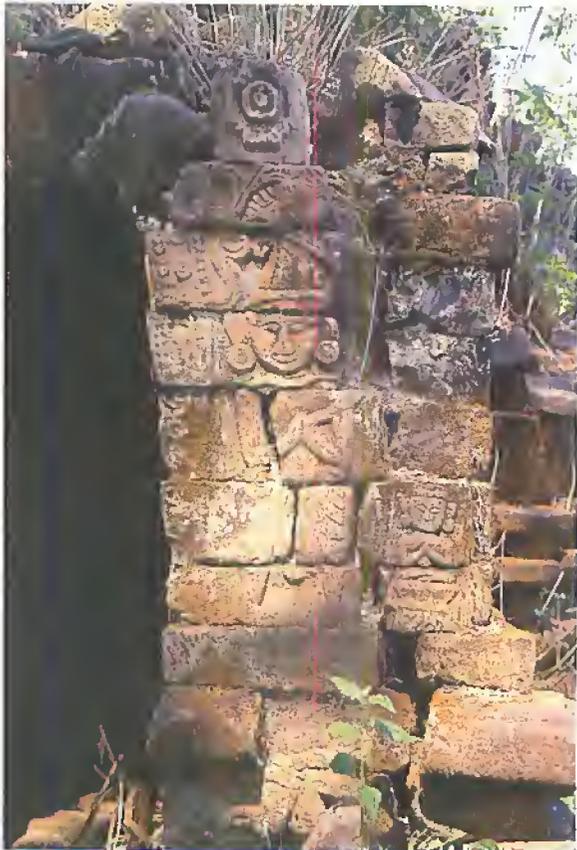
The architecture of the later period again became closer to that of Burma proper, with the influence of the late Mon architecture of Pegu and Dagon (Rangoon) most apparent. Spire shaped pagodas rise from a circular, square or octagonal base in a succession of receding tiers, with porches attached to the sides or niches let into the wall for images. They are often surmounted by an iron *hti*, or umbrella, sometimes gilded, consisting of a number of concentric rings rising in ever-narrowing circles, finishing off in a long iron rod, its sides ornamented with barbs.

The outstanding feature of this period was the use of low relief carving as decoration, where in Burma, with its lack of stone, stucco would usually have been used. These carvings are most apparent at the entrances to shrines, which are crowned by ornate pediments and where highly stylized guardians appear on either side of the door. Sometimes, especially in the



P. 7 Facade of the Kado-thein at Launggret built in 1723, after Forchhammer.





134 a,b Carved stones from the Kado-thein, Mrauk-U Museum,

135 Facade of the library in front of the Teza-rama.

136 The Shwe-kya-thein, on the road to the Mingala-manaung, late 17th-early 18th centuries.

137 Shwe-kya-thein, detail of doorway with guardian.

case of libraries, entire walls are covered with the complex, geometrically determined designs foreshadowed at the Pitaka-raik.

#### LAUNG-PAN-PRAUK

The Laung-pan-prauk ("Coloured Tile") pagoda, about a half kilometre east of the Mahabodhi Shwegu has been attributed to both Min Saw Oo in 1525 and to Thirithudhamma in 1625, but may have been restored by the latter, as stylistically it would appear to belong to the late phase of Mrauk-U architecture. It is set within a square wall of stone blocks, decorated blatantly with opaque glazed tiles forming

*138 Laung-pan-prauk. The hti crowning the structure is a recent addition.*



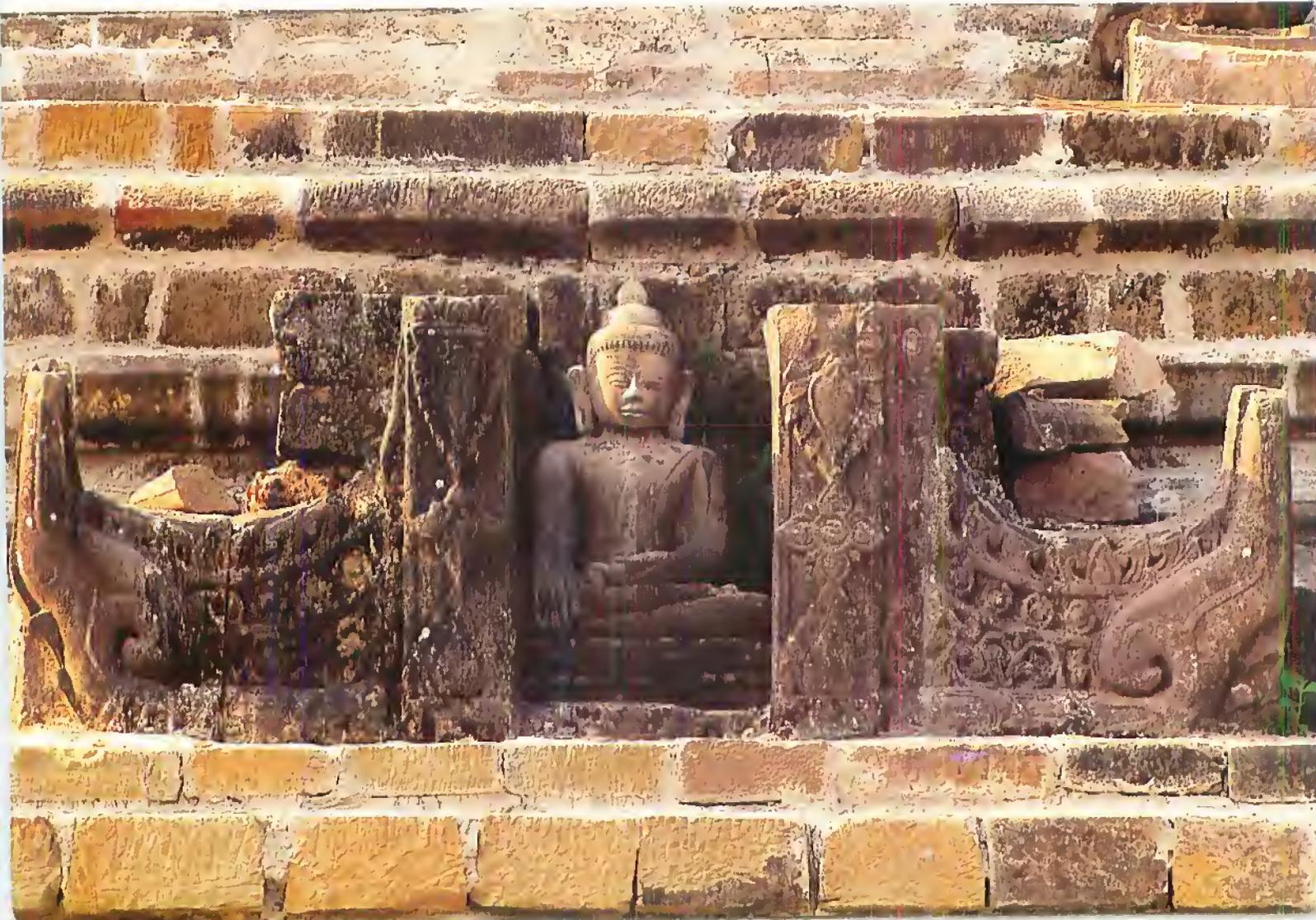
flower patterns with petals in red, yellow, blue and green and a white centre, sixty in all. The court this wall encloses was also covered with glazed tiles, with blue and green designs over a white background.

The *stupa* itself is solid and octagonal in plan, rising in receding tiers. On the eight faces of the first tier were highly ornamented niches, some of which still exist, each originally containing an image of the Buddha. The outer surface of each niche is sculpted, in the manner of stucco-work of the later Pagan and medieval Mon periods, with ornate cornices and flame-like pediments. The uppermost motif on the pediment, while reminiscent of a *naga* (serpent) is said locally to represent a peacock's chest.

#### RATANA-PON

The Ratana-pon "Pile of Jewels" is recorded as having been built in 1612 by Min Khamoung and his queen, and is

139 *Laung-pan-prauk, ornamental niche.*



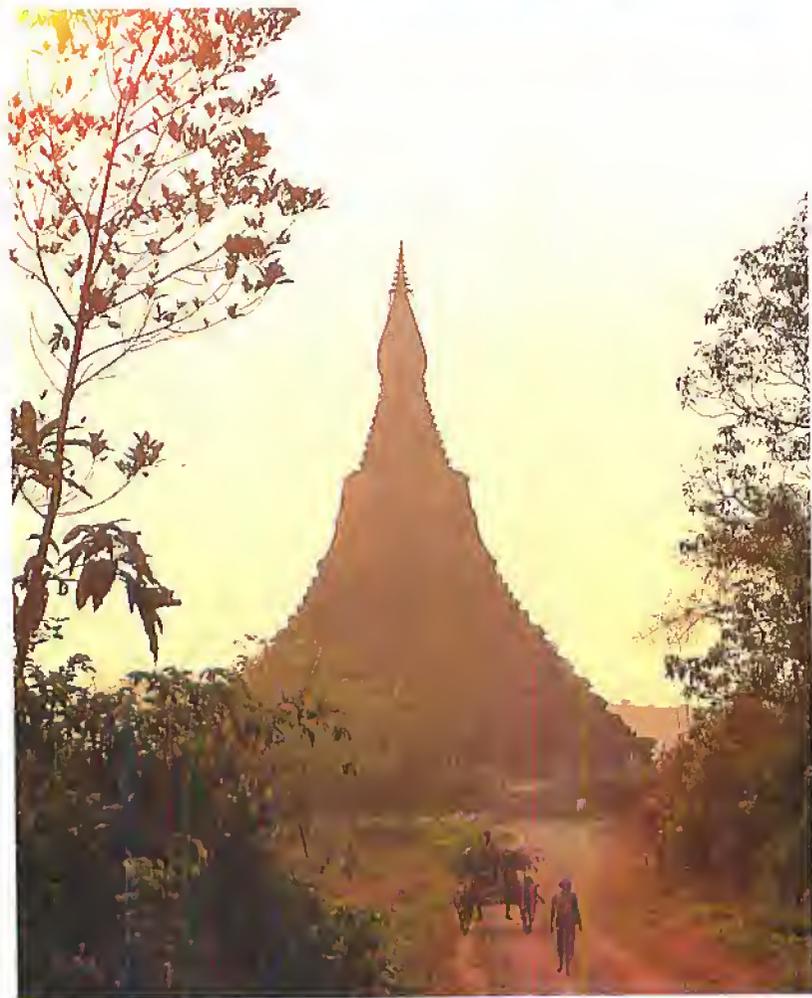
said to have a hoard of gold, jewels and images enshrined within it. This reputation has led to generations of treasure seekers attempting to find their fortune, but neither these nor earthquakes have succeeded in penetrating its core. What remains today is the body of a solid *stupa* constructed of blocks of sandstone, circular at the base and rising in concentric receding tiers. The uppermost portion has fallen away.

A circular wall surrounded the *stupa* as did a row of twenty-four small brick *stupas* which are now overgrown and in ruins. The platform within the walls was covered with glazed terracotta tiles with blue and green floral and animal motifs over a white background.

A series of similar shrines, the Jina-manaung, Ratana-manaung and the Loka-manaung, was built by the rich religious revivalist King Sandathudhamma between 1652 and 1684. While these serve to illustrate the wealth of the country at the time, they reflect a closer affinity with the Late Mon

*140 Ratana-pon, with the outer stupas of the Andaw-thein in the foreground.*





*141 The Sakya-manaung (1629) with twelve smaller stupas within its enclosure wall. The ornamentation of the façade recalls that of the Laung-bon-prauk.*

*142 Ratana-manaung.*



architecture of Pegu and Dagon (Rangoon) in their domes and decorative elements.

#### MINGALA-MANAUNG

The northernmost shrine at Mrauk-U is Mingala-manaung built in the mid-17th century. Octagonal in plan, this solid conical pagoda has a circular bell-shaped dome, a long conical spire and is topped by a modern *hti*. Each side has a projection with a niche for a Buddha image, but much of the decoration of these has been lost. A square wall surrounds the *stupa*.

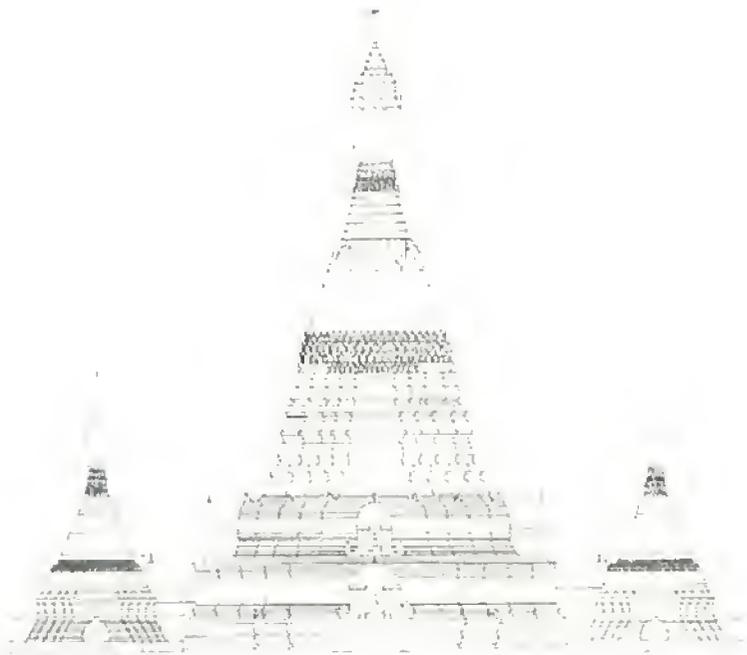
Four inscriptions were found at the site, two recording land grants by the usurper Candravijaya, the thirty-fifth king of the Mrauk-U dynasty, who claims, however, to be the great great grandson of Naradipati, the reputed founder of the shrine.



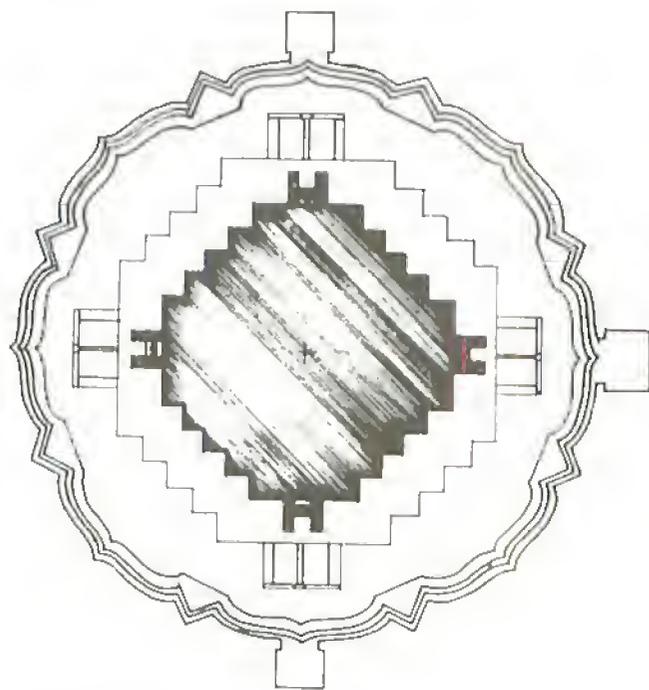
143 (left) The octagonal Mingala-manaung stupa, seen through the gate in its western wall. The *hti* or umbrella crowning it is a modern addition.

144 (above) The most common pediment finial motif from the early Mrauk-U period onwards resembles a naga but in local tradition it is a peacock's chest, said to be the crowning element of the royal throne. This finial was found near the Mingala-manaung.





*P. 8 The Sakyamanaung (north elevation).*



*P. 9 Sakyamanaung, plan.*



### THE FOREIGN ENCLAVE

Foreigners were not permitted to live within the city but from the time of Min-Bin (1531-1553) were accommodated at Daingripet, to the west of the walls on the bank of the Aung-dat river where ships could harbour. The Portuguese built a church here, the Indian traders a Hindu temple and the Dutch merchants their factory. There was probably also a mosque, as a *mihrab* stone was found in the vicinity. Earlier the Bengali Muslims who are said to have accompanied Min Saw Mun back to Arakan built the Santikan mosque southeast of the city walls, east of the road to the Le-mro cities.

Plate 147



145 (left) Hindu shrine, now completely overgrown.

146 (above) The remains of the Dutch factory.





147 Mihrab decoration from Daingripet, Mrauk-U Museum. This stone sculpture would have originally ornamented a mihrab, or prayer niche, of a mosque. The style compares closely with that of the Chhota Sena mosque at Gaur in east Bengal (1493-1519).

## SCULPTURE

### STONE

The earliest images in stone closely follow what must have been the style of the late Le-mro period. An image erected by King Kawlia of the Pyinsa dynasty at Pizi-taung, the Testes relic shrine south of Koe-thaung in Mrauk-U is clearly derived from the squat Pagan type of the mid-12th century. Closely related is the Thongaiktasu shrine image, said to have been installed by Ali Khan, the second king of the Mrauk-U dynasty who reigned from 1433. The earlier image has an elongated *usnisa* or top-knot, a head large in proportion to the body, and a wide chest narrowing towards the hips. The facial expression is more benign than the ethereal early Pagan type. The Ali Khan image shows the beginning of the Mrauk-U style. The *usnisa* is flattened and the hair, treated as rows of dots and separated from the forehead by a narrow file, from which it springs in a bulbous manner. These images are characterised by their thrones, often carved together with the figure and usually waisted and either unornamented or having a band or two of lotus petals.

Plate 52



148 The central image of the now ruined Thongaiktasu pagoda built by Ali Khan around the mid-15th century.





149 Central image of the Nyi-daw.

150 Massive stone image in the Mi-phara-gri gu, the shrine built by Queen Saw Thandar in 1553, when her husband Min Tikkha was building the Koe-thaung.





151 Worshippers from the 16th century  
Thet-taw-ra shrine.

152 A guardian figure, probably  
dating to around the 18th century from  
near the Teza-rama shrine, now at the  
Mrauk-U Museum. The figure  
represents a syncretic deity with the  
attributes of Hindu gods absorbed into  
the Buddhist religion. Such figures were  
placed on either side of the entrance to  
a shrine in order to avert disaster. This  
sculpture represents the final phase of  
the degeneration of the art of Mrauk-U  
between 1638 and 1710 when the  
country was ruled by thirteen kings  
and the economy of the court was  
dependant on piracy.



This type becomes refined in the Nyi-daw central image, made around the same time. The shoulders are squared and the body slighter. The aesthetic is shared with contemporary Thai sculpture, and may reflect increasing Sinhalese influence. Here the Buddha sits in *virasana*, right leg folded over the left, on a raised throne.

By the time Min Bin built the Shit-thaung the squat Le-mro type had been resolved into the solid, masculine form which was to characterise all Mrauk-U stone Buddha images until the 17th century. These images express the confident spirit of the time. The religious feeling they convey is one of serenity and benign reassurance. The country's refuge was in the Buddha: the Buddha's Law was its strength, and it was the king who ultimately upheld that Law in the protection of the country.

A more horizontal approach is seen in the flattened usnisa and the broad face, head bent slightly forward and eyes downcast in contemplation. Long protruding ears reach or nearly reach the shoulders. They have broad, square shoulders, a wide chest which diminishes to a slightly narrower waist, while the heavy limbs continue the massive effect of the whole. The surface of the body is fluid and smooth, relieved only by indications of the garments and, occasionally, prominent nipples. Most sit solidly in *virasana*, right leg over left, with the right hand almost invariably nearly touching the ground in *bhumisparsamudra*.

By the late 17th century the Buddha image had lost the massive quality seen in the middle Mrauk-U phase. The body is stiffer, upright rather than inclined, and the facial features are treated in an almost abstract, geometrical fashion which tend to render the face expressionless. The ears protrude, and again come almost to the shoulders. The garments have become well-delineated and more complex. Often the Buddha's upper garment, which leaves the right shoulder bare, is tied across the chest in a manner described as *zenthaing*. Local tradition connected with the story of the Mahamuni shrine has it that when the Lord Buddha was flying to Arakan with his disciples they found it necessary to tie their robes in this manner to prevent them flapping in the wind. It may, however, illustrate the influence of the monastic garb of a particular sect.

The style degenerated from one inspired by an ethereal religious fervour to one which relies on decoration for effect, a change which is paralleled in the architecture of the time where the emphasis is also on decorative effect.

Plates 93, 106, 115, 125, 150

153 (opposite page) Inscribed Buddha image dated 1486 AD now at Phara-baw monastery. The head was lost and has been replaced recently.







## BRONZE

The bronzes of Mrauk-U are among its greatest achievements. The tradition developed from what must have been an active industry in the Le-mro period, and in the earlier centuries of the period some work-shops retained certain Le-mro features.

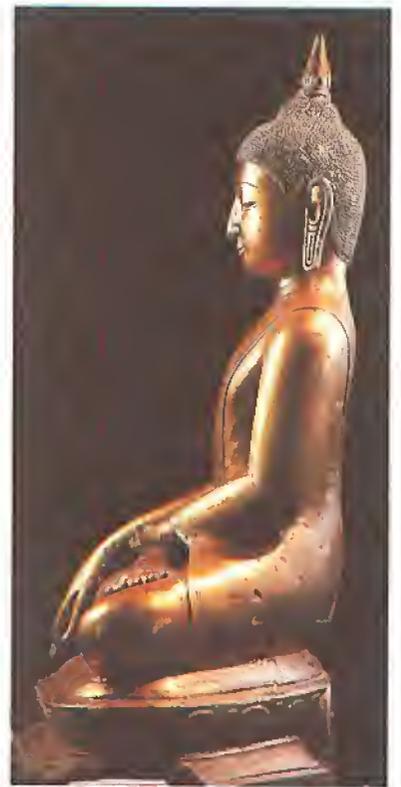
Plate 153

One large image, inscribed and dated Sakkaraj 846 (1484 AD) in the reign of Min Dawlia was the meritorious gift of a military officer. While the head has been repaired, it is important in that it introduces a new iconographic type, possibly from northern Thailand. Parallel developments in the architecture of Thailand and Arakan have been noted above.

The Buddhist art of the northern Thai kingdom of Lan Na in the mid-15th century was characterised by two main image types. The "Sinhalese Buddha" sitting in *virasana*, right leg over left, hands folded below the waist in *dhyanamudra* reflects renewed Sri Lankan influence after a group of monks from Chieng Mai received higher ordination there. The Emerald Buddha, a Sinhalese type, was taken from Chieng Rai by King Tiloka (1441-1487) who installed it at Chieng Mai. The "Sihing" or lion-type sits in the lotus position or *padmasana*, the right hand touching the ground in the attitude of calling the earth to witness. Also introduced into the art of Lan Na during the reign of King Tiloka, Alexander Griswold has described its inspiration as the Pala image of the Buddha as lion of the Sakyas at Bodh Gaya.

The 1484 Arakanese image, like the Lan Na "Sinhalese" Buddhas, follows the Sri Lankan type. The lappet of the robe is folded over the left shoulder and falls to below the waist. The body, clearly visible through the thin garments, is smooth and slight, and in the Arakanese image the shoulders and joints have an almost angular appearance. It is obvious that the Arakanese sculptor was not familiar with the *virasana*, and has had difficulty in positioning the feet, while the hands rest awkwardly in the new *mudra*. It is unfortunate that the head of the image is not original.

Found together with the dated image was another which appears to have come from the same atelier. Seated in the more usual *padmasana* on a simple throne with a single layer of lotus petals, the body and garments are treated in a similar fashion.



154 (opposite page) Second Buddha at Phara-baw monastery.

154 a profile of fig. 154.







155 (opposite page) Early Mrauk-U Period bronze Buddha following the Le-mro style. Mrauk-U Museum.

156 (above) Middle Period bronze Buddha in dhyana-mudra. Private Collection.

157 (left, top) Middle-Late Mrauk-U period Buddha image from Mrauca hill. Mrauk-U Museum.

158 (left, bottom) Middle-Late Mrauk-U period Buddha image. Mrauk-U Museum.



159 A pair of praying worshippers from Nyimadaw shrine, Mrauk-U. These two worshippers, each with their hands together in the attitude of prayer, anjalimudra, may represent Gotama Buddha's favourite disciples, Sariputta and Mogallana. They would have originally been placed on either side of a larger image of the Buddha. Middle Mrauk-U period, Mrauk-U Museum.

The head, being original, is of particular interest. The hair is represented by raised dots, separated from the forehead by a narrow filet. A lotus bud bursts from the rounded *ushnisa*. The eyes are downcast and the face has a serene expression, while the stylized protruding ears reach to chin level. Similarly conceived heads are found on dated northern Thai images of the 1480s, further supporting a connection with early Mrauk-U.

It is from this early type that the Mrauk-U Buddha image developed. Influence from Sri Lanka is attested by finds of some of its finest bronzes. The masculine style made popular by Min Bin at the beginning of the middle period owed something to Sri Lanka, a development echoed in Northern Thailand in the adoption of the square-shouldered, broad-chested type seated in *virasana*. Garments are usually scarcely indicated, and the main stylistic differences come in the treatment of the hair and *ushnisa*.

#### CROWNED BUDDHAS AND SINO-TIBETAN INFLUENCE

One of the most interesting iconographic developments during the Mrauk-U period was the crowned Buddha image. The earliest of these can be dated to the Le-mro period,



when the influence of the art of Yuan China became apparent. The dominant type has strong connections with the Buddhist art of Ming dynasty China.

We have seen that these images, adorned with royal regalia, could combine the attributes of a Buddha and a Buddha to be, a Bodhisattva. At Pagan the king was regarded as having acquired his position by virtue of the merits of his past deeds. As king, he was capable of redistributing merit, and because merit secured a means for eternal salvation he was, in effect, a Bodhisattva. As the protector and promoter of religious and civil law and Indra's earthly counterpart he was also a *dhammaraja* or ruler of the law as well as a *cakravartin* or world ruler.

This was the symbolism behind the use of the crowned Buddha image in the royal coronation ceremony, for which an image, the *Mabakyain Phara* or Buddha of the Royal Oath, arrayed in the royal regalia of the time, was cast especially. At the beginning of the ceremony the king raised the *Mabakyain Phara* over his head and circumambulated the shrine in which it was to take place three times. At the ceremony's conclusion the Chief Abbot of the kingdom, together with the most learned monks, held the *Mabakyain Phara* over the king's head and exhorted him to uphold justice in the tradition of his forefathers, to venerate the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, to encourage the Buddhist religion within the kingdom and to suppress the enemies of Buddhism. The king then took the oath, swearing to carry out these duties. Thus, under the image representing the heavenly *dhammaraja* and *cakravartin* his earthly counterpart assured his country of the continuation of the religious and civil law.

A radical change in the iconography of the crowned Buddha image occurred at the time of the founding of Mrauk-U in 1433. The first image we have was enshrined at the Mahamuni shrine, probably when it was restored by Minsawmun. It was among the loot from the Mahamuni taken to Mandalay by Bodawpaya<sup>1</sup>. The image is obviously Sino-Tibetan in inspiration, and probably manufacture. The style and quality are identical to those of the bronzes made in the Yongle period of the

<sup>1</sup> The image is illustrated in G.H. Luce's *Phases of Pre-Pagan Burma: Languages and History* O.U.P. 1985, Volume II, frontispiece.





Ming dynasty (1403-1424). These images were made in the Imperial Ming workshops, which employed Tibetan craftsmen, and sent as gifts to the Lamaist dignitaries known as “Kings of Dharmma” in Tibet.

The Yongle and the Arakan bronzes have the soft, sinuous and refined quality associated with the Tibetan style. Their style and ornamentation are important as they present the major point of departure from the Pala-influenced crowned Buddhas of Southeast Asia and persist, albeit in a degenerate form, for at least four centuries. They wear identical garments and jewellery: a *paridhana* clasped at the hips with a jewelled belt and a square shawl draped over both shoulders, leaving the remainder of the torso naked. The crowns are five-leaved, the central diadem elaborated by projections from each side and the earrings are large and round. Two necklaces are worn, the shorter with symmetrical loops and three long pendants hanging from the centre, the longer falling over the breasts to just above the navel. The jewelled belt has loops similar to the short necklace, and bracelets wind up the arm. Three stylized flames rise from either shoulder.

These bronzes also differ from earlier types in that the hands usually rest on the lap and often hold an *amrtsa* pot, the “jar of immortality”, which in a Sino-Tibetan context would identify the image as Amitayus. It is noteworthy that Khmer crowned Buddhas of the 12th-13th centuries also hold such a jar. In the



160 (opposite) Crowned Buddha image, Yongle style, 15th-16th centuries. A stepped throne guarded by lions has been added below the lotus throne of the Yongle prototype. One lion and the *amrtsa* jar are now missing. Four sockets behind would have held an ornate *reredos*. H. 57cm. Base 44cm. Mrauk-U Museum.

160a Detail of 160.





161 Crowned Buddha image, Yongle style, 15th-16th centuries. In addition to the *amrita* jar the Buddha holds a small earth-touching Buddha figure, indicating the desire to become a Buddha in a future life. The stupa surmounting the crown perhaps indicates the presence of all previous Buddhas. Mrauk-U Museum.

absence of any other evidence of the Mahayana in Arakan at the time, it can be assumed that it was the image-type, but not the form of the religion it implies, that was adopted. This is borne out by one remarkable image in the Mrauk-U Museum, which holds not only an *amrita* pot but also a small Buddha seated in earth-touching *mudra*, which would indicate that the figure was perceived as a Bodhisattva or a Buddha to be. The king, too, was regarded as a Buddha to be.

While Chinese sources for this period are silent on the subject of Arakan, Tibetan sources indicate that there was a regular and continuing interchange of monks between Arakan, Bengal and Tibet, which peaked in the 16th century. The first images of this type may have come from Tibet in the early 15th century, perhaps even carried from Bengal by Min Saw Mun when he returned from there to reclaim his country from the Burmans.

While the image type continued to be made throughout the Mrauk-U period, its ornaments changed with the fashion of the time. In the mid-16th century the Burman invasions of



Ayutthaya resulted in an influx of artisans and the adoption of Thai models. The crown and ornaments of the images in the late 16th and 17th centuries are directly copied from the Ayutthian style.

Some crowned Buddha images in stone are also found. A large image from Vesali now enshrined in the entrance hall of the Shir-thaung. This earth-touching Buddha is solid and heavy in the manner of the middle-late Mrauk-U period. His crown is tall and his breastplate and armbands imitate the Ayutthian style, while the flames from his shoulders follow the Sino-Tibetan type.

That the influence of Tibetan Buddhism evidenced by the crowned Buddhas continued is attested by a bronze Bodhisattva with an inscription on the reverse recording its donation in 1553. The figure sits on an ornately decorated throne in *lalitasana*, left leg folded under and the right resting on a lotus protruding from the base of the throne. Each hand holds a two-stemmed lotus, which may indicate that this is a local form

Plate 163

Plate 164

*162 Crowned Buddha image. The earlier Le-mro-style image has become reconciled with the Yongle type. The usual monastic garments have replaced the ornate necklaces and the right hand calls the earth to witness. 17th century. Private Collection.*





163 Crowned Buddha image wearing ornaments in the Ayutthian style. 17th century. Mrauk-U Museum.

164 Crowned Buddha at the Shit-taung, from Vesali. Sandstone, broken into three pieces and now repaired. 16th-17th centuries.

165 Bodhisattva dated 1553, found at Pipungon village, the site of the old city of Pyinsa. Mrauk-U Museum.



of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. The crown is an exaggerated form of those worn by the early crowned Buddhas, its triangular points and the *stupa*-shaped *usnisa* reaching upwards. The long ribbons behind the headdress also fly upwards. The chest is covered by an intricately decorated breastplate or necklace, which once contained precious stones.

While local in manufacture, the inspiration for this image is obviously Himalayan. The headdress, in particular, recalls Tibetan and Nepalese sculptures of the 15th and 16th centuries, although the filigree work displayed in the ornaments and on the throne is a local innovation.

#### COMPOSITE IMAGES

A popular series of composite Buddha images represents the five Buddhas who succeed each other during the present cycle of time, or *bhadra kalpa*. These are Kakusandha, Konagamana, Kassapa, Gotama and Mettaya, who is yet to come. The worship of this series of five is known from an early date in India, and in Burma at Sriksetra and Pagan. At Mrauk-U they are represented by a central seated Buddha figure, around which are a combination of four small earth-touching Buddhas and *stupas*, the combination determining the identity of the central figure. Each *stupa* represents a Buddha who has attained *nirvana*. Thus, the combination of two *stupas* and two Buddhas represents Kassapa, while four *stupas* denotes Mettaya. The central Buddha, sometimes crowned, usually sits touching the ground, although other *mudras* are found. The five Buddhas invariably sit on a waisted throne, hollow-cast and trimmed and incised after moulding. The lotus throne is now interpreted as a mass of intertwining floral motifs. Vasundhara often sits at the base of the throne, wringing her hair.

#### SRI LANKAN INFLUENCE

All the Buddhist communities of Southeast Asia maintained links with Sri Lanka. Anandacandra's Shit-thaung pillar inscription records donations sent to a community of monks there in the 8th century. At the end of the 16th century the Sri Lankan king Vimaladhamma Suriya, concerned at the decline





166 The first Buddha of our era, Kakusandha, surrounded at each quarter by the four Buddhas who are yet to come. From Vesali. U Shwe Tha Khine collection, Sittwe.

167 (opposite page) The Buddha of the future, Mettaya, surrounded by three stupas, with the fourth part broken. Lower half of throne missing. Mrauk-U period. Mrauk-U Museum.

168 (opposite page) Buddha seated between two small Buddhas, with the remaining two attributes missing. Ganesha sits at the base of the throne, which has a lion at each side. Mrauk-U Museum.







169 (above) Miniature standing Buddha from Sri Lanka, from Koe-thaung. 15th-16th centuries. Mrauk-U Museum.

170 Sri Lankan-type bronze Buddha with an ornate revedos with lions and a kirttimukha from Shan-taung-myo. Made in three parts: the Buddha image, the throne and the revedos. 15th-16th centuries. Mrauk-U Museum.



of Buddhism in his country, sent a mission to Arakan. This resulted in the Arakanese monk Nandicakka travelling there to conduct the *upasampada* ordination, when several members of the royal and other noble families were received into the order. With the assistance of the Dutch, who supported the restoration of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, another deputation of Arakanese monks was sent there for the same purpose at the end of the 17th century.

Several Sri Lankan bronze images have been found at Mrauk-U, and others clearly derive from the Sri Lankan type. A miniature standing Buddha figure was discovered during the Koe-thaung excavations, and was probably brought there some time after the mid-16th century when the shrine was built. It fol-



lows the classic colossal standing Buddha from Avukana type from about the 8th century, which has been copied in Sri Lanka for centuries. The figure stands on a lotus base, right hand raised in *abhayamudra*, the gesture of reassurance, while the left is outstretched in *varamudra*, the gesture of giving. A flaming *usnisa* issues from the top of the Buddha's head.

Two remarkably fine Sri Lankan bronze Buddha images were discovered at Shan-taung-myo, near the Teza-rama monastery. Both are in the style which was developed in the late Polannuvara period (1150-1200AD), but which continued to be copied after that time, making dating difficult. Both sit in *virasana*, right leg folded over the left with their hands folded in *dhyanamudra*, the attitude of meditation, have their robes

171 Sri Lankan-type bronze Buddha with an ornate vahanika with eight small devas and a kirtimukha. Made in three parts: the Buddha image, the throne and the vahanika. 15th-16th centuries. Frank-U Museum.



172 Bronze Lokapala from Sri Lanka,  
16th-17th centuries. U Oo Tha Yin  
Collection.

folded over the left shoulder, leaving the right bare, and have a flaming *usnisa*, all of which are features common to Sri Lankan art. They are distinguished by their magnificent reredoses.

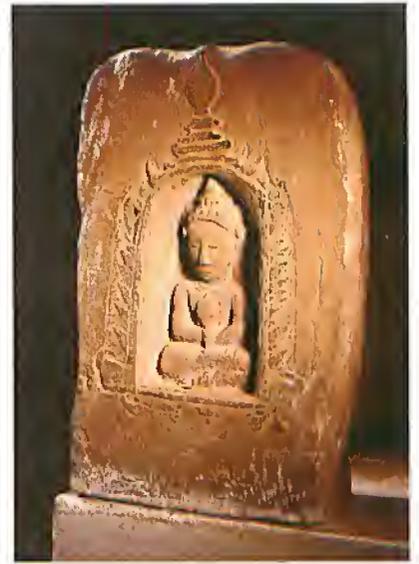
The first sits on a rectangular throne which has a floral design etched on the front panel and a row of lotus petals around the base. His reredos is supported by a pair of pillars on which sit lions with fantastically conceived tails. An arch decorated with jewels and leaf designs rises above the lions' heads and is surmounted by the mythic *kirttimukha*, from whose mouth exudes the elixir of immortality.

The second is even more complex in that the rectangular base of the throne has a front projection and is etched with geometric designs. The base of the reredos is flanked by small squat figures, which appear to be holding it up. Above these are a pair of lions facing inwards, over which are a pair of *vyalas*, fantastic composite animals often depicted in the art of Mrauk-U. The arch is composed of eight small figures with tall headdresses. The outer pair each hold a club in the manner of door guardians or guardians of the quarters. The others have either one or both hands raised to their foreheads in attitudes of respect. These eight represent inhabitants of the *Brahma* world, divinities which, like men, pay homage to the Buddha. Again, the whole is surmounted by a *kirttimukha*.

A very small standing male figure may also have come from Sri Lanka. Carrying a club, which suggests that it is a *lokapala*, it wears the same tall conical headdress as the *devas* on the reredos, and a costume typical of the early Kandyan period.

#### DIVERGENT ICONOGRAPHY

During the Mrauk-U period Theravadin Buddhist iconography began to diverge from the orthodox forms inherited from India and Pagan, and to represent incidents from the life of the Buddha not depicted before in sculpture. One form, which appears to have become quite popular, signifies the time when the Buddha preached to the ogres, on which occasion he held a fan. The story might have attained popularity in Arakan given the strong beliefs of the people in the power of demons like the ogres. It remains important to the Arakanese today. A stone image of the fan-holding Buddha, whose provenance is not discernable as it is covered by layers of lime and paint, is now prominent among the collection of images in the entrance hall of the Shit-thaung.



173 (left) Buddha preaching to the ogres. The Buddha's hands are in the attitude of holding a fan, which is now lost. He sits on a plain waisted throne with two-bodied lions at the front corners. An elephant kneels on either side at the front, while in the centre is a damaged figure, possibly an ogre. There are sockets for a revedos behind and on either side of the image. Bronze, with traces of laquer and gilding. Mrauk-U Museum.

174 Buddha preaching to the ogres from Tabintaing shrine, near Mrauk-U. The Buddha, holding a fan, sits in a niche with a throne-like surround, flames to either side and with a stupa-like projection on top. Sandstone. Mrauk-U Museum.

#### BRONZE VOTIVE *STUPAS*

Models of *stupas* and shrines were deposited in their relic chambers during the consecration ceremony. Others were made as objects for devotion. A bronze four-faced model in the Mrauk-U Museum represents a solid-core shrine. A Buddha within a niche faces each of the cardinal points, in the manner of the Lemyethna. Above are three square terraces and an elongated dome, which has broken off. This model is interesting in that the entrances are surmounted by an ornate multi-flamed pediment crowned by the peculiar *naga*-like element typical of shrines throughout the Mrauk-U period.

Plate 144

A hollow cast bronze model of another, more complex four-sided *stupa*-shrine which was made in three sections. The upper part has a round dome over three terraces topped by an elongated finial with three umbrellas at its apex. There is a smaller *stupa* at each corner. In the central section the shrine proper has four entrances to the four Buddhas within. There are two-bodied lions at the base of each corner, and a Vasundhara wringing her hair in the centre. Separating the base from the shrine are eight figures functioning as caryatids. These carry drums, pipes and offerings and represent participants in a ceremony held at the shrine. The type recalls the later solid *stupas* at Mrauk-U, such as the Sakya-manaung.

A *stupa*-shaped casket for accommodating relics and precious objects to be deposited within a shrine, might, by analogy with the architecture, be attributed to around the seventeenth century. The base has the twenty-eight successive Buddhas seated in three diminishing rows, while the lid is in the shape of a bell-shaped *stupa* with an elongated finial.



175 (upper, left) Bronze model of a four-sided stupa. Uppermost section missing. 16th-17th centuries. Mrauk-U Museum.

176 (top) Model of a four-faced stupa-shrine made in three sections. Bronze, with traces of gilding. 17th century. Mrauk-U Museum.

177 (bottom, left) Bronze relic casket in the form of a stupa. The double-lotus base has been painted red. 16th-17th centuries. Phara-baw monastery.

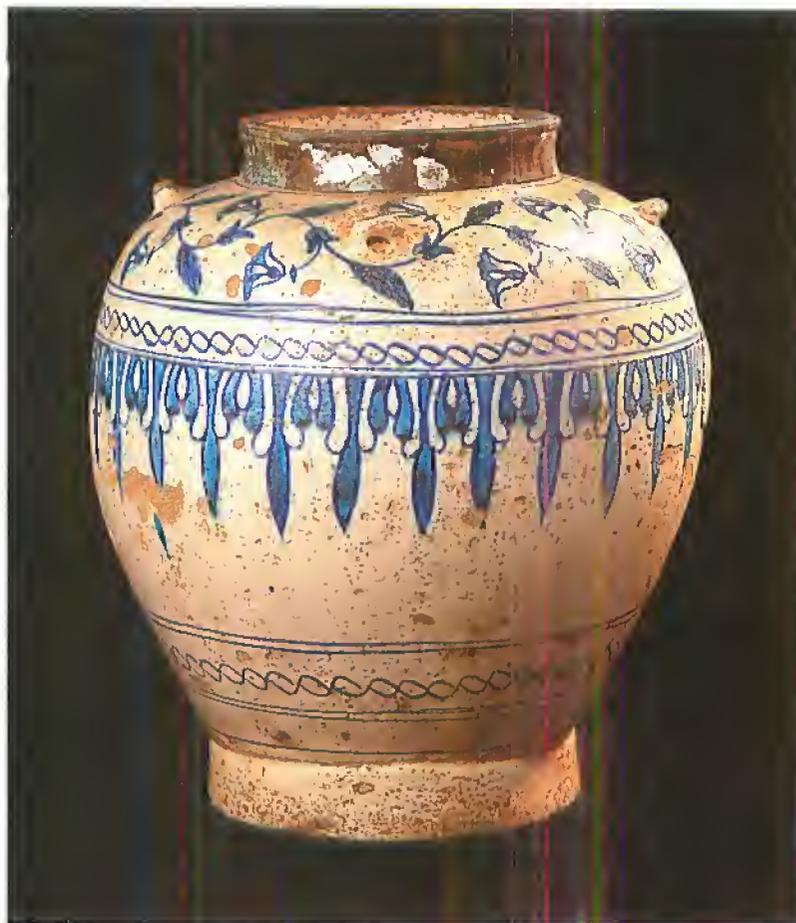


## CERAMICS

While the use of glazed sandstone was known at Pagan, after Min Bin conquered east Bengal terracotta and sandstone tiles glazed in the technique the Indians had acquired from the Middle East were used to cover the platforms of shrines and in the palace. The Koe-thaung, Laung-pan-prauk, and Phara-ouk, among others, had lead-glazed tiles, either in opaque monochrome blue, green, red, white and yellow or in painted designs of flora, fauna or auspicious motifs using white, pink, blue or green lines on a complementary field.

Domestic wares glazed using the same technique were made at Mrauk-U. Don Hein has identified the remains of at least six kilns west of the Shwe-gya-thein monastery on sloping ground leading to the Aungdat creek, from whence they would have exported via the Kaladan.

Plate 69 a, b

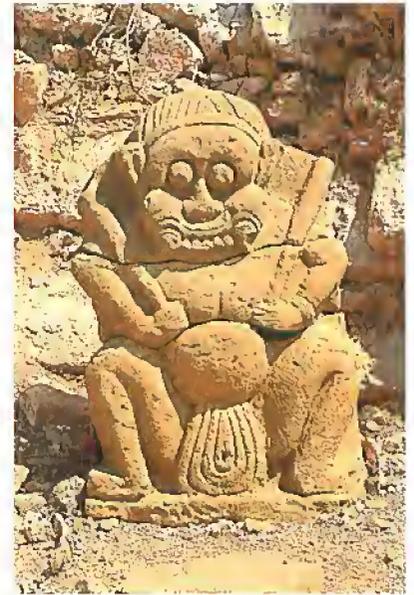


178 Earthenware storage jar with underglazed blue decoration, circa 16th century. Found at Parabaw village, Mrauk-U. Mrauk-U Museum.



## NAT SHRINES

We have seen how beliefs held before the earliest cities were built were incorporated into introduced religions, how the function of the spirits guarding the village was overtaken by *lokapalas* who guarded the kingdom, and how the village spirit house became the royal shrine. Spirits - known in



179 (left) The goddess of the continent west of Mount Meru at the Nan-Oo image shrine guards the people in the western part of the country. These people have faces shaped like the full moon. The image illustrates a local version of Buddhist cosmology.

180 (top) Guardian of the religion in the form of a demon, whose fearsome countenance drives away evil spirits. Koe-thaung.



Arakan and Burma as *nats* - never vanished. Some remain much as they always have, dwelling in trees and on hills and guarding particular fields and villages. Throughout the traditional histories there are accounts of the deeds of the spirits who protected the shrines, the cities and the country. People given as slaves to a pagoda continue to guard it as ghosts. Other spirits guard the palace sites, long after the original buildings have disappeared. Particularly powerful spirits guard the cities and the country. The kings of Mrauk-U, after the coronation, underwent a marriage with the city spirit, who is still propitiated.

With the decline of royal support for Hindu cults, some of those images which survived were regarded as having particular powers, and were reinstalled in later shrines. The Ni-buza shrine, which stands on a prominent hill and whose name means "Offering to the *Nats*", has long been the site of an important shrine. Recent excavations have revealed Hindu and Buddhist remains dating to the Vesali period, although the present shrine is attributed to the early Mrauk-U period.

The best known of the *nat* shrines is Wunti-taung, a hill covered with bricks and dressed stones, where a remarkable collection of sculptures and inscriptions have been found.





Tradition ascribes the building of the shrine to a king Pephyu in 976. It was dedicated to the Wunti *nat*, who assisted the king in driving out invaders from the northwest. The earliest remains are a standing Visnu image of around the 6th century and a Pali inscription in Pyu script dating from the same time. On the reverse of the Pali inscription is another dated 1521, recording repairs to the shrine made by the king. Most remarkable are two weathered sculptures which probably represent the Wunti *nat*. Quite unlike any others found in Arakan, they bear some resemblance to images of the Sakti cult of medieval Bengal, but their inspiration is local rather than introduced. In the example taken to the Mrauk-U Museum, the central figure, naked apart from a short lower garment, stands erect on a horse. To her right is a figure on a throne under which sits

Plate 45

182 *The Wunti Nat. Mrauk-U Museum.*





a bull, suggesting that he might be Siva, while to the left is another female who stands on a flying creature, half bird and half human. The flat, erect style suggests the late Mrauk-U period.

The identity of the nats protecting other prominent sites clearly changed over time. One such is the protector housed in the Buddaw Maw Kun shrine.

Said to have been founded in 1756 by Muslims in honor of the saint, Buddaw Auliah, the British Commissioner in Arakan in 1876 recorded that:

*On the southern side of the island of Akyab...there is a group of masonry buildings, one of which, in the style of its construction, resembles an Indian mosque; the other is a cave, constructed of stone on the bare rock...called Buddermokau, Budder being the name of a saint of Islam, and Mokau, a place of abode. It is said that 140 years ago or thereabouts two brothers named Manick and Chan, traders from Chittagong, while returning from Cape Negrais in a vessel loaded with turmeric, called at Akyab for water, and the vessel anchored off the Buddermokau rocks. On the following night Manick had a dream that the saint Budder Auliah desired him to construct a cave or a place of abode at the locality where they obtained water. Manick replied that he had no means to comply with the request. Budder then said that all Manick's turmeric would turn to gold, and that he should therefore endeavor to erect the building from the proceeds thereof. When morning came Manick, observing*

183 Buddaw Maw Kan shrine.



*that all the turmeric had been transformed into gold, consulted his brother Chan on the subject of the dream and they conjointly constructed a cave and also dug a well in the locality now known as Buddermokan<sup>2</sup>.*

Today the shrine consists of a cave on the rocks and a structure where the roof is a blend of the Indian mosque and the Burmese turreted spire. Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims worship the saint here for protection against the dangerous spirits of the water. Some will bring their new cars here and forward and reverse three times, a contemporary gesture of the traditional obeisance.

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<sup>2</sup> Forchhammer p. 60

184 Interior, Buddaw Maw Kan Shrine.



185 *View from Bandoola monastery*

## NOTE ON THE PHOTOGRAPHY

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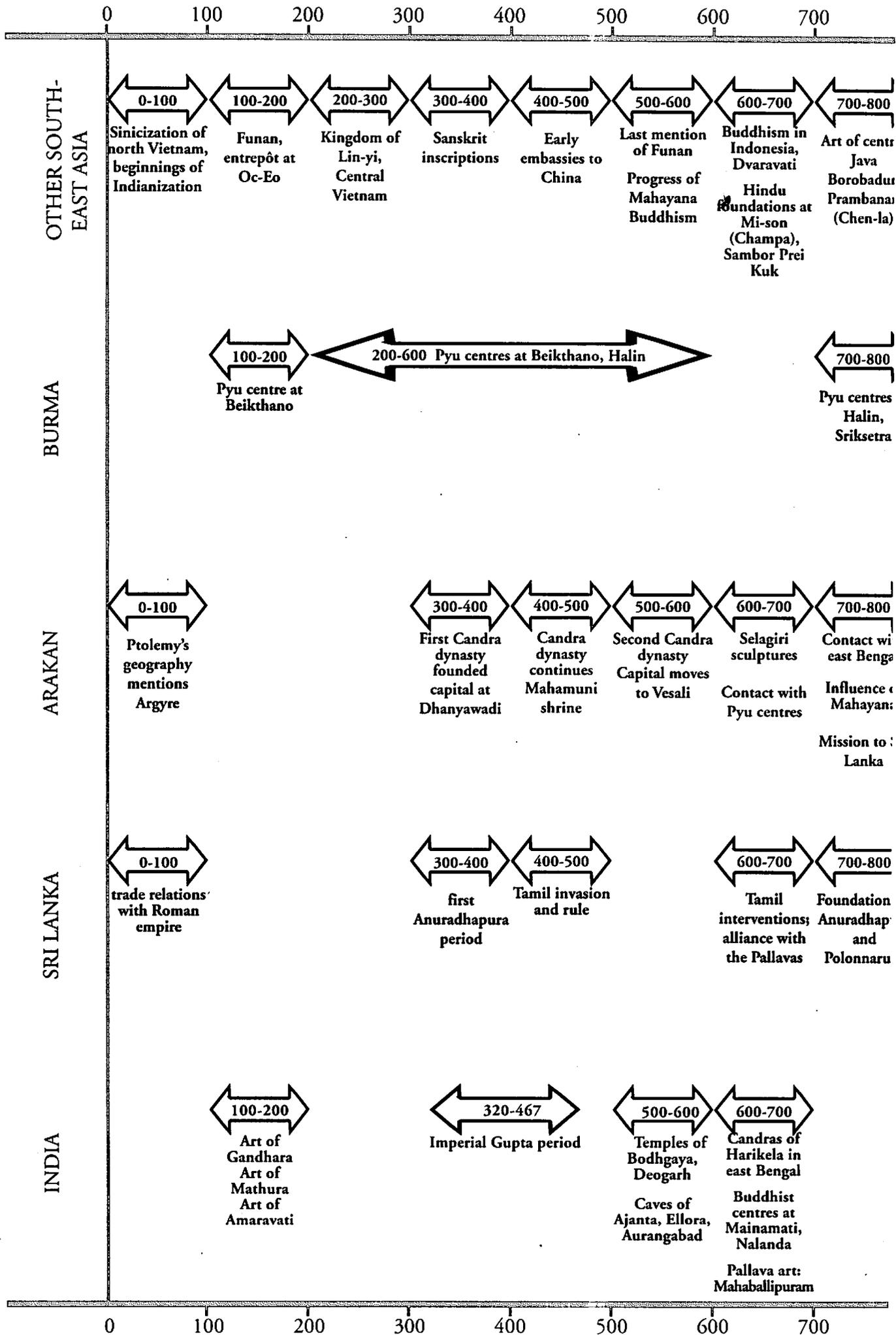
While I came from a family of Burmese photographers and film makers and had been photographing in Burma since 1993, when I worked on *Myanmar, Land of the Spirit* (Co and Bear, London), I had never visited Arakan. So when one morning in 1996 we first started out for the Shit-thaung shrine I felt it was pre-ordained.

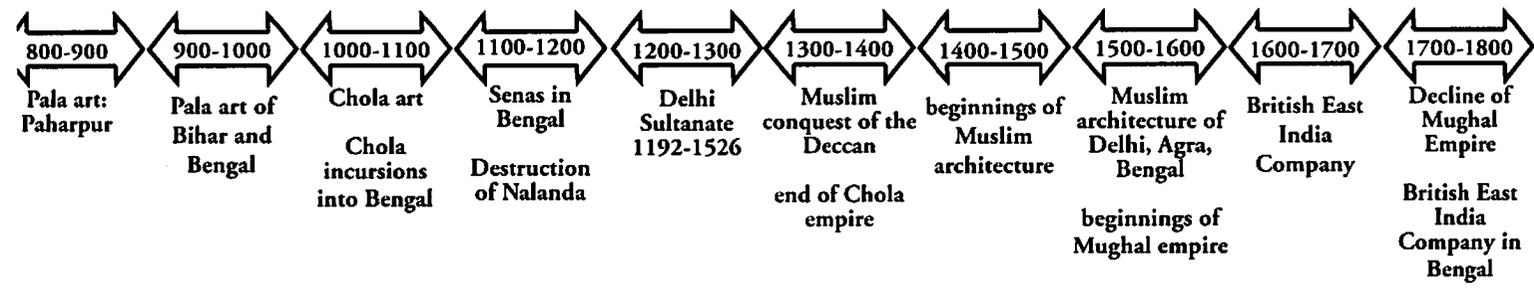
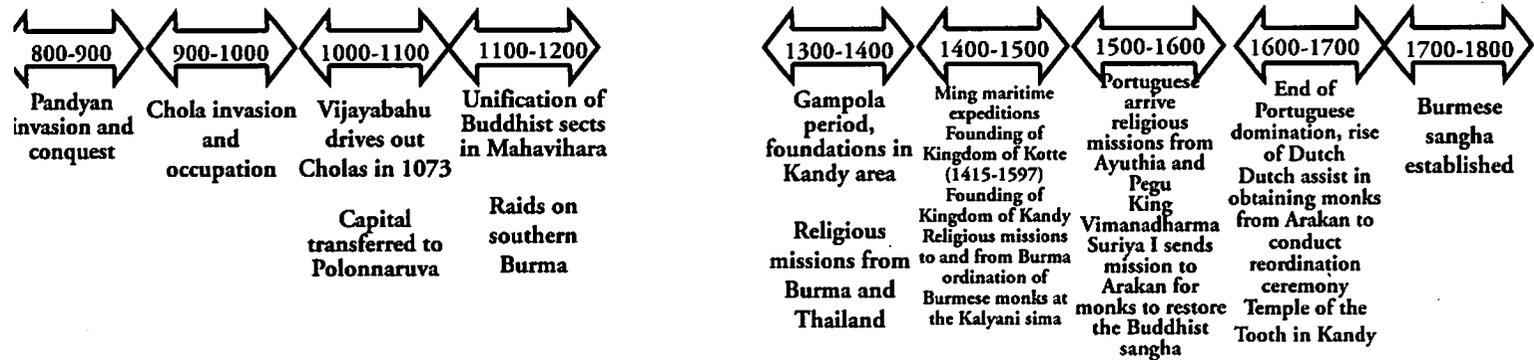
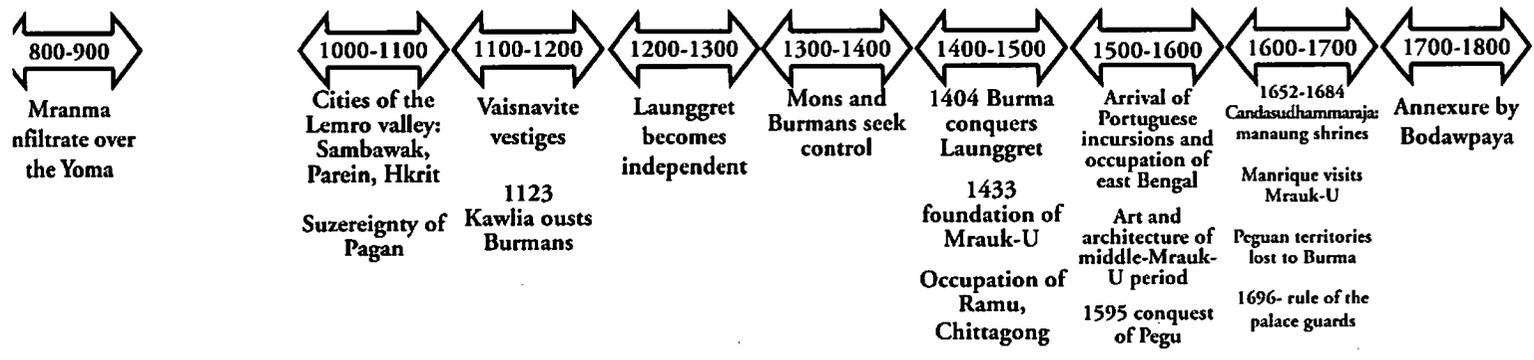
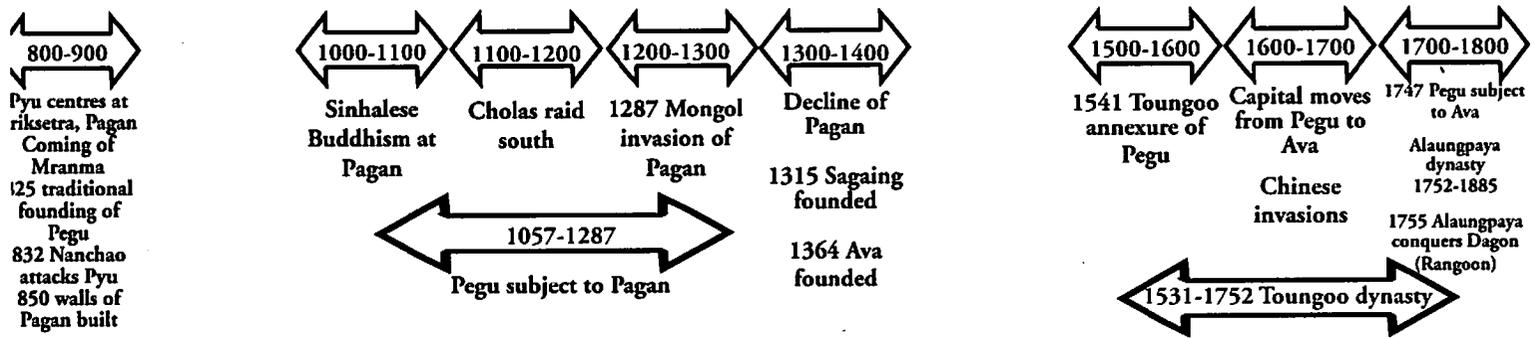
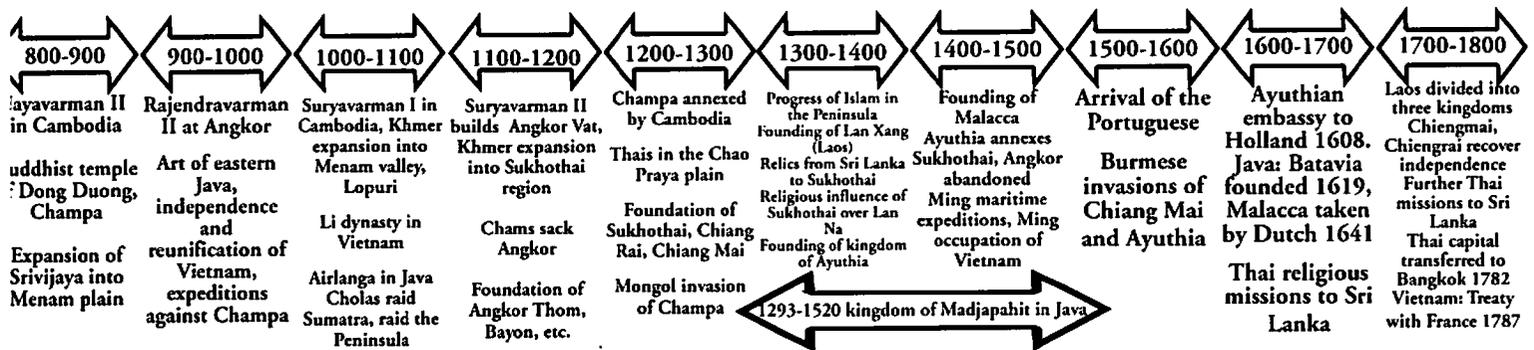
I used mainly 35mm format, and 120mm Fuji film for Buddha images and sculptures in museums and private collections. In Mrauk-U electricity was sometimes only available for two hours in the evening. It was somewhat frustrating to have to use car batteries for my studio lights. These were never properly charged and died out after just a few set-ups. At one time my assistant, Thaw Zin, hired all the batteries available in the town of Mrauk-U, including the tractor battery. I also used oil lamps and candles to recreate the original lighting conditions. Strangely, when I was taking interiors of shrines and wanted to use flashlights to fill out the shadow areas, the flash didn't respond on several occasions. Although I tried many different methods, using the slaves, sync cord or the radio remote, it just didn't work. My assistant and I decided to ask for permission from Buddha and the spirits before shooting each day.

Before I started work on this book a monk asked me "what camera do you use to capture your pictures?" Nikon, I answered. He was not satisfied with my answer and said "think". I couldn't answer then but now I understand what he meant. The photographs in this book were captured with my heart.

Zaw Min Yu

# CHRONOLOGICAL CHART





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## GLOSSARY\*

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**abhayamudra:** gesture of reassurance, with the right hand held upwards, palm exposed  
**abhiseka:** ritual lustration  
**Avalokitesvara:** Bodhisattva of compassion  
**ayudhapurusa:** personified weapon (of Visnu)  
**blumisparśamudra:** attitude of touching the ground to call the earth to witness  
**Bodhisattva (Pali Bodhisatta):** A compassionate being who forswears nirvana in order to help others attain enlightenment: in some cases, a Buddha-to-be  
**Brahma:** gods of the heavens which make up the second of Buddhism's Three Worlds  
**Brahmin:** a member of the priestly class in Hindu culture  
**caitya:** sanctuary, shrine or model of a shrine  
**cakra:** (Pali *cakka*) wheel, symbol of the world ruler or cakravartin  
**camara:** flywhisk  
**deva:** a god  
**dharmaçakramudra:** attitude of "turning the wheel of the law" or reaching  
**dhyānamudra:** attitude of meditation, hands resting on lap  
**dvarapala:** door guardian  
**gada:** club or mace  
**Ganesa:** elephant-headed god, the remover of obstacles  
**Hinayana,** see Theravada  
**Indra (Pali Sakka, Burmese Thagya-min):** King of the Gods  
**kīrtamakuta:** mitre-like headdress, worn by Visnu and other deities  
**kīrtimukha:** literally "Face of Glory"; the name given to the demon's mask mounted above doorways  
**lalitasana:** posture of ease, usually with one knee raised, the other folded  
**lokapala:** guardian of the world or one of its four quarters  
**Mahayana:** Later branch of Buddhism, apt to stress the concept of salvation through the efforts of others, such as Bodhisattvas  
**Maitreya (Pali Mettaya):** the Buddha of the future  
**mandala:** Cosmic diagram, often used as the focus of meditation in both Hinduism and Buddhism  
**makara:** mythical aquatic beast, probably derived from the crocodile, sometimes with an elephant's trunk. Together with the kīrtimukha, the makara is used to frame doorways and niches of shrines.  
**Mara:** in Buddhism, personification of desire and evil  
**makuta, mukuta:** headdress  
**naga:** serpent, mythological serpent-like figure  
**nagaraja:** king of the serpents  
**nat (Burmese):** spirit which has adopted a human shape

**padmasana:** lotus posture, sitting with both legs crossed, each foot resting on the opposite thigh, also called vajrasana  
**prabhavali:** flaming surround

**Sakka,** see Indra

**sampadasthana:** hieratic frontal posture, with weight equally distributed on both feet

**Siddharta (Pali Siddhattha):** Buddha of the present era

**Siva:** Hindu god of destruction and renovation of the universe

**stupa:** mound or tower used to mark the relics of the Buddha or of a Buddhist spiritual leader

**Tavatimsa:** Heaven located at the summit of mount Meru, ruled by Indra

**Theravada:** The most conservative branch of Buddhism, founded in Sri Lanka in the 3rd. century BC

**unśa:** cranial protuberance, a distinguishing mark of the Buddha

**vajra:** lightning, weapon of Indra

**vanamala:** forest garland, worn by Visnu

**varamudra:** gesture of giving, arm pendant, hand turned palm outwards

**Vasundhara:** The Earth Goddess

**virasana:** heroic posture, in which the legs are folded and one foot is placed on the opposite thigh

**Visnu:** Hindu god, preserver of the universe

**vītarkamudra:** gesture of elucidation, hand raised, thumb and forefinger touching

**vyāla:** mythical composite beast of auspicious significance

**yajnopavita:** sacred thread worn by Brahmins over left shoulder and under right arm

\* All words are Sanskrit except where otherwise indicated

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## NOTE ON THE AUTHOR AND PHOTOGRAPHER

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### PAMELA GUTMAN

was first sent to Arakan in 1972 by G.H. Luce, the foremost historian of Burma at the time. She worked with the Department of Archaeology and the University of Rangoon in the preparation of her doctoral thesis on Arakanese cultural history before the 11<sup>th</sup> century (Australian National University 1977) and has since made many study tours together with Burmese and Arakanese colleagues. Pamela has published widely on aspects of Southeast Asian history and culture. She has also been Adviser on Foreign Affairs to the Prime Minister of Australia and was Director of the Research Institute for Asia and the Pacific at the University of Sydney. One of her particular interests is the symbolism of political power.

### ZAW MIN YU

is a well known photographer and artist who has travelled and worked widely in Burma and throughout the world. He has been living abroad for 20 years, first in France and then the Philippines and then 9 years in Sydney, Australia, before settling down in Rangoon.

