ABOUT THE BOOK

Arakan, the deprived cousin of Myanmar (Burma), has long been neglected. Its antique works of art vandalized or incompetently renovated by the present Buddhist clergy. During the early years of the Christian era, despite rumours of demonic cannibals, its fertile plains attracted Hindu colonists. Their nobility founded dynasties. At the inauguration of the metropolis of the Chandra maharaja(s), its inhabitants derided the grandeur of Amaravati, the celestial city of Swargar, Indra’s paradise, claiming their capital was more superior.

It was a confident kingdom in which Brahmanism, Mahayana Buddhism and local cults flourished. The court language was Sanskrit, and the ceremonial life within the palace emulated that of the subcontinent. Vaishali, the capital and emporium of Argyre ("Silver Land") attracted merchants from neighbouring kingdoms who came for the dazzling bullion shipped all the way from Nanzhao (Yunnan).

In its glory days, Vaishali contained hundreds of Buddhist stupas, Hindu temples, and communities of craftsmen. Today, evidence of the Brahmanic presence has been almost eradicated by the present Rakhaing people, determined to present a land ‘untainted’ by any other religion except Theravada Buddhism - when in fact that is far from the case.

The work, with its no holds barred approach, investigates the achievements of a little known Indianized kingdom on the periphery of its giant neighbour.

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Vaishali and the

Indianization of Arakan
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Indianization of Arakan

By
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New Delhi
Dedication

Dedicated to Colleen Beresford (nee Rustom) and Terence R Blackburn, and in particular to the Rakhaing-thar(s), in the hope that in time they may come to appreciate the immense religious and cultural contributions rendered by the early Buddhist and Hindu colonists to ancient Arakan.
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My deepest gratitude must go to the late Professor E. H. Johnston of Balliol College, Oxford, who translated the Sanskrit text of the Ananda Chandra Inscription, but regrettably did not live to see it published. Research on ancient Arakan suffered a terrible blow by his untimely death in 1942.

I would like to put on record my grateful thanks to the long-suffering Colleen Beresford (nee Rustom) and Terence Blackburn for reading the manuscript, and for their innumerable and critical suggestions, in particular their prudent advice regarding my forthright views on the neglect of the historic sites, and the offhand attitude of the people, clergy and the authorities. Colleen has not only allowed me to quote from her scholarly article "Some Coins of Arakan", but has also provided me with a rare copy of one of San Tha Aung's books on Ananda Chandra, together with some important news cuttings and photographs vital to my work, and for which I am obliged.

The incredibly patient Terence Blackburn has kindly spent long hours trawling the Internet for information relevant to the present work.

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To Dr. Pamela Gutman and Dr. Michael Mitchiner whose important contributions on the history, religion and culture of this region have been invaluable. Their works have also helped to clear many an unanswered question on the period. At this moment in time, they appear to be the only recognized authorities on ancient Arakan.
The obliging staff at the Mrauk U and the Mahamuni Museums also have my deep gratitude. Despite little financial backup from the relevant authorities, these dedicated souls are undertaking a tremendous amount of work, much of it in their own free time.

Grateful thanks to Daw Saw Saw Sarpay for some of the illustrations which appeared in San Tha Aung’s The Buddhist Art of Ancient Arakan.

Any interpretations, forthright or cynical opinions, and errors are, of course, mine alone.

The drawings and photographs, unless otherwise stated, are by the author, as are the comments in square brackets.

Noel Francis Singer
2008
Introduction

This account originally appeared as an article "Sculptures from Vaishali, Arakan", in *Arts of Asia*, July-August 2007, vol. 38, no. 4.

The project initially began in 1999 and by 2006, reams of information had been gathered, threatening to turn the article into a book. As space in any magazine is at a premium, this meant that much of the data had to be grudgingly jettisoned and the text ruthlessly edited.

Nevertheless, I was determined to retrieve the valuable data and reweave the scattered strands into a book as I felt it was too significant to waste. Many of the photographs not included in the article were also too valuable to be consigned to oblivion.

Obviously, since the article was published, I have received more pertinent information which necessitated several changes in the present text.

My interest in ancient Arakan had been simmering since the late 1950s, when I lived in Myanmar, but was unable to visit the 'legendary' sites of Mahamuni and Vaishali. In those days, it involved an unpleasant sea voyage, and once there, transport was practically non-existent. Many of the locations, too, were also in the hands of rebel groups and extremely dangerous. A virulent form of malaria was rampant — and still is — so intending travellers beware. Medication, insect repellent and a mosquito net are a must. One cannot be too careful about the food either, even in the best hotels.

Over forty years later, and now living in the United Kingdom, I finally achieved my wish. Disappointingly, during each of my two visits, I came away with almost all my long-held illusions shattered, saddened at the terrible neglect, and the vandalism being perpetrated on ancient religious artefacts by ignorant and misguided men, in particular the Buddhist clergy. There was also extreme poverty in the outlying areas. The total lack of interest from the locals was depressing. Then again, one cannot blame these simple rural folk, as finding the
means to fill hungry bellies is far more important than expending energy on the preservation of mouldy old ruins and ancient artefacts. During my travels in the countryside, it was most distressing to see such abject poverty.

This account of Vaishali does not pretend to be a scholarly work, and despite my lack of academic qualifications, I have tried to tell what is to me a fascinating story which was probably replicated in various parts of ancient Southeast Asia which came under the influence of the Hindu colonists.

The early history of Arakan from 200 to the 900 CE is far from complete and still shrouded in what appears to be an impenetrable haze. Not only have insufficient archaeological investigations been undertaken, it has also been weighed down and sabotaged by inaccurate information by native chroniclers of a later age.

Some foreign writers, too, have either slavishly repeated these fantasies, presented their own interpretations, refuted the findings of others, or else, ignored this early period altogether. For example, ancient Arakan of the Chandras was omitted by George Coedes in his celebrated The Indianized States of Southeast Asia.

A number of readers may find it surprising that I have not given due weight to indigenous accounts of a later date quoted in this work. This is a deliberate omission on my part owing to their unreliability, permeated as they are with borrowed historical episodes and myths from Buddhist and Hindu India. Although these native sources are claimed to be 'ancient', they probably date from a time after the 14th century. Above all, they had a tendency to fabricate, obsessed with a need to present a realm infused with Buddhist piety of the Theravada School when in fact it was a Mahayana version, together with Brahmanism, which predominated.

As things stand, an immense amount of research and scientific excavation, unhampered by religious bigotry and political propaganda urgently needs to be accomplished.

One occasionally hears of this or that foreign institution planning excavations and conservation, but nothing constructive appears to have materialized in Arakan. Judging by the articles in the Myanmar Historical Commission Journal, attention seems to be focused on Myanmar proper.

This present work is based on the unique lithic inscription of circa 729 commissioned by Ananda Chandra, ruler of Vaishali, together with other epigraphic evidence and iconographic. At this point in time, these are the only
contemporary historical materials available for this early period. One can but hope that before long a fuller picture will emerge when other relevant inscriptions have been excavated.
Chapter One

Background history*

The elongated coastal strip of Arakan (Rakhaing) is situated on the western part of Burma (Myanmar) proper and extends for almost 360 miles. At its widest it is roughly 100 miles, while at its narrowest it is only about 25 miles. Oh the west is the Bay of Bengal, the region now called Bangladesh is to the north, and on the east are the high Yoma mountains. Man tended to congregate in the fertile river valleys.

What may conceivably be the earliest representation of this ancient land can be seen in a map based on the findings of the Greek scholar Erathosthenes (circa 276-194 BCE), the Chief Librarian of the Great Library at Alexandria. In it, Hindoi or Indoi (India) and Taprobane (Sri Lanka) are indicated. Included are the Ganga (Bhagerathi) River and its Delta, together with part of the curving coastal strip of Arakan. The Yoma range which separate this region from the country now called Myanmar, is depicted as well. Unfortunately, Arakan is represented as a blank space with no identifiable habitation sites.

A chart by Strabo (c. 63/64 BCE-24 CE) which appears to have been based on the above, is almost identical for this region. However, in a later map derived from those of Claudius Ptolemaeus (Ptolemy: flourished 127-145 CE, another inhabitant of Alexandria), the coastline of Arakan has been updated considerably, and the mountain barrier illustrated in detail. Of particular interest is the inclusion of the premier port city of Sada together with another, also on the coast, called Berabonna. The river "Sados Flu" [thought to be the present Kaladan] is shown.

Another map, also based on Ptolemy's researches and published in 1695, identified the Yoma mountain chain as the "Meandrus Mons". In this

* All dates not designated BCE are of the Christian Era. Comments in square brackets are by the author version, only two cities are named, Sada on the coast,
and Triglyphon, situated further inland and to the north.

An additional chart entitled "Geographiae Antiquae" and dated 1818, depicted Sada and Berabonna, together with Triglyphon which had now been relocated to the coast; several versions based on Ptolemy are known to exist.

In those remote days, it is possible that it was in Bharatavarsha ("The Realm of the Sons of Bharata", a fabled Indian ruler) that the earliest name by which Arakan was known was first recorded, and where it achieved notoriety as "Kala Mukha" (Land of the) Black Faces.1

The Mahaniddesa (circa 200 CE) noted that the Ramayana (The Adventures of Rama: circa 500 BCE) and the Mahabharata (The Great [battle of the] Bharatas: circa 400 BCE) identified it by that appellation, and described its denizens as cannibals, presumably negritos.2

Not surprisingly, the Hindus called them rakshasa (demons) as they believed them to be the offspring of men and rakshasis (shape-changing female demons) who through their magical powers could metamorphose themselves into delectable maidens.3

The legend of the rakshasa filtered down the centuries, for the present-day Rakhaing whose presence was first noted in the region in about the 10th century CE4 knew their land as Yetkhapura (Rakshasa pura) or Kingdom and City of the Demons; although it is unclear where this city-state was situated or during which period it flourished.

Gerini was sceptical of the derivation of Yetkhapura from the word "rakshasa", he felt that although Ptolemy in his Geographike Hyphegesis (Guide to Geography) had populated the littoral around the Gulf of Martaban with cannibal tribes, he had not mentioned their existence in Arakan.

"The term Rakhaing can therefore be scarcely connected with the tradition of the Raksasas occupying at one time the land, and any such pretended connection put forward is undoubtedly the modern invention of Buddhist monks, anxious to find some explanation for the name of the country.

Sir Arthur Phayre says that the latter was designated as Rakkha-pura by the Buddhist missionaries from India; but I should like to hear how far back in antiquity this name can be traced. It appears in the Mahavamsa [of Sri Lanka] under the form Rakkhanga at so late a date as A.D. 1592; and in the Ain-i-Akbari at about the same period under the form Arkung."5
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Luce, quoting Ptolemy [who in turn was citing Pomponius Mela (circa 43] on the location of ancient Arakan, said:

"Descending the coast south-eastwards from the mouth of the Ganges, he names first the Airrhadoi (with the port of Barakoura) [this was presumably in the Chittagong region]; then the country of Argyre ["Silver Land" i.e. Arakan] with [the towns of] Sambra, Sada, Berabonna and Temala [which Gereni believed was Cape Negrais]; then a Cape; then the cannibals ofBesynga [thought to be in the region of the mouth of the Irrawaddy River] in the Sarabak Gulf [most likely the Gulf of Martaban]."6

These areas were allegedly inhabited by other savage tribes, such as the Beseidai or Tiladai who lived between India and China, therefore somewhere in present day Myanmar. However, Luce, when quoting Ptolemy, offered conflicting descriptions. While on one occasion he defined the people as "big" of stature and "broad and hairy and broad-faced, white-skinned", further on they are described as "stunted.7 The Periplus had originally depicted them as 'pygmies '.

Nevertheless, according to Luce "Both Chinese and Greek sources agree in placing, at the beginning of our era, undersized and white-skinned peoples in Burma, and the existence of early trade-routes between China and India."8

How reliable is the anecdote concerning the cannibals?

Regarding these man-eating savages, was Ptolemy simply repeating the scare stories of the geographers before him, and the sensational traveller’s tales which were liable to circulate in ports of the world? After all, it is a well known fact that humans have a tendency to fabricate, either from sheer ignorance or pure malice.

Revealingly, a location map in Moore's recent work pinpoints numerous fortified habitation sites from possibly before 100 CE in the very areas supposedly being terrorized by Ptolemy's cannibals.9

The cold archaeological and scientific facts are these.

Cave paintings and stone implements said to be over 5,000 years old have been discovered in the Badalin ("Shining-as-Mercury") Caves in the Shan States. Older still are the mysterious hunter-gatherers of a prehistoric period called "Anyathian", from the relatively modern Myanmar word ah-nyar-tha, meaning a male from the upper part of the country.
Recent excavations have uncovered hitherto unknown finds from loca-tions which have been identified as the Neolithic, 'Bronze Age' and the 'Iron Age'. The Nyaungyan burial site, in particular, has revealed what appear to be unique 'mother goddess' figures crafted out of thin sheets of bronze; the identification of these symbols is still ongoing. Grave goods include decorative ornaments for coffins, polished stone implements, large perforated stone discs designed for the wrists and chest, glass rings, pottery and bronze artefacts. Almost similar examples from these periods have also been reported in Thailand.

It is doubtful if cannibalism was practiced amongst these people who were certainly not wild savages.

Carbon-dated evidence has revealed that by circa 200 BCE, the Pyu (Piao or Tircul), possibly one of the earliest civilized ethnic groups, were already established within their small city-states in central Myanmar.

One must presume that the civilized and the uncivilized existed within their own territories, with raids and counter raids being undertaken as the centuries passed. It would appear that the more primitive tribes were finally pushed further back into the wilderness, for the Pyu and the Mon, each in their own kingdoms, soon came to dominate the land.

But that is another story.

**The first wave of Hindu colonists**

To return to what was occurring at the time in ancient Arakan.

In India of the 1st century CE, fuelled by their need for commerce, gold and silver, the initial wave of Hindu colonists undertaking their samudra yatra (sea voyages) across the Purva Samudra (Bay of Bengal) began in earnest.

These extraordinarily courageous travellers, composed of merchants, adventurers, artisans, Brahmana, members of the ruling elite and, one must assume, some of their fearless women folk, braved the terrifying and cramped conditions at sea to seek out strange new worlds such as the fabled Survanabhumi and Suvarnadvipa, which reputedly contained unimaginable wealth. Once at their destination, the pioneers founded settlements and over-came the hostility of the local inhabitants. Some of their elite married into the families of local tribal chiefs and in time, by their superior knowledge and skills, came to rule over them.
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It was surprising to learn that even before that early date, many of the coastal areas and shipping lanes of the Indian Ocean and the Straits of Malacca were infested by pirates who either killed all on board or sold them into slavery. This meant that for the prudent ship owners and merchants, precautionary measures had to be taken, and a contingent of archers and spearmen hired to accompany these voyages.13

By the 3rd century, the coastal regions of Kala Mukha had been settled, the colonists dominating and coexisting warily with the aboriginal tribes.

The Lords of the Solar and Lunar dynasties from far off Bharatavarsha had indeed arrived.

In the major habitation sites, Sanskrit was the written language for the ruling classes, and religious beliefs were those current at the time on the subcontinent.

Dr. Emil Forchhammer, a Swiss Professor of Pali at Rangoon College, and Superintendent of the newly founded Archaeological Survey [1881] described this fertile region [which was, and is still infested with the deadly malaria mosquito (Culicidae)].

"The earliest dawn of the history of Arakan reveals the base of the hills, which divide the lower course of the Kaladan and Lemro rivers, inhabited by sojourners from India, governed by chiefs who claim relationship with the rulers of Kapilavastu. Their subjects are divided into the four castes of the older Hindu communities; the kings and priests study the three Vedas; the rivers, hills, and cities bear names of Aryan origin; and the titles assumed by the king and queen regent suggest connection with the Solar and Lunar dynasties of India."14

Argyre, the Silver Land

Ptolemy, quoting Pomponius Mela, had identified this part of Eastern India as Argyre (Silver Land) as he had been told that it contained numerous silver mines. Its capital was Sada. But since this metal is not found in the region, later scholars found his description perplexing, neither could the city of Sada be identified.

Majumdar, too, could not agree with this location for Argyre and felt that "we might look upon the island of Java as corresponding to Argyre, and there are several facts which speak in favour of this supposition."15

Fortunately, in 1978 the mystery was partly explained by Mitchiner, who said that the reason it bore the epithet Silver Country was that its government acted as
a mediator for the export of bullion which originated in Nanzhao (Yunnan) and an area of Myanmar which is now believed to be located in the present Bawzaing area of the Shan States\textsuperscript{16} [the Bawdwin mines are another location]. This immense stretch of country in the Shan States was variously under the control of the Pyu kingdoms of Vishnupura (City of Vishnu), Hanlin, and the Varman and Vikrama dynasties of Sri Kshetra, named after the holy city of Puri in Kalinga, and sacred to Vaishnavites.

According to Mitchiner, the silver was taken down the Temalos (Irrawaddy River) to Temala, thought to be near present-day Syriam (Thanlyin), across the river from Rangoon (Yangon); it was later to become part of the Mon kingdom of Ramannadesa.

From Temala, the bullion from Nanzhao was shipped to agents in the eastern kingdoms and to Sada in the Silver Land from where it was dis-patched to India and beyond. This precious metal attracted the attention of the Romans, for it is known that sometime during the 2nd century CE, a small expedition sailed across the Apara Samudra (Arabian Sea) and the Bay of Bengal, and managed to travel to Nanzhao by way of the Irrawaddy River — an incredible and obviously dangerous undertaking.

As to the identity of the capital of Argyre, Ptolemy was told that the Sanskrit name of the ruling dynasty was Chandra, which his informants, using the Prakrit parallel, pronounced Chada. Linguistic difficulties meant that Ptolemy's rendition became Sada, which he also used for the capital.\textsuperscript{17}

Interestingly, the \textit{Mahaniddesa} also referred to the city as Sada, and said that it was a premier port of call for shipping from Palur in the Ganjam district of Kalinga (Udra or Orissa) and Tamralipti (Tamluk), on the Hugli River, about thirty miles southwest of modern Kolkata.\textsuperscript{18}

Gerini, quoting from Ptolemy, said that Sada was identified:

\begin{quote}
"as the terminus of the sea-passage across the Gangetic Gulf (Bay of Bengal) from Palura [in Kalinga], effected in a direct line from west to east, and covering a distance of 13,000 stadia. It was, therefore, the first port touched at in his time by ships proceeding from India to the eastern coast of the Bay of Bengal. Some ships, however, took a more northerly route, and touched at the riverine port of Antibole on the Dhakka or Old Ganges River, before making out for Sada and the Gulf of Martaban."
\end{quote}\textsuperscript{19}

However, Gerini did not agree with Ptolemy's identification and location of Sada, and was of the opinion that the city was sited at the present port town of
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Sandoway (Thandwair, with the classical name of Dvaravati) which is considerably further down the Arakanese coast. He added pertinently that some of the later Portuguese maps were still calling the port Sedoa.

[Gerini's assumption is credible, for although all the maps based on Ptolemy's researches show Sada as being situated on the coast; it is in fact over fifty miles inland. Why would the vessels from India travel laboriously inland through winding mangrove creeks, and facing possible attacks by pirates, when the present port of Sandoway was more accessible?]

The large sea going vessels from India, known as mahanavah, were heading east to other Southeast Asian kingdoms, in particular to Survanabhumi ("Land of Gold"; claimed to be Lower Myanmar and Malaysia), and to Suvarnadivipa ("Isle of Gold"), which Majumdar identifies as Sumatra, together with some of the islands in the region. Several interpretations of the exact location of these fabled lands are current. Another name for this region was the legendary Chryse, known to Pomonius Mela, Pliny the Elder and other of an earlier period, and which is now accepted as covering a large swathe of Southeast Asia.

The second period of Indianisation

The second phase of the Indianisation of Arakan occurred from about the 4th to the 6th centuries, by which time the kingdom of the colonists had been well established. One must also assume that by then, the earlier name of "Sada", for its capital, had been replaced by "Vaishali".

As a port city, Vaishali was in contact with Samantata (Tippera-Noakhali region, Southeast Bengaladesh), India, Simhaladivipa (Sri Lanka) and other overseas realms. Relations were strengthened by trade and diplomatic connections and the movements of migrants, pilgrims and itinerant craftsmen.

Nearer home, the Chandra rulers were in communication by land and water with the Pyu kingdoms across the mountains in the east, and with the small Mon city states in Ramannadesa.

Collis, who in 1925 quoted his source in good faith, said that the archaeologist, San Shwe Bu, had provided him with a translation from an old manuscript called "The True Chronicle of the Great Image" [the Mahamuni bronze which was located at the earlier capital of Dhanyavati].

"The Chandra kings were upholders of Buddhism, guarding and glorifying the Mahamunni [sic] shrine; their territory extended as far north as Chittagong" [then known as Chatigrama], "The conclusion to be drawn from this MS is that Weasali [Vaishali] was
VAISHALI AND THE INDIANIZATION OF ARAKAN

an easterly Hindu kingdom of Bengal, following the Mahayanist form of Buddhism and that both government and people were Indian as the Mongolian influx had not yet occurred."

The uncertainty over the date for the founding of Vaishali

Even though the capital of the Chandras is now accepted as Vaishali, there is as yet no coeval epigraphic evidence confirming it, neither is the term by which they identified their kingdom known. Western scholars have based their identification on the word "Waythali" (Vaishali), a corrupt later version in use by the present Rakhaing and the Myanmar peoples who are incapable of pronouncing the character "v".

If it was indeed Vaishali, Dr Johnston, an epigraphist of Balliol College, Oxford, who translated the Sanskrit inscription (circa 729) of Ananda Chandra, Maharaja of Vaishali, felt that the region had come under the control of the descendents of the [Licchavi] ruling family from Vaishali, Bihar, when they fled from the ascendancy of the Imperial Guptas (circa 300-467).

Johnston's theory is plausible, as the time scale corresponds with the second surge of Hindu migration into Southeast Asia, and the creation of the new Vaishali, when the Licchavi, under Dven Chandra (circa 370-425) established a Chandra vamsa (Lunar dynasty); previously the Licchavi claimed to be of the Sun/a vamsa (Solar dynasty).

However, at the present time, different opinions are current amongst scholars as to the identity of the city which Dven Chandra inaugurated. While some believe that it was the older Dhanyavati (meaning "rich as a source for food grains" because of the fertility of the earth), about sixteen miles to the north, others are of the opinion that it was Vaishali.

If we assume that it was the latter, at the location [Latitude 20° 40' 05" North, Longitude 93° 90' East] which was to become Vaishali, there was probably in existence a sizable number of colonists from the subcontinent, making it an ideal choice for the high-born Licchavi.

Then again, if it was Dhanyavati, it is unclear if the Licchavi replaced the earlier ruling house. This was an important site containing the Mahamuni Shrine, with its reputedly miraculous 'living' bronze image of Buddha. However, apart from legendary accounts invented centuries later, there is as yet no evidence of a contemporary nature to suggest that the shrine was already in existence when the Licchavi established the spot as their new capital.
As Sada was mentioned in the Mahaniddeesa, followed by Mitchiner's interpretation of Ptolemy's 2nd century rendition of "Chandra", perhaps the dynastic name of this older dynasty, too, was Chandra?

Little is known of these early raja(s) who ruled at Dhanyavati, apart from the fabricated accounts in later native chronicles which date this dynasty from 600 BCE to 400 CE. Htun Shwe Kaing has gone further and pushed the date for “the First Dhanyavati dynasty” to 3000 BCE, which one must accept pure wishful thinking.

In circa 729 CE, the inscription set by Ananda Chandra provided a list of the long line of past rulers, and the major events which occurred during their time of sovereignty. It stated that as the region was unstable, the monarch Dven Chandra had to subdue no less than 101 kings, presumably local tribal chiefs [this is a common symbolic number used to describe the many races of man, implying that as the conqueror of so many, he was entitled to the status of supreme ruler or Emperor].

Dven Chandra then laid out a nagaram (royal city) ovoid in plan and measuring 2.7 square miles in area. It was protected by fortifications and moats.

If this was the present site of Vaishali, one will have to speculate that either for sentimental reasons, or on seeing the topography with its vast fertile lands which resembled the locality of their former home, the Licchavi decided to name their new city after it. Vaishali is a derivation of Visala meaning broad, extensive, spacious, magnificent. It was also the name of Visala, the founder of the dynasty, who was the son of Trinabundu of the Iksavaku dynasty, possibly a semi-mythical ruler.

The original Vaishali in Bihar, described as "a small but powerful republic governed by nobles of the Vriji family", was one of the six great cities of India visited by Buddha. It is situated about 27 miles north of Pataliputra (Patna) and contains the Licchavi Relic stupa and the Abhishek Pushkarini or Coronation Pond of the later Vaishali rulers.

Fa-Hsien and Xuanzang, the Chinese pilgrims who were in India between 401-410 and 629-645 respectively, travelled to the older "Fei-she-li", and reported that although the region was very fertile, this celebrated site was already in ruins.

Whether it was Dhanyavati or Vaishali, centuries later in Arakan, the Ananda Chandra Inscription of 729 [henceforth to be known simply as the Inscription] enthused that because of its magnificence the newly built but unnamed capital, "saundarya hasinam"
(laughed at) the grandeur of Amaravati, the Vedic deity Indra's fabulous capital in Svarga ("Light of Paradise").

Gutman has suggested that the city built by Dven Chandra was not Vaishali but Dhanyavati, and dated the former to the 6th century; this was based on surviving archaeological evidence such as sculptures. Earlier, she had suggested the 7th century.

If this is the case, it had to be the splendid city of Dhanyavati which supposedly expressed amusement at the opulence of Indra's Svarga.

On the other hand, if Dhanyavati had been constructed by Dven Chandra sometime between circa 370-425, who then was responsible for relocating the capital to a site named Vaishali?

At the moment, no one appears to agree and each expert offers a bewildering array of dates and theories.

**Vaishali founded in circa 2nd century BCE**

In 1972, Aung Thaw, Director of Archaeology, recorded that "a Hinduised dynasty was ruling at Vaisali (Wethali) about the 2nd century B.C." In 1972, Aung Thaw, Director of Archaeology, recorded that "a Hinduised dynasty was ruling at Vaisali (Wethali) about the 2nd century B.C."

**Vaishali built in 327 CE**

The writers Myar Aung and Shwe Zan have claimed that Vaishali was built in 327 by Maha Taing Sandra, who is not listed in the Inscription, and that this was the year in which the great Pharagri image was commissioned and installed at the capital at the instigation of his consort Thupaba Devi (see Chapter Eleven).

Conversely, the late San Tha Aung, insisted that the year was 370.

**Vaishali established early 6th century**

If the first half of the 6th century has been recommended by Gutman for its foundation, there were only two maharaja(s) listed in the Inscription for this period. They were Bhuti Chandra (circa 496-520) and Niti Chandra (circa 520-575).

In all probability, it was the latter, for the Inscription indicated that he reigned for fifty-five years. There was also peace in the realm, and more importantly, the economy appeared to have been strong [this may be attested by fact that the
coins issued by him are the most common in the Chandra to have survived].

But that was all.

There is no mention in the Inscription of a new capital being built during his reign.

The mystery is, why was such a vitally important subject as the relocation of the capital not confirmed and identified in the text? Although it recorded the construction of a city, frustratingly it failed to name or date the event.

To confuse matters further, the later Rakhaing chronicles have also claimed a date for the establishment of Vaishali — in fact a baffling number.

To quote but a few.

One source\textsuperscript{32} asserted that Vaishali was built by the monarch Vasudeva [not listed in the Inscription]. Another said that Vasudeva and his nine brothers took over old Arakan and established themselves at Dvaravati [now Thandwair, also known as Sandoway during British colonial times; the city reputedly had a habit of floating off into the air and had to be tethered to the ground by a massive chain].

Vasudeva is also another name for the god Krishna, who is the eighth Manifestation of Vishnu.

Providentially, we have Gutman's version regarding this mysterious Vasudeva. She explains that he was the focus of the Bhagavata cult [connected with the worship of Vishnu or Krishna] adopted by the Gupta monarchs, which the Chandra rulers felt obliged to imitate, doubtless to bolster their self-importance.\textsuperscript{33}

According to Dallapiccola, in India the cult later amalgamated with the Vaishnava faction of the Pancharatras.\textsuperscript{34}

One must assume that somehow this information filtered down through the centuries to later Rakhaing chroniclers who were totally unaware of its significance, and presumed that Vasudeva had to be the name of a very important monarch, and was therefore the ideal candidate for the founder of Vaishali.
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Vaishali constructed in 788 CE

An indication of how these supposedly ancient Rakhaing chronicles could get their facts terribly wrong is revealed by Collis, who was equally ignorant of the piece of information he was quoting.

"The area now known as north Arakan has been for many years before the 8th century the seat of Hindu dynasties; in 788 A.D., a new dynasty, known as the Chandras, founded the city of Wesali [the dynasty then] came to an end in 957 A.D., being overwhelmed by a Mongolian invasion."35

[The date could not possibly be 788, for the Chandra dynasty had ended by circa 600. Yet, according to Kyi Khin, who was doubtless quoting one of the later Rakhaing chronicles, it was Maha Tain Sandara who rebuilt the old [and presumably abandoned] city of Vaishali in 788, and that it was destroyed in 957.36

Vaishali built in 790 CE

Forchhammer, quoting the Sappadanapakarana (Sarvasthanaparakarana), claimed to be "an ancient Arakanese manuscript of great value" added another twist to the story:

"In the year 152 B.E [Buddhist Era] (A.D. 790) the new city of Vesali [sic] was founded by the King Mahataingcandra on the site where the old town had stood."37

As the chronicle did not identify this "old town", Dhanyavati is out of the question as it is nearly sixteen miles to the north. Another source, however, said that this "old town" was Ramavati ("The City of Rama").

Vaishali created in 887 CE

Aung Tha U, who failed to reveal his source, made the surprising claim that Vaishali was founded by Maha Sandra in 887 CE.38 He was obviously not aware that the oldest section of the Inscription [the text on the east face of the pillar] was already in existence by the reigns of either Bhumi Chandra (circa 489-496) or Bhuti Chandra (circa 496-520) in Vaishali itself, and that by 887, the Chandra dynasty had long ceased to exist.

The by now bemused and mystified reader will be relieved to learn that at this point in time all theories are tentative. Until archaeological and scientific investigations have been conducted thoroughly, and centuries of entrenched
and bewildering myths created by later native chroniclers which influenced some naive foreign scholars, eradicated.

It will probably be many years before a competent archaeologist or historian, will be able to unravel this mystery and present an acceptable account period.

Regarding the founding of the earlier Dhanyavati, as Gutman has suggested a period sometime between 370-425, one must also presume that this should be accepted as the date for the construction of the Mahamuni Shrine on Sirigutta hill, thereby causing the chroniclers, invariably monks of a later age, to spin in their graves.

These pious men have stated, and with great authority, that the dedication of the shrine and its bronze icon was attended by none other than Buddha himself, who 'activated' the icon by breathing 'life' into it, and named it the Candasara image.

One is informed that on that fabulous day when the bronze image was created, among the distinguished guests were none other than Indra and Visvakarman (Tvashtri), the celestial architect and creator of Indra’s Swarga, who was also responsible for casting the image, and for the construction of the shrine to house it.

This preposterous claim is still accepted by the entire country.

As supernatural beings, if Indra and Visvakarman were endowed with such impressive magical powers, why was there a need to actually cast a bronze image? Could it not have been magicked out of thin air?

Then again, why were Hindu gods attending and taking part in a Buddhist ceremony?

If as it is now claimed that this centre of worship was of great importance at the time, why was it not mentioned in the Inscription?

The Rakhaing who are of Sino-Tibetan stock, did not arrive at their present homeland from Western China until about the 10th century CE. However, their quasi-historical records which are secondary material compiled centuries later, and liberally sprinkled with anachronisms, now maintain that they have been in their country since 5000 BCE. They also claim, quite seriously, the early Indian dynasties of Dhanyavati and Veshali as their own — peopled by the Rakhaing race.39
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All these incredible assertions have been eclipsed by Ah Lon Maung's recent and extraordinary account entitled "Some Stupas from Ponnagyun Area" which appeared on the Internet in 2006. In it he stated that over time, there had been several cities in Arakan called Vaishali which had been built and then abandoned. An idea of the time scale between the present city-site and its predecessor in the quote below is mind-boggling.

"With the accession of king Marayu and the rise of Danyawadi, the name of Vesali had gone silent for about 36 centuries until 327 AD, when king Taing Candra chose it as his capital to make it the seat of the most splendid dynasty in ancient Rakhaing."

[Marayu allegedly reigned for 62 years from 2666 BCE; this is a confused and purloined corruption of the word "Maurya", a dynasty of India. According to later Rakhaing chronicles, Marayu was the offspring of a female deer and a Brahmin rishi — the animal was miraculously impregnated by drinking his urine which contained semen].

Shwe Zan has also added to these bewildering pronouncements on the supposed founding date of Vaishali.

"Up to 3325 B.C. a local dynasty ruled over Vesali. In 3337 B.C. [sic] savages (Rakkhaik) [presumably rakshasa (demons)] overtook the city and rendered it without a king."40

This spectacular dating conflicts wildly with Gutman's more restrained suggestion that Vaishali was founded sometime during the first half of the 6th century CE.

Nevertheless, there is a glimmer of light at the end of this dark tunnel which represents present Rakhaing scholarship. Signs are that a more enlightened attitude is being adopted by a few sensible Rakhaing who are better educated, living abroad, and consequently have access to more liberating scientific views. Above all, they have no qualms about offending, with their candid modern views, their old-fashioned and bigoted compatriots back home.

In 2007, it was refreshing to read the Narinjara News (on the Internet) which had been set up in 2001 by a group of Rakhaing who had fled to Bangladesh to avoid persecution by the Myanmar military regime.

In the section on ancient Arakan, instead of the usual eccentric claims by their dogmatic fellow countrymen in Rakhaing Land that their race had been in the country since 5000 BCE, they have stated that their forebears entered the country only in the ninth century CE as the advance guard of the Myanmar people.
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Doubtless this will be seen as a contemptible statement and will be vigorously denied by the outraged present Rakhaing writers in Arakan.

I also acquired a copy of an article by Leider in which the reliability of the Arakanese chronicles was discussed. This was a forthright, no nonsense type of paper which was published, surprisingly, by the Myanmar Historical Commission for their Golden Jubilee in 2005. Yet, less than two decades ago, the dreaded Si-sit-yae or the State Censors would have been foaming at the mouth and declaring that the paper was a vile attack on the integrity of revered Myanmar and Rakhaing scholars.

It would seem things are certainly looking up, and long may they continue.

For the reader who feels that my attitude to the native chronicles is a biased one, it is revealing to quote the views from 1922 of an educated Rakhaing on the 'ancient' ancestry of his race, or the reliability of the native chronicles.

San Shwe Bu, that great scholar and Honorary Archaeological Officer for Arakan, stated:

"I thoroughly agree with the view held by Mr Harvey [the historian] that none of our historians can, on the material, e.g. palm leaf on which they are written, go back three centuries at the outside. For the material is too perishable, the climates too destructive, the old government too unstable for preservation of archives even though proper record-room methods are understood."42

[Unfortunately, and this is infantile and unwarranted, the majority of Rakhaing civil servants of the colonial days have now been branded "British stooges"]

The talent for self-delusion among the Rakhaing is so pervasive, we have "miraculously preserved" hoary old chronicles providing in minute detail dynastic lists of kings and queens beginning from 2666 BCE, and which are frequently quoted, even by foreign scholars who should know better.43&44

Revealingly, many of the names of the chief queens for this extremely early period end with the word "bi" such as Waylutabi, Thuyabi or Thilabi, which are obviously Rakhaing renditions of Islamic names and titles.

According to Harvey the spread of Islam along the coast of Arakan and into further Southeast Asia only began in the early part of the 13th century. This is additional damning evidence that these so-called ancient chronicles had been compiled more than a millennium later.
From the early 15th century, Rakhaing rulers established ties with the courts of Muslim Bengal. Nevertheless, this did not prevent them from raiding the Bengal Delta for slaves; these incursions were masterminded and assisted by the Portuguese who took a cut from the loot and the sale of the unfortunates.

And here it should be pointed out that unknown to them, the Rakhaing were known in Bengal as Magh or Muggs. Being Buddhists, not only were they considered Infidels, they were also loathed for their cruelty, vicious slave raids, and were designated scum. To secure captives in groups, the Rakhaing slavers had a brutal habit of passing a thin rattan cane through the palm of the hand. Human life was considered so cheap, it did not matter to them if the wound caused an infection and the victim died as a result of this and other ill treatment.

Incongruously, so powerful was the influence from Bengal that the Buddhist kings of Arakan began using Islamic titles in addition to their native ones. Some rulers issued silver coins in Persian script bearing the kalima, the Islamic confession of faith. Many a Muslim architect influenced the shape and layout of Buddhist architecture; this can be observed at their capital Mrauk U, with the result that these hybrid structures are quite unlike anything seen in Myanmar proper.

Collis commented on the Rakhaing of this period:

"The [Rakhaing] Court was shaped on Gaur and Delhi; there were the eunuchs and the seraglio, the slaves and the executioner. But [from the 15th century onwards] it remained Hinayana Buddhist."46

Many of the high ranking officials, together with sections of the army, in particular the Archers of the Royal Guard, were Muslims; the latter were known collectively as Kaman: Persian for a bow or archer. From 1661, fresh archers recruited from North India virtually controlled the weak Rakhaing administration, assassinating and setting up kings, until they were finally overcome and exiled in the early 1700s.47 Unlike the courts in Myanmar proper, a form of purdah existed within the Rakhaing palace and among the upper classes.

The 15th century also witnessed a great flowering of Rakhaing literature, yet so far, the earliest surviving work, known as the Rakhaing min-thami ei-gyin ("Lullaby for a Princess of Rakhaing") only dates from 1455.48 It is to be presumed that it was at about this time also that many of the 'ancient' chronicles were compiled. San Tha Aung said that although it is claimed there are fortyeight
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historical works, he knew of only eight, and that regarding these, he was unsure of the reliability of accounts before 1000 CE.49

One should bear in mind that the Rakhaing chroniclers of old were incapable of reading the contemporary Sanskrit epigraphic sources in Devanagari from Vaishali. In 1975, San Than Aung commented that native scholars capable of reading Devanagari could be counted on one's hand.50 Presumably, these 'experts' have no interest whatsoever in the Ananda Chandra Inscription, for the majority of the untranslated portions still remain a total mystery 2008.

The section on Ananda Chandra itself was inaccessible for over a millennium and was deciphered in the late 1930s by Johnston, an Englishman, and published in 1944.

A translation of Johnston's article by San Tha Aung only became available to readers in Myanmar in 1975.

Endnotes

1. Majumdar, Ancient Indian Colonies etc, pp. 56-57.
2. Kala Mukha is not to be confused with a Shaivite sect who wore a black undhwapinda (sectarian mark), and were notorious for their bizarre Tantric practices which included rituals of a brutal sexual nature and human sacrifices in which the skull of the victim was used as a kapala (drinking vessel).
3. Dowson, A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology etc., p. 141.
5. Gerini, Researches on Ptolemy's Geography of Eastern Asia, p. 38.
12. Because of the predominance of shipping from Kalinga which monopolised the sea-routes, the Bay was also known as Kalingodresu (Kalinga Sea). Sila Tripati, p. 29.
18. Sila Tripathi, Maritime Archaeology etc., p. 71.
20. Collis, "Arakan's Place in the Civilization of the Bay" etc., p. 486.
22. The Licchavi were ambitious, and a splinter group also founded a dynasty (circa 300-879) in Nepal with their capital near Kathmandu, thought to be Harigaon. Hutt, M., Nepal A Guideto the Art and Architecture of the Kathmandu Valley, p. 18.
27. Swarga is believed to be situated on Mount Meru or Devaparvata ("Mountain of the Gods") which lay at the very centre of the earth.
28. Gutman, Burma's Lost Kingdoms etc., p. 10.
30. Aung Thaw, Historical Sites in Burma, p. 117.
35. Collis, "Arakan's Place in the Civilization of the Bay" etc., p. 486.
40. Ibid, p. 149.
43. Phayre, History of Burma, p. 293.
45. Harvey, History of Burma etc., p. 137.
46. Collis, "Arakan's Place in the Civilization of the Bay" etc., p. 494.
47. Harvey, History of Burma, pp. 139-149.
49. San Tha Aung, Anandasandara etc., p. 216.
50. Ibid, p. 5.
“Buddha’s pretended peregrinations” in Arakan and Myanmar

Curious phenomenon is the vigorous claims by the Myanmar and Rakhaing that Buddha had actually visited their country not once, but innumerable times during his previous incarnations and in his lifetime; this strong belief still persists.

Another is the predilection of their royal families of a much later age, to declare blood relationships with the dynasties of ancient India, in particular with Buddha's Sakya clan and the Emperor Priyadarsi (Ashoka: reigned 268 BCE -227 BCE); the latter is usually referred to in the indigenous chronicles as “our great imperial ancestor”, when in fact neither the Rakhaing nor the Myanmar existed as a race during the Maurya period.

[One cannot help but feel that this presumptuous assertion had been encouraged by the Brahmins who organized the ceremonial life at court, and who desired to confer on their lord and master a high pedigree].

The third obsession of the Rakhaing and the Myanmar is their fondness for foisting Pali and Sanskrit names from the subcontinent on their own towns and cities.

In one instance, later chroniclers have insisted that Aparantaka [the 'Western Country' in India] was in fact middle Myanmar, and that it was one of the regions in which Ashoka sent the missionary Yavana-Dharmarakshita to propagate the Buddhist faith.1 These historians were obviously not aware that during the time of Ashoka, apart from small isolated tribal groups, the country was barely inhabited and covered in thick jungle.

This fascination with ancient India is so remarkable that an explanation by Taw Sein Ko, Superintendent of the Archaeological Survey in Burma [1902-1919], is worth quoting in full.
He commented:

"Such a flagrantly erroneous identification of classical names has arisen from the national arrogance of the Burmans, who, after the conquest of the Talaing [Mon] kingdoms on the seaboard" [in the 11th century]," proceeded to invent new stories and new classical names so that they might not be outdone by the Talaings, who, according to their own history and traditions, received the Buddhist religion [first and] direct from missionaries from India.

The right bank of the Irrawaddy river near Pagan was accordingly renamed Sunaparanta, and was identified with the Aparantaka mentioned in the above list.

This is but one of the many instances of the fanciful theories of the native historians [Taw Sein Ko then warned] and indicates the extreme care and judicious discrimination that is required in utilizing their writings in the compilation of a history of their country."  

It would appear his words of advice have not been heeded, for many an inexperienced foreign 'scholar' has since repeatedly succumbed to these fascinating fantasies without bothering to check their authenticity.

Charles Duroiselle, who followed Taw Sein Ko as Superintendent of the Archaeological Survey of Burma [1919-1931 & 1936-1939] also remarked:

"The names thus brought over and transplanted may be called classical; there is another class however which might well deceive, they look so thoroughly Indian, which indeed, as far as the language is concerned, they are; but they are not the names of places ever known in India; they were coined on the model of genuine ones, and might be called pseudo-classical; belonging to this class are most of the names of Pagan [Bagan] as well as those of Tagoung, Prome [Sri Kshetra, now Pyay] etc.,

The origin of the practice of thus renaming already existing towns after names well known in India, or of applying such names to newly founded cities, is not far to seek, and may probably be looked for under two heads.

The first would be the natural propensity in a people deeply attached to their new faith — and the extraordinary sway of Buddhism over the mind and heart of nations outside India itself is well known — to sanctify, so to say, their own land, and to identify it as closely as they could with the cradle of their religion by making the Buddha come over and visit their cities on his errands of mercy, and in so doing taking bodily, or more frequently adopting, an episode in the Master's career and applying it to the place he is thus made to visit in Burma; such is the case for numerous places in this province; in not a few instances, the Buddha, in the course of his peregrinations, is made to deliver a prophecy as to the future foundation of a large city; such is the case, among others, for Pagan and Mandalay; in such instances, the legend attaching to the place has no exact counterpart in the sacred books or their commentaries, but has been ingenuously Imagined in a spirit
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of unconscious pious pride in the sanctity of the city."3

Although imaginatively inventive, the monk chroniclers were woefully naïve. According to them, Buddha’s visits to their land consisted of him flying through the air accompanied by 500 disciples, when it is a historical fact that the Sage did not ventured outside India — the 'Holy Land' for Buddhists.

[The Thais also have a tradition that Buddha came to Suwanna Banphot Hill, Saraburi, north-east of Bangkok, where his pada (in this case a symbolic foot print) can still be seen. However, it should also be noted that the Thais did not exist as a race in their present homeland during the lifetime of Buddha].4

Such beliefs are similar to the legend of the young Jesus who allegedly travelled several times, with his uncle Joseph of Arimathea, all the way to Glastonbury, England, and built a church with his own hands.

Therefore this writer was pleasantly surprised when Thaw Kaung of the Myanmar Historical Commission, agreed that Buddha "probably never left his homeland..."5

Understandably, this was said guardedly by Thaw Kaung, and with good reason as it is not advisable to offend the supposedly 'compassionate' but powerful Buddhist ecclesiastics who are not above stooping to inappropriate but 'righteous' vindictiveness at times.

Nevertheless, let us hope that things are beginning to look up in the world of Myanmar scholarship, and we may soon be leaving behind imposed religious bigotry and propaganda.

As early as 1891, Emil Forchhammer, commenting on these aerial visits pointedly remarked that:

"Nothing is reported in the Southern Buddhist scriptures of Gotama's sojourn in Suvannabhumi [the Mon land], Arimaddana [Bagan] or Ramannadesa (constituting the present Burma) " — to which should be added Arakan.

He said, pertinently, that it was "unrecorded in the Tipitaka."6

Such information is, of course, now suppressed.

Nonetheless, from about the 15th century CE onwards, numerous works by Rakhaing clerics and authors began to appear on the subject. Over the centuries, the original texts were added to by resourceful and piously enthusiastic writers, with the result that the material has become exhaustive, replete with amazing incidents and
miracles. Prophesies supposedly uttered by Buddha regarding local Rakhaing locations are so detailed, it was as if at the time a tape recorder had been held to his mouth.

More appropriately, Bishop Bigandet who based his work on indigenous chronicles when he compiled his *Life of Buddha* [1858], did not mention the Sage's flying visit to Arakan [or for that matter Myanmar proper], as such incidents had obviously never taken place.7

In 2004, Dhanyawati Aung Zay Ya provided in minute detail Buddha's legendary presence in Arakan. Incredulously, even the time, day, month and year were shown.

Apparently, this occurred when the Buddha had observed *wa* (Lent) twenty times [twenty years had passed].

The time was sunrise. It was a *Boddhahu* (Wednesday), the 8th day after the new moon, in the month of Kasson (May) [surely a bad choice, for the lashing monsoon rains and winds would have been in full swing].

The year was 123 Maha Thetkarit (Sakarit or Sakkaraj also known as the Tharthanar Thetkarit or the Religious Era) which equates with 568 BCE.8

Readers will no doubt be aware that a bewildering array of dates are still current for the birth and death of the Great Sage, and it would seem you "pays your money and takes your choice". However, I have selected the latest and presumably up-to-date version quoted in Trainer's *Buddhism* (2004).9 It claimed that Siddhartha Gautama was born in either 566 BCE or 563 BCE and died possibly in 486 BCE or 483 BCE [he lived to be eighty].

For example, assuming we take 566 as his date of birth, he married in the year 550 at the precocious age of sixteen.

At twenty-nine years of age, in 537, he left his palace and became an ascetic.

If "twenty Lents" are subtracted from this number, we obtain the year 517 [the year Buddha supposedly visited Arakan] but which differs considerably from Dhanyawati Aung Zay Ya's version of 568 BCE.

It is still unclear if the "twenty Lents" occurred before or after his Enlightenment. How he acquired the magical power to transport himself and his 500 disciples through the air to Arakan is another question begging to be answered.
In 486 or 483 Buddha passed away.

Surprisingly, recent archaeological verification now suggests the date could 400 BCE!10

If we are to accept Dhanyawati Aung Zay Ya's date of 568 BCE, it clearly shows that at the time Siddhartha Gautama had not yet been born.

To confound matters further.

Other Rakhaing sources have given the date of the visit as 554 BCE, which indicates that at this time the lusty young Prince Siddhatha Gaudama was still enjoying the pleasures of his seraglio, and that austere ascetic practices were hardly on his agenda.

As early as 1916, San Shwe Bu commented on this fabled visit of Buddha to Arakan.

"Interesting as all these facts may appear, there is however one great flaw which defies my attempt at reasonable explanation. King Sanda Thurya ascended the throne of Ankan in 146 A.D., all available records are pretty well clear on this point. If we take 483 B.C. as the date of Buddha's death there is a very large gap of over six hundred years between the two events, viz: his sojourn in Arakan and his death at Kvsinara... On the other hand it is not my purpose here to try and reconcile this great discrepancy in time as I am convinced of the utter futility of the task. The very fact that neither Buddha nor any of his five hundred Rahandas who accompanied him into Arakan ever made mention of this unique event in the many subsequent discourses delivered in India is sufficient to tempt one to lay down the pen so far as this point is concerned."11

Just who was initially responsible for keeping a note of Buddha's visit from so remote a time is never stated in these chronicles. One must suppose it was revealed to the authors in visions and dreams. After all, having close relations with India meant that hallucinogenic drugs were known. One could quote examples such as the mushroom fly agaric (Amanita muscaria) and Bhanga (hemp: Cannabis indica, said to be a narcotic plant ruled by Soma or Chandra — the moon).

But then, anything is possible in this land of enchantments.

Understandably, Gerini, too, dismissed these fabricated visits as "Buddha's pretended peregrinations."12
Emperor Ashoka innumerable journeys to Myanmar

Ashoka was another alleged visitor who by all accounts was compelled to build pagodas not only in his homeland, but Rakhaing and Myanmar proper. In these stupas he supposedly enshrined an untold number of relics of the Buddha; this is the present proud claims of trustees of many a shrine scattered across the country.

[Is it possible that sometime in the 15th century, a Rakhaing cleric was made aware of Ashoka’s celebrated pilgrimages in India, and decided to include their part of the world in his itinerary?]

Kyaw Zan Hla, in his unintentionally hilarious booklet teeming with grammatical errors, claimed in all seriousness, that Ashoka had visited Dhanyavati and that,

"At the mountainous [sic] grand ceremony, the two kings (Thurious sarka [Surya Chandra] and Thiridhamathoka [Ashoka] had merrily met together and are deliriously talking each other with more fully mercy happiness."

Evidently, all this occurred in,

"B.C. 316 [at the time Ashoka had been dead seventy-nine years], Thiridhamathoka had come to Dhannyavidi in the second tourist voyage for friendly negotiations between India and Mahavihinka [Arakan]. Thiridhamathoka and Thurious Sarka were chattering collageus [sic] deliriously at the golden palace of Dhannyavidi. The Buddha relics or dattaws from India was handed over at Dhannyavidi [and in return] Dhannyavidi presented [to Ashoka] the Mahamuni intimate art one to India."

[What Kyaw Zan Hla meant was that a replica image of the Mahamuni was presented to Ashoka].

According to the propaganda which is still being circulated in books and pamphlets, Myanmar must be the only country in the Buddhist world overflowing with innumerable body parts of Setkyamuni, acquired it would seem by supernatural means when his cadaver was cremated on a huge funeral pyre. These astonishing relics range from his shin bones to his testes; the latter are said to be still enshrined in the Piza Phara pagoda at Mrauk U, Arakan. Explaining how such a fleshy body part escaped incineration should make enthralling reading.
Buddhist monks and their predisposition to invent

This tendency to fabricate was noted in 1909, when Gerini marvelled at the “inventive genius of the Buddhist priests,” who were “always ready to concoct strange etymologies and stranger stories to support them.”

Duroiselle continued in his Report:

“In other cases again, it is desired to affirm the absolute genuineness of a relic and the hoary antiquity of a pagoda, and an episode in the Buddha's life is taken bodily and transplanted in Burma with all the necessary additions to make it fit in with new surroundings, as we see in the history of the Shwedagon at Rangoon and the shwezetdaw at Legaing in Minbu District. In many of these cases, the place name mentioned in the pitakas or their commentaries are applied to the places thus sanctified.”

The other head is what might be called pseudo-historical; here, what appears to be the principal aim is a courtly endeavour to push back the origin of [their] dynasties by ten of centuries, in the endeavour, conscious or unconscious, not only to affiliate them to the great dynasties of India, such as the Solar and Lunar, but above all to show the direct descent of their kings from the clan of the Sakyas, of which the Buddha was a member; the best example of this is Tagoung [an old city in the upper part of Myanmar proper].

Arakan falls back on a Jataka story to explain the origin of its first kings from the north of India.

In most of these cases, the ancient history of India, as it was known through passages in the pitakas and other Pali sources, is put under contribution, and naively manipulated to suit the new circumstances. This pseudo-historical connection of Burma with India was another fruitful source of classical place-names [to be found over the entire country].

San Baw U, the Rakhaing scholar, who was doubtless echoing the attitude his compatriots, stated revealingly in 1921:

“Persons who are devoid of powers of imagination cannot aspire to become historians,” adding that the Rakhaing chroniclers “were not devoid of such powers.”

While numerous Rakhaing versions on the Vaishali period are now available on the Internet, they can scarcely be relied on for factual veracity, clouded as they are with fictitious incidents and ardent Theravada Buddhist fervour.

In the 1990s, and as late as 2006, some Rakhaing writers such as Htun Shwe Khaing and Shwe Zan, ignored the scientifically researched works of eminent
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European and Indian scholars and have accused them of ineptitude in calculating the dates given in the so-called ancient Rakhaing chronicles.

For example, Phayre, that great and distinguished scholar who based his history of Arakan on the Rakhaing chronicles, has given the date for "Ma-ra-yo" (Marayu) its first monarch as 2666 BCE, and noted that he reigned for sixty-two years. Phayre has now been accused by some Rakhaing authors of misrepresenting the dates - the very dates which are quoted in their chronicles.

Such rantings are common, and are the work of a blissfully naive and uneducated minority who do immense harm.

Recently, their 'experts' claimed to have worked out the 'authentic' chronology of ancient Rakhaing kings, but their attempts have been found to be highly untrustworthy. Shwe Zan, in particular, has provided detailed but confusing lists, in a publication in which he claims he has made the Rakhaing versions and the interpretations by foreign scholars compatible; its translation into the English language will no doubt be awaited with bated breath.

Regrettably, at present, for the serious scholar the material on this early period is extremely limited, as there appear to be only two authorities whose works are readily available, namely Gutman and Mitchiner, who have provided historical accounts for the region. Mitchiner, in his The History and Coinage of South East Asia, has also revealed hitherto unknown data substantiated by numismatic evidence.

The latest contributions on old Arakan are Hudson's and Leider's highly informative but disappointingly short papers.

A tremendous amount of work still needs to be undertaken on Vaishali.

Endnotes

1. Taw Sein Ko, Burmese Sketches, Chapter III — History, Burma and the Third Buddhist Council, pp. 41-42.
2. Ibid, pp. 41-42, also pp. 179-196.
“BUDDHA'S PRETENDED PEREGRINATIONS” IN ARAKAN

10. Ibid, p. 23
17. Shwe Zan, Yakhaing-thamaing-khit-kala-paing-char-hmu (Rakhaing history and its various ), pp. 30-33.
Chapter Three

The Inscriptions of the Dhanyavati and Vaishali periods

Dubious inscriptions in so-called Brahmi script

According to San Tha Aung,

"To date [in 1980] over thirty stone inscriptions bearing in Gupta characters, the Yedhamma [haytu] verse1 in full, have been found from all over Arakan. These stone inscriptions are [from] the remains of the old stupas built before the 6th century AD."

He claimed that amongst the earliest of these indigenous inscriptions are two which are in a Brahmi script.2 One example, found in 1922 within the ruins of an old stupa, about three miles east of Vaishali, was incised on the back panel of an image depicting an ascetic. The other was reputedly engraved on the surface of a rocky outcrop near the village of Taung Pauk Gyi.

The Saccakaparibajaka (ji) na image

This figure is accompanied by a caption identifying it as Saccakaparibajaka (ji) na, a Nirgaranatha Jina ascetic who lived at Vaishali, in India, during the time of Buddha. San Tha Aung dated it "according to the palaeographical consideration of the script" to "the beginning of the Christian era"3 — a time before the founding of Vaishali in Arakan.

He also stated that the figure had been [incompetently] renovated recently, and since it is not available for scientific examination, a shadow of doubt will, for the time being, have to be cast on its authenticity. For example, being a cynic, one cannot help but feel that there is every possibility of this inscription having been incised in modern times from a pious but fraudu-lent motive.
THE INSCRIPTIONS OF THE DHANYAVATI AND VAISHALI PERIODS

The Taung Pauk Gyi Inscription

The second lithic record was ostensibly discovered by San Shwe Bu, Archaeological Officer, and his assistant U Oo Tha Htun, sometime between 1932 and 1933 at Taung Pauk Gyi, which is situated between the town of Kyauk Taw and the Mahamuni Shrine in old Dhanyavati. It recorded Buddha's [alleged] visit to Arakan.

In the early 1970s, San Tha Aung was informed by the elderly U Oo Tha Htun that out of the twenty-five lines of script, only five were legible, and that the rest had been deliberately vandalized by theik-sayas (occultist treasure hunters); why they felt the need to perpetrate this mindless act was not explained.

During World War Two, in the early 1940s, Japanese soldiers supposedly moved the inscription to an unknown location with the intention of destroying it; if this story is to be believed, they presumably had to laboriously chisel out a slab of the engraved section from the solid rock first, assuredly an extremely difficult undertaking.

Again, the reason for this extraordinarily bizarre act on the part of the Imperial Japanese Army was not given; surely, they had more important things to do, after all, there was a war on.

After hostilities had ceased, although numerous searches were evidently made by U Oo Tha Htun the inscription could not be located.

That was his story.

San Shwe Bu was a prolific writer and patriot, who contributed numerous articles on ancient Arakan in the prestigious Archaeological Survey for India and the Report of the Superintendent, Archaeological Survey, Burma. If he had supposedly found this inscription, why then did he not bring this vitally important discovery to the notice of its readers, and in the process lift Arakan's obscurity as a backwater in the world of archaeology?

In San Tha Aung's 1974 publication, although copies of all the earliest known inscriptions were shown, he only included a translated version of this inscription, but without a picture of the rubbing. In it he revealed that it was a record of the visit by Buddha to the kingdom of Dhanyavati, in which he allegedly flew through the air accompanied by 500 arahats [each disciple purportedly stood within his own towering pyatthat multi-roofed gilded shrine] to land on Selagiri Hill on the east bank of the Kacchabha nadi (Kaladan River).
This must have been an extraordinary sight in view of the fact that the space on the summit is relatively small.

The unedifying spectacle of 501 persons, together with their huge shrines, jostling for landing space, and causing an aerial traffic jam, would have been well worth observing. One must also not forget the members of the Dhanyavati court, and the immense multitude which accompanied it, waiting on the peak to welcome the Buddha and his disciples.

Conceivably, as in all tales of enchantment, the hill top miraculously ex-panded a thousand-fold to receive these people, and then reverted back to its original size after this earth-shattering event.

No date was provided, nor the name of the person responsible for the inscription given.4

[Are we to believe that the Kacchabha nadi, the Sanskritic name of the present Kaladan River was known at so remote a period? Colonisation from the subcontinent did not begin until about the early part of the Christian era. If we are to accept the legends, surely during the time of Buddha, ancient Arakan was swarming with passionate female demons intent on seducing unwary human males so that they could create a race of cannibals?]

The script detailing this momentous event appeared to be Brahmi of the third century BCE5 with characters remarkably similar to those on the pillar inscription erected by Ashoka at Lumbini 6 and some of his Edicts.

One has the distinct feeling that this inscription at Taung Pauk Gyi could deliberately have been forged by an educated Rakhai who had access to and knowledge of the early scripts of India. Whoever it was must have been extremely competent to compose a text of this nature.

Then again, the illustrated example I have included in this book should be read by a proficient epigraphist just to ensure that it is not gibberish, with the characters thrown together to make the text look 'authentic'.

The forger obviously knew full well that his fellow Rakhai were inca-pable of understanding Brahmi, let alone Devanagari.

Tellingly, in 1980, San Tha Aung who rarely missed an opportunity to trumpet the so-called hoary antiquity of the Rakhai race, presumably had second thoughts regarding this inscription's authenticity, and omitted to in-clude this significant discovery in his English language The Buddhist Art of Ancient Arakan for all the world to see. Had he done so, and had the story been true, it would have been a stunning coup.
Nevertheless, in 2004, Dhanyavati Aung Zay Ya published the photograph of the rubbing in his work, with the additional information, which was not included in the text of the inscription, that it was a record engraved on the orders of Sandra Thuriya, the fabled ruler of Dhanyavati.

One is left wondering why the treasure hunters of old had deliberately defaced the rest of the inscription, but had thoughtfully left this particular passage which 'confirmed' Buddha's visit, thereby 'validating' this legendary occasion in the earliest known Brahmi characters.

Neither the original rubbing in the photograph, or the actual site of the inscription can now be traced. Had the inscription been genuine, it would have made it the oldest record of its kind outside India.

The Setkya Muni image

An even more brazen attempt at fakery has recently been added to these highly dubious inscriptions. This is a brass image of Buddha reputedly discovered near Mrauk U in 2000, and now called the Setkya Muni. It was claimed to have become entangled in the net of a fisherman, who took it to the Abbot of the Bandula Monastery, then disappeared; how he managed to carry this heavy bronze all the way from his village to the monastery has never been explained. Rumours were soon rife among the gullible that this person must have been either Brahma or Indra in human form; this is a well-established scenario whenever something mysterious occurs.

The inscribed characters, which several Rakhaing 'experts' maintain is Brahmi, appears on the front of the base and are said to be part of the *Yedhammahaytu* verse.

A line at the rear bears a dated inscription which stated that "this is the good deed of [king] Thuriya Kula, undertaken in [the year] thekrit 520 " [which should equate with 1158 CE!].

While one author, the quaintly named Set Set Shwin ('Continuous Mirth') interpreted the date as 11 BCE, the author Hla Maung ('Handsome Youth') who was responsible for the pamphlet available at the shrine in which the image is housed, said that it corresponded with the 3rd or 2nd century BCE and that the image was cast "2200 years ago".
VAISHALI AND THE INDIANIZATION OF ARAKAN

To begin with, describing the characters as Brahmi is ludicrous, as they bear no resemblance to the genuine script. Instead, they appear to be similar to an early type of Myanmar alphabet of the 11th century CE.

On the other hand, instead of being written in a square form as was the norm for that period, the words have been 'scribbled', rather like shorthand, in a way which is unlike anything from that date.

The 'experts' have now coined a term identifying the script as yetkha-wunna which roughly translates, curiously to say the least, as a type of Raksha (demon) script; presumably meaning Rakhaing script. This, they maintain, was in use during the early Dhanyavati and Vaishali periods.

It should be noted that there is no contemporary lithic or any other evidence to support these pronouncements which have obviously been intentionally created to mislead or impress.

The figure of the Setkya Muni Buddha is in the bhumisparsa mudra (earth-touching posture). Apart from the face and hands, the entire surface is encrusted with tiny replica images reputedly 1162 in number [numerology is at work here, for when the numerals are added together they reduce to 1, meaning that there is only One Buddha — the Setkya Muni].

Since nothing similar has been encountered in either Arakan or Myanmar, one must assume that the idea for the tiny motifs was copied.

Art books on other Buddhist cultures have now penetrated Arakan, and it is possible that the forger saw illustrations of the Lokeshvara sculptures from Cambodia, in particular that of the example found at Kompong Thorn, 12th or early 13th century. It, too, is covered in minute images, signifying the compassion of Buddha.

Unfortunately, the overall design of the Setkya Muni bronze is too fussy and detailed to have been created at so early a date in Arakan. Regarding the features, the forger had obviously used the Mahamuni image in Mandalay, and which is blatantly claimed to be the only true likeness of Buddha.

Another damning evidence that the image is a fake is the remarkably modern-looking eight-pointed star it holds in its hand, the design of which is unknown for this period either in the Hindu or the Buddhist world.

I first saw the Setkya Muni in 2002. When I expressed my doubts as to its authenticity, my guide became apprehensive and warned me not to tell the "military authorities" [at the time the dreaded SLORC] in Yangon about my doubts; to which I replied that it was none of my business.
I then saw it again in 2005, by which time the propaganda machine had been in full swing, and an impressive collection of miraculous happenings had been attributed to the image. One of these being that the image can never be photographed unless permission is obtained, respectfully, from it [it is amazing what can be achieved by word-of-mouth].

Being a sceptic and of a no-nonsense frame of mind, I have obtained excellent photographs — without permission from Setkya Muni.

The authentic inscriptions

Regrettably, these are mainly inscribed with mundane religious verses, such as the Yedhammahaytu verse, in either Sanskrit or Pali and are in the Devanagari characters. As a result, they are of little use to the historian, ever vigilant for vital data on administration, culture, people and historical events.

Epigraphic records in other materials such as brass, copper and silver, are also claimed to have come to light in the remoter regions, but were melted down by peasants for the metal content.

Listed below are some inscriptions that have been accounted for, and are now, hopefully, in safe keeping within the Department of Archaeology. The list is the only one available to this author, and is presented according to the date of each discovery. Other unpublished finds almost certainly exist.

1918

In 1918, an inscribed bronze monastery bell was found by San Shwe Bu at Prinedaung village, north of Vaishali. It had been donated in memory of an anonymous monk's parents and his tutors. The script was derived from Eastern Bengal, and as it contained a common Mahayana formula, the implication is that at the time this form of Buddhism prevailed in the kingdom; it has been dated to the sixth century CE.

1939

Regarding the leading personalities at the court of Vaishali, with very little contemporary material available, the discovery by an agricultural worker in 1939 of a hoard of raja sasana (royal copper-plate charters) should have been exhilarating news for the historian. The collection had been deposited in a
structure, now in ruins, inside the city walls close to the village of Pauk Taw Pyin (Thairlarvati). Unhappily, the chain of events which followed were devastating.

To begin with, the collection was broken up and sold piecemeal to local self-styled alchemists and occultists who believed such kyai parabaik (ancient writings on copper) were permeated with magical properties and vital to their rituals. Subsequently, except for one, the rest were melted down and made into amulets and other accessories.

Providentially, the historian U Tha Tun Aung of Mrauk U heard about the find, and with great difficulty persuaded the owner to sell him the last plate.

During World War Two, Japanese soldiers thinking the metal to be gold confiscated it. Their tests involved using a blow torch and cutting off the section which, unfortunately, contained the name of the grantor and his predecessors.

Fortunately, the damaged piece was returned to its owner by the disappointed soldiers, and later acquired by the Archaeological Survey of Burma.

In 1965, Brahma Sri Mon Bo Kay, one of its officials, sent Sircar, the Indian epigraphist, photographs and rubbings from which he published his "Fragmentary Copper-plate Grant from Arakan" in 1967.11

Sircar was able to identify the titles of several important personages at court, one of them being Kimmajuv Devi, the chief consort of the grantor of the charter, together with enough of the text to provide invaluable data.

The document stated that the Dengutta-grama (the village of Dengutta) was dedicated to the Jetavana vihara (monastery) for its upkeep and for the requirements of the monks, such as vizzivara (robes), sayanasana (bedding), pindapata (nourishment) and bhaishajya (medicine).

This indicates there were weavers, cooks who prepared foodstuffs, and those proficient in herbal medicines, presumably based on local and the Ayuvedic systems.

The presiding monks of this monastery which was named after the establishment at Sravasti, the ancient realm of Kosala, in India, were listed as the Elders of Jetavana [the name Jetavana was a popular one and was also to be found at Anuradhapura and Pulatthipura, in Sri Lanka].

The income received from Dengutta-grama is stated to have been 3000 [coins] signifying that it was a large community. In 1974, San Tha Aung interpreted the
"3000" as the extent of the land, "presumably acres" then changed his mind in 1980 to "described as yielding 3000, the reference being apparently to the revenue income in the standard coin."  

Although the location of Dengutta-grama will now never be known, the text indicated that to the south of it stood the Srilakka-jola, a line of sila-pankti (large rocks) [does this suggest the remnants of a megalithic cult?] and a mango (Mangifera sp.) tree [a revelation that this particular fruit was already known and propagated at Vaishali]. It also said that to the west of the village was Vangen-khalla.

Sircar said that the words jola and khalla were borrowed words from Bengal, and meant a channel and a canal respectively; the vast Vaishali fertile plain is still criss-crossed with waterways, some of which have almost certainly dried up or have been filled in to create land for cultivation.

Sircar also felt that Dengutta-grama and the vihara were possibly once situated near the find spot [at present Thairlarvati is the nearest habitation site].

The dedication ended with a curse for anyone confiscating the land, and is in the style of similar 6th century inscriptions of Bengal. The format of this extant plate is comparable to those found in India, in particular the Tipperah document of Lokanatha, which bears the date 663 CE.

On this charter under discussion, a seal depicting Nandin, the royal symbol of the Chandra maharaja(s) is attached to the obverse; a similar symbol of a humped seated bull was also used by the Pallava dynasty (circa 300-888) of Tamil Nadu. Faintly visible on the reverse is possibly the pericarp of a padma (lotus: Nelumbium speciosum).

The document in its undamaged state would have measured 42 cm in length and by 26 cm in breadth, with 22 lines of Sanskrit text.

In 1979, San Tha Aung, working from Sircar's text, agreed with his tentative identification of the benefactor of the charter as Bhuti Chandra (reigned circa 496-520). As it was granted in his eleventh regnal year, he suggested a date of 507; as will be explained in Chapter Four, Bhuti Chandra could have been one of the two monarchs responsible for the oldest text on the Ananda Chandra Inscription.

Despite the damage to the copper plate, Sircar thought that the text originally mentioned eight rulers, beginning with Dven Chandra (reigned circa 370-425) the founder of the dynasty.
Each sovereign had been born of a mahadevi, and six of these Queen Mothers were listed. The donor's mother was Kalyana Devi; Kyau Devi was his grand mother; his great-grandmother was Sukanya Devi; Kimdal Devi was his great-great-grandmother, and Kimton Devi was his great-great-great-grandmother.

It is highly regrettable that the other copper plates have been lost forever and we will now never known their content.

[A word of warning. Readers who have access to Nyunt Han's Archaeological Report for December 1986, will have read that, apparently, in 1953, "kyai pyar hna chat" (two copper plates) were discovered in a ruined structure near the south-western city wall. These recorded the dedication of paddy lands [it sounded remarkably similar to the charter thought to be by Bhuti Chandra and mentioned previously]; apart from a brief report by the Minister for Archaeology in 1964, nothing further had been published.14

I, too, was delighted at the news, but my expectations and excitement were dashed when much to my exasperation, I was told that the information was inaccurate. It would seem, Nyunt Han had his 'wires crossed' and was in fact writing about the single copper charter discovered in 1939! How he managed to confuse 1939 with 1953 will never be known.]

1956

A dedicatory inscription found in 1956 to the north of the Ananda Chandra stupa on the summit of Unhissaka hill provided further information regarding one of the personalities at court. The name of the hill, too, is of interest as it is possibly original, and has somehow survived against all odds as the Rakhaing of a later age had a tendency for replacing Sanskrit names with their own.

Although it is unclear if the structure that is mentioned was a stupa or a monastery, the param-opasika (donor) of the inscription, Savitam Chandra Sriya, a consort of Sri Niti Chandra (reigned circa 520-575), stated that it was a deyya-dharma (religious gift). Her husband was the second longest reigning Chandra maharaja of the dynasty, and I propose, may also have been one of the possible founders of Vaishali.
1965

In 1965, a dedicatory stone inscription belonging to Sri Vira Chandra Deva (reigned circa 575-578) was unearthed in the locality of the Ananda Chandra stupa. It recorded the king commissioning the construction of one hundred stupas, presumably in and around Vaishali. There is a possibility that each of these structures contained a similar dedicatory inscription; finding several duplicates would confirm my assumption.

The use of the 'mystic' number is of interest as it may imply that yaddaya, an ancient form of magic from India, and involving numerology and occult rites, was known and practiced. It should be noted that 'pious' Buddhists were not above indulging in such procedures in order to gain that elusive and much sort after goal - merit.

Nearby, in the ruins of a stone shrine, another inscription containing the Yedhammahaytu verse was also discovered. Several foundation remains clearly indicate that a well established religious community existed in the hills on the south eastern side of Vaishali.

1967

Close to the main Mrauk U road, and situated by the old city wall, an in-scribed dedicatory chaitya bell donated by Kimmayana Devi, another queen of Bhuti Candra, was unearthed in 1967. This was on the hill now known as Ahpaungdawdat taung near Thairlarvati. The text which described the bell as a naraghanta ('bell-with-a-pleasing-sound') was dedicated in memory of her parents.

Because of the numerous finds, indications are that this particular area was once of some importance, and systematic excavations should yield promising results.

Vital revelations from contemporary sources such as these have been instrumental in building up a lineage of Vaishali’s various royal families but the list is far from complete.
VAISHALI AND THE INDIANIZATION OF ARAKAN

Endnotes

1. The credo of Buddhism uttered by the Arahat Asvajit. San Tha Aung, The Buddhist Art of Ancient Arakan, p. 17.
2. The Brahmi script was once thought to date from the 3rd century BCE, but new evidence has emerged that the earliest form is from the 6th century BCE.
5. Barnette, Antiquities of India, p. 225, plate VI.
14. Nyunt Han, Departmental Report, p. 6, Department of Archaeology, December 1986, Yangon.
Chapter Four

The Ananda Chandra Inscription

The contents of all the previous records pale in comparison to that of the Ananda Chandra Inscription, the crowning glory of the Sri Dharmarajandaja vamsa (dynasty) (circa 649-circa 729). Although none of the dedicatory records include a date, the names on the coins and the significant list of the rulers in the Inscription have helped scholars to identify the royal donors.

Had it not been for Johnston and the Indian epigraphists before him, the contents of the Inscription which remained inaccessible for well over a thousand years, would never have been known. Although the Rakhaing chroniclers, monks and laymen alike, were incapable of deciphering the Sanskrit text, they were not above providing fictitious names and accounts of the rulers of this and other ancient sites.

While the Inscription, which consists of sixty-five verses [seventy-one and a half lines] has provided important material regarding dates and locations, its compiler could also be infuriatingly terse at times. Neither the name of the kingdom or the two premier city sites of Dhanyavati and Vaishali are mentioned; it simply states that a nagaram (royal city) had been established.

Since nothing comparable to this eleven foot high monolith exists in Myanmar, during my visits in 2002 and 2005, I was distressed to find it neglected and the text flaking. Though it is four sided, only three faces are inscribed in a Nagari script which is allied to those of North-Eastern India and Vanga (Bengal).

As the monolith is cemented to the floor, each of the four panels has been designated according to the cardinal direction in which it faces; this is for easy reference.
And now for some deduction games on the age of the inscription on each panel.

**The panel on the east face**

While Johnston merely said that the script on the eastern face was the earliest, San Tha Aung felt that it could be dated to sometime between 300 to 600 CE. Alternatively, Shwe Zan was less vague and claimed that the record could be credited to either Bhumi Chandra (circa 489-496) or Bhuti Chandra (circa 496-520). Gutman has also suggested that it was similar to the type of script used in Bengal during the early sixth century.

**The panel on the north face**

Although Johnston suggested a date for the type of script on the north panel, he mentioned that several smaller inscriptions in Bengali characters, had been added during the tenth century. Gutman, on the other hand, felt that the principal text in this section was of the mid eleventh century. Then again, Kyi Khin in his Report, indicated that the first four lines on the north panel were of the 7th century, and that the short inscriptions at the base belonged to the 9th century. Regrettably, the contents of the eastern and northern faces have not yet been fully investigated, and the situation has reached a critical point as the surfaces are fast deteriorating. Half-hearted plans to have the texts studied and translated have not materialized.

[The profound apathy which appears to grip most civil servants in the relevant departments may be one of the reasons. One must also assume that there are no competent epigraphists available to attempt unravelling the inscriptions. By all accounts, resources are now focused on the archaeology in Myanmar proper, with early Arakan and old Mon thrust to one side].

**The panel on the west face**

Fortunately, this segment which is reasonably preserved, is a prasasti (record of a ruler's qualities and achievements) of Ananda Chandra and his predecessors, including some earlier monarchs who are thought to be legendary. Johnston dated the type of script to the sixth or early seventh century, while Gutman felt that it was from the earlier part of the eighth century.
THE ANANDA CHANDRA INSCRIPTION

This priceless document not only lists the personalities of each monarch, but also some of the major events of every reign, and is the focus of this work.9

Since the pillar which is now sited at the Shitthaung pagoda [the stupa which [allegedly] contains eighty thousand Buddha images], the Inscription has variously been called either the Shitthaung Pillar, the Mrohaung [another name for the town of Mrauk U] Inscription, or the Ananda Chandra Inscription.

As the earliest texts on the eastern panel may be attributed to either Bhumi or Bhuti Chandra, the pillar should in theory be named after one of them. However, for our present purpose, it will henceforth be referred to as the Inscription, since we will be concerned primarily with the period of Ananda Chandra's reign.

So far, the early history of this inscription pillar is a blank.

It was first mentioned in the Rakhaing chronicles when it was conveyed from Vaishali on the orders of king Mong Ba Gree (reigned 1531-1553) to his Shitthaung pagoda at Mrauk U, nine miles to the south.10 Various dates are given for this event, such as 1534, 1535 and 1536.11,12,13

The heavy pillar, together with its supplementary fixtures, were doubtless placed on specially constructed carts. Another source said that the king's elephant was used to carry the monolith to Mrauk U; surely a near impossible task for an animal to undertake, trudging for nine miles with this immense load?14 The north entrance of the pagoda then became the Inscription's new home. On the death of Mong Ba Gree in 1553, the pillar was neglected, and thereafter for over four centuries abandoned and finally used as a gatepost.

[When more progressive times prevail, the inscription pillar should be returned to its original site in Vaishali. As things stand, at this moment in time, this is too much to hope for].

But this is no ordinary epigraphic record, it was once part of a ceremonial torana (portal) bristling with mystical connotations. The components forming this doorway were the pillar itself, a lintel, an octagonal column and a swing-ing gate.

With regard to the age of the first three objects, Gutman's interpretation appears to be the most reliable. She has suggested that as the material used was red sandstone, she proposed a date anterior to the middle of the seventh century. Evidently, after this date its use fell out of favour in Arakan.15
Possibly the first time this amazing monolith was studied and reported was when the archaeologist Dr Emil Forchhammer visited the region and saw it in a derelict state. Although authors have provided various dates for his visit, I have discovered that it was actually 1884.16

As always, primary observations are worth quoting in full.

"A square stone pillar rises to the height of eleven feet from the socket; each side is two feet by four inches broad; three sides are covered with inscriptions in Nagari characters; that facing the east is almost entirely defaced and the text cannot be recovered; the inscription on the north side is also damaged; the lines are very irregular and the letters badly engraved; that on the west side is the best preserved; the south side of the pillar has not been inscribed; the stone exhibits no ornamental designs.

The octagonal pillar

Opposite the inscription is an octagonal stone pillar eight feet by ten inches above ground; the circumference of the base measures seventy-two inches (nine inches to each side); the decorative designs near the top are in relief; the pillar contains no inscriptions; the shaft and base are roughly hewn.

The large lintel

Close to the inscribed pillar lies a large stone slab, twelve feet long, four feet by two inches broad and ten to twelve inches thick; at the lower end is depicted, in relief, a conch, with the opening of the convolution to the right; a lotus flower grows out of the aperture; the tip of the petals touch the outer rim of the "dhammacakka", the "wheel of the law". The design (wrought, as already stated, by Hindus) appears to be emblematic of Brahmanism (the conch) which produced Buddhism (the lotus flower), the dhammacakka.

At the upper end of the latter, a square hole is sunk into the stone, five inches deep, two feet by four inches long, and two feet by eight inches broad; next follows a circular cup-like hole, four inches deep and six inches across the opening; the reverse of the stone shows only a rough-hewn surface.

As the sides of the inscribed pillar measure also two feet by four inches, I believe the stone slab, which must have been from eighteen to twenty inches long, but is broken off above the cup-like hollow, to have served originally as a lintel or architrave; the square hole capped the inscribed pillar forming the left-hand post of the entrance gate; the circular hollow received the revolving axis of a swinging door; that portion of the lintel which exhibits the dhammacakka, the lotus and the conch, protruded over the north side of the inscribed pillar to counterbalance the weight of the opposite part of the slab (now
broken off) which formed the actual lintel over the entrance; the octagonal pillar constituted the right-hand post of the entrance.

The 'mystic' portal

The construction of the gate forcibly recalls to mind the famous phrase "dhammacakkam pavatteti", or (as it is usually rendered) "the turning of the wheel of the law. "

And here I would like to place on record that deplorably, the above observations have often been quoted verbatim, and unashamedly by Rakhaing and Western authors alike without having the decency to acknowledge Forchhammer, implying that these interpretations were their very own. Perhaps they felt safe in the fact that Forchhammer's report, being rare, is not easily accessible to the average reader.

On investigating the symbolism of a shankha (conch), padma (lotus) and the dhamma cakka (The Wheel of the Law) engraved on the broken lintel, Forchhammer deduced that the monolith, slab, gate and pillar had once been assembled to form a portal that was used ritually in association with a chakravartin cult. This title is variously described as a "world-conquering emperor" "universal monarch" "sovereign of the wheel". Such a ruler was allegedly versed in charms, spells and unimaginable supernatural powers.

What is not clear is, did part of the hoped for phenomenon occultly transpire in some mysterious way when devotees passed through the "swinging door" to worship at the Shitthaung pagoda?

A competent scholar will no doubt be able to explain the puzzling connection between the swinging gate and the portal.

In 1986, Gutman provided further data on this exotic doorway which may have been devised at Vaishali [between circa 489-520 by either Bhumi or Bhuti Chandra], on the suggestion of the court purohita (a literate priestly adviser) an adept in the appropriate sections of the Atharvaveda and Atharvanic lore. By erecting it, the ruler was proclaiming that as a chakravartin (Universal Monarch), he brought prosperity to those living in the eight directions, symbolized by the octagonal pillar.

While Gutman assumed that succeeding dynasties accepted its implications and carried the portal with them to each new capital, rather like an heirloom or royal insignia, the Rakhaing chronicles are emphatic that until 1536 the Inscription was still in situ at its original site in Vaishali and that it was only transported to Mrauk U in that year.
Another relevant point is that between 729 and 1536, the location of the capital changed six times as dynasties succeeded one another; sometimes small rival kingdoms flourished briefly, only to be crushed by the more powerful.

According to the local histories of a later date, after the fall of the monarchy at Vaishali, the administrative centres which followed moved to the Lemro River Valley, across the low hills east of the Kaladan River Valley where Vaishali, the old capital, was situated.

The first capital was Sambawak (circa 794), followed by Pyinsa (circa 818-1103), then Parein (circa 1103-1160), after that the capital moved to Khritt (circa 1142-1250), from there to Nareinsara Taungngu (1160-1250), consequently to Launggret (circa 1250-1430) and finally to Mrauk U (from circa 1430-1784) returning to the ancestral Kaladan River Valley.19

[The dates prior to 1160 will have to be accepted with caution].

These were unsettled times, with power struggles and devastating civil wars, each lordling trying to set himself up as king. Therefore, common sense suggests that it is highly unlikely that this massive monolith and its heavy attachments would have been transferred on each occasion, to be laboriously set up, only to be dismantled and relocated yet again.

In 1921, when Duroiselle of the Archaeological Survey examined the In-scription at Mrauk U, he too, found it and its appendages in a deplorable state, and said that "the inscribed stone itself did not appear to have be-longed originally to the [Shitthaung] temple."

However, being unaware of its esoteric links, he noticed that the monolith was now "serving the purpose of a gate-post at the entrance to the temple" [as the government archaeologist, one would have assumed he had read Forchhammer's report which was published as early as 1891].

Nevertheless, Duroiselle took rubbings and sent copies to Krishna Sastri, Government Epigraphist for India, who published his findings in 1925-26 on the section connected with Ananda Chandra.

Soon after, Hirananda Sastri, his successor, investigated the text further. In the 1930s, it was reread by Dr. Chakravarti, another epigraphist, but no record of his study of the text seems to exist.

An in-depth translation of the record did not become available until 1944, when Johnston's posthumously published "Some Sanskrit Inscriptions of Arakan"
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appeared on the scene. Johnston had been working on the text from 1935 to 1942, but died unexpectedly in October of that year. His handwritten manu-script which was not yet ready for publication had to be painstakingly edited by Professor Luce and Dr Barnett.

The record at the beginning of the text, designated the First Era, lists three dynasties. Fifteen rulers are mentioned, six of whose titles have partly flaked away. However, as seven have been assigned dubious regnal periods of 120 years each, these raja(s) will have to be relegated to a semi-mythical status.

Parallels in the text to those from India

It is possible that these were the early rulers of the older capital Dhanyavati, or perhaps even earlier city-states whose names and locations are now irretrievably lost; their territories could not have been all that vast.

Were these the early adventurous scions of noble families and merchant adventurers from Bharatavarsha with pretensions to kingship?

As the Inscription was not dated, the type of script and composition indicated to Johnston that it was almost identical with that of a record set up at Nalanda by Yasovarmandeva (reigned 725-754), king of Kanauj (Panchala) in North India.

There is also the probability that the compiler of the Inscription may have borrowed from legendary accounts from India in an attempt to provide an impressive genealogy for the ruling family he served.

The similarities did not escape Sircar's notice, and he remarked that this section called to mind the legendary account of classical Kashmir in Kalhana’s Rajatarangini. He likened the phraseology and the way the compiler had presented the Second and Third Eras to inscriptions on the genealogies of the Eastern Chalukya of Vengi (630-970) and the Imperial Gangas of Kalinga (500-1435).

I have also discovered that in parts of its narrative on Ananda Chandra, there are certain parallels to a copper plate charter dated 585, and issued by Maharaja Ghuhasena of Valabhi [in Eastern Kathiawar: Surastra or Peninsular Gujarat]. It was found at Wala, South India, and is now in the British Museum.

Nevertheless, Sircar observed that despite these resemblances, he felt that the text of the Inscription had been based on genuine indigenous court records.
Such parallels reveal that there were in circulation Sanskrit treatises for the compilation of inscriptions which were indispensable to the vyasa (authors, scribes and compilers) of India and Indianized Southeast Asia.

In the Inscription, during the Second and Third Eras there is a list of the thirteen maharaja(s) of the Chandra dynasty which span the years circa 370 to circa 600. Followed by two dynasties, the Purempura (circa 600-circa 649) and the Sri Dharmarajandaja vamsa (circa 649-circa 729). In the latter, nine monarchs are mentioned, ending with Ananda Chandra who commissioned the Inscription in his ninth regnal year, thought to be circa 729.

In 1957, Sircar's rereading of the text shed additional light on some earlier misinterpretations.

Although San Tha Aung 'investigated' the document further in the 1970s, apart from his biased version, his labours failed to produce any new revelations.

As to the regnal dates, despite clarification by Johnston and Sircar, uncertainties still surround their true interpretation. The latter noted that this Inscription was unique in that although the inscriptions of India often quoted the titles of a ruler's predecessors, the period of their reigns were rarely mentioned.

Estimation of dates by Johnston and Sircar were based on the period of sovereignty listed in the Inscription, and a title substantiated by coins issued during each reign bearing the dynastic name of the monarch.

In 1978, though Mitchiner offered new dates based on numismatic data, in this work the earlier version will be retained for the time being, so as to avoid confusion.

Although most authors refer to the list of monarchs in the Inscription as belonging to the Chandra dynasty, over time, the city was the seat of several ruling families, some of whose names are still uncertain. Until further contemporaneous epigraphic evidence comes to light we will never know how long the period of Ananda Chandra's authority prevailed or if there were other rulers after him.

Concerning the scribe who compiled the Inscription, as befitting a professional courtier his description of each monarch is generous and extremely complimentary. They are all portrayed as mahimakrti (powerful) personalities with srima (great charisma and dignity), endowed with good looks, pious and benevolent, and at the termination of their blissful and successful reigns the majority ascended to Paradise. Despite San Tha
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Aung's vehement claims that the inhabitants of the kingdom throughout its history were devout Theravada Buddhists, it should be noted that Svarga, the Hindu Paradise, and not a Buddhist one, was indicated in the Inscription.

The question most readers would probably like to have answered is why did the Inscription specify that only certain monarchs were allowed to experience the bliss of Heaven? Astonishingly, out of the thirty-seven rulers listed, only a fortunate twelve were blessed with this privilege.

It is surprising that the celebrated Dven Chandra, the founder of the Chandra dynasty, and Niti Chandra, who both allegedly reigned for fifty-five years each, were not accorded this advantage, while the less significant were. Was the compiler of the text, who had access to the court documents, suggesting albeit subtly, that those who did not ascend to Paradise were unworthy of this privilege as their lives had somehow not been exemplary?

Endnotes
5. Ibid, p. 280.
10. Aung Thaw, Historical Sites in Burma, p. 117.
22. Gaur, Indian Charters on Copper Plates, p. xi, Ind. Ch. 43.
24. Mitchiner, M., The History and Coinage of South East Asia until the fifteenth century, New dates for the Chandra dynasty, pp. 59-60.
The dynasties mentioned in the Inscription

The First Era

Between 1935 and 1942, when Johnston was working on the text from rubbings, he noticed that the Inscription commenced with a badly damaged incantation which supplicated Buddha, a Bodhisattva and Trilocana (Shiva); this was the standard format for many of the inscriptions of the period on the subcontinent.

In the first section, of the eight rulers listed, only the titles of three have survived, the rest were badly damaged. It is unclear where this kingdom was situated, neither is the name of the capital specified.

One of these early rulers was called Bahubali [probably meaning "the-great-and-mighty-who-receives-tribute-and-offerings". It is also the name of a Jain Tirthankara, one of the twenty-three sages who preceded Vardhamana Mahavira ("Great Man") the founder of Jainism].

The second was Raghupati [another title for Lord Rama].

In the sequence of events which unfolds, the scribe who composed the text now appears to have been working from an authentic list based on court records.

Fortunately, the regnal dates at this point become believable.

Next on the throne was Candrodaya ("Rising Moon") who ruled for twenty-seven years from circa 202-229 CE.

Regarding the relationship between the ruler and his successor, it is not clear if they were father, son, a relation or a usurper. One must assume that this early dynasty concluded with Candrodaya.
THE DYNASTIES MENTIONED IN THE INSCRIPTION

The Annaveta dynasty (circa 229-234)

The region then came under the control of the mysterious Annaveta kings whose brief reigns totalled only five years. It is unclear who these rulers were, their titles, whence they came, how many achieved kingship, or where the capital was located at this time. The short reigns all point to an unstable period. Perhaps these were times of anarchy with intrigues and power struggles at court. Nevertheless on their demise, surprisingly, the Inscription stated that each entered Svarga.

An anonymous dynasty

The Annaveta kings were succeeded by the founder of another dynasty whose name is irretrievably damaged but who supposedly reigned for seventy-seven years. This claim is reasonable, as he may have been installed as a child with a Regent controlling the affairs of state until he came of age.

Fortunately, the names of all those who followed have survived.

Rimbhyappa (circa 311-334), ruled for twenty-three years.

The kingdom may have then experienced further civil disturbances possibly from the surrounding hill tribes, for with the death of Rimbhyappa, Queen Kuverami or Kuverapi (reigned circa 334-341), who may have been his consort, seized authority for seven years. The document claimed that she was powerful enough to have cleared the realm of its enemies. This implies that there was a standing army at the capital, but where this unnamed centre of administration was situated is still unclear.

Kuverami was succeeded by Umavirya (?) (circa 341-361), her patis (presumably her second husband), who reigned for twenty years.

He, in turn, relinquished the throne to Jugna or Jugnahvayas (circa 361-368), who ruled for seven years.

The next king, named Lanki (?) (circa 368-370) was in power for the short period of only two years, after which he entered Svarga.

This dynasty then ended with Lanki.

The composer of the Inscription referred to the royal forebears as kula kartnam, which Johnston translated as ancestral monarchs, and then provided the total number of years they were in power, but Johnston was unsure if the number suggested was 1,016 or 1,060.
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The Second Era

The Chandra dynasty (circa 370-circa 600)

[As the Rakhaing and the Myanmar have corrupted the word "Chandra" to Sandra, the same has occurred with the word "Vaishali" which they now pronounce Waythali]

The text indicated that a period followed when chaos again descended on the region and there was no central authority. Despite the Inscription declaring that "in later time" [how long this period lasted is uncertain] Sircar has indicated that a new ruler seized power in the very year Lanki's reign ended in 370.

This was the sagacious and powerful personality named Dven ("He-who-resembles-a-divine-being") Chandra who reigned from circa 370-425. The Inscription described him, rather boastfully, as an overlord of 101 kings. Implications are that his authority was backed by a powerful military presence.

More importantly, once the province was under his command, he decided to construct his capital which was defended by fortifications and moats. As the scribe failed to identify this city, opinions are still divided as to whether it was Dhanyavati or Vaishali. Nevertheless, it appears to have been built on a magnificent scale, for the city reputedly mocked the glory of Indra's Svarga.

The victorious Dven Chandra enjoyed a long reign of fifty-five years, and was probably elderly when he died [or was deposed?].

He was succeeded by the judicious Raja Chandra ("Sovereign-of-the-Moon") (circa 425-445) who reigned 20 years and then passed into Svarga.

The economy of the kingdom then prospered under the popular and wise Kala Chandra (circa 445-454), who ruled for nine years. He, too, was welcomed into Svarga; the word Kala is usually associated with Shiva in his dark aspect, and therefore denoted that the bearer had a strong personality.

His successor, the politic Deva ("He-who-is-like-a-divinity-of-the-Moon") Chandra (circa 454-476), is described as resembling Sakra (Indra); he reigned for twenty-two years and on his death entered Svarga.

He was followed by the prudent Yajna or Yitnya Chandra (circa 476-483) who was in power for seven years.
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Chandra Bandhu ("Companion-of-the-Moon") (circa 483-489), the saga-cious, then ruled for six years. Johnston felt that the name Bandhu implied that there were suspicions regarding his parentage; his mother could have been a lowly concubine and as a result he was not in the direct line of succession. Except as the only surviving offspring of Yitnya Chandra he succeeded to the throne.

Bhumi ("He-who-is-of-this-earth") Chandra (reigned circa 489-496) was named after Bhudevi, Goddess of the Earth, in the belief that the deity would cast her protection over him. This king was prudent and was on the throne for seven years.

Next, the far-sighted Bhuti ("Lord-of-Monarchs"; the term also applied to Brahma, Krishna and Vishnu) Chandra (circa 496-520) became ruler for twenty-four years.

And here I would like to make a pertinent comment.

If Gutman and others ascribe the founding of Dhanyavati to Dven Chandra sometime between 370-425, one must assume that the capital had been relocated to Vaishali by the reigns of either Bhumi Chandra (circa 489-496) or Bhuti Chandra (circa 496-520) and the Inscription set up. After all, the type of script [of the fifth and the sixth centuries as claimed by Shwe Zan] suggests that one of these two rulers could have been responsible for the earliest text on the eastern face of the pillar.

The inscribed monolith was installed, together with its mystic gateway, on a mount [now known as the Let Khat Kon ("Mount-of-the-Loom-Batten")] near the palace complex. And there it remained in Vaishali for over ten centuries until its removal to Mrauk U in 1536.

On the subject of the monarch responsible for the construction of Vaishali, mentioned earlier in Chapter One, Gutman has suggested the sixth century; there were only two rulers listed in the Inscription for this period — Bhuti Chandra (circa 496-520) and the great Niti ("One-who-is-of-high-principles") Chandra (circa 520-575). The former reigned for twenty-four years and the latter fifty-five years. Except it must be said that the Inscription does not mention the building of a new capital during the reign of either monarch.

Niti Chandra was followed by Vira or Virya ("Ruler-of-the-Splendid-Moon") Chandra (circa 575-578) who reigned wisely for three years; a dedicatory inscription of his provides his full title as Sri Vira Chandra Devenana and states that he was responsible for building one hundred stupas. It also made a point of
announcing that the project had not been financed by the Treasury, but by his private funds.

His successor was the righteous Prithi ("Love") Chandra (circa 578-590) who reigned for twelve years; he was presumably named after Prithi, a monarch in classical India, renowned for his virtue.

A ruler called Prithivi ["the-broad" or "of-the-earth"] Chandra (circa 590-597) then became famous for his piety and devotion to religion during his kingship of seven years. The monarch was probably named after Prithivi, a Vedic goddess who personified Earth, and was the consort of Dyaus; she was also the mother of Indra and Agni (the god of fire). Naming the child after the goddess was undertaken in the hope that all three deities would provide him protection throughout his life.

A ruler called Dhrti Chandra ruled from circa 597-600 and had to defend his subjects [from enemies]; Dhrti means "He-who-is-of-firm-resolution", and was probably named after a king of the dynasty of Mithila, India, who was of the Sun/a vamsa (Solar Race). He only reigned for three years and it is unclear whether his death was by natural causes or whether he was killed in battle or struggles for the throne. Nevertheless, he ascended to Svarga.

The text then indicated the termination of the Chandra dynasty by giving the years of kingship enjoyed by the sixteen rulers as totalling 230. Although sixteen monarchs are listed, only thirteen are mentioned. Johnston felt that this may have been because the missing three were in power for only a brief period, and were therefore omitted from the list.

Whoever compiled the Inscription in circa 729 would have shown the draft to Ananda Chandra for approval. The text stated that all these monarchs could claim descent from Isa (Lord or Iswara), a title of Shiva. This is a clear indication that the religion, at least at court and among the upper classes was Shaivism, which San Tha Aung, being a devout Theravada Buddhist of the 20th century, vehemently denied.

Regarding the presence of the bull Nandin, the vehicle of Shiva, and renowned symbol of Hinduism, San Tha Aung explained its presence in ancient Arakan as "the royal insignia of the Vesali kings", and which was "used on coins issued by" [them] "from about 350 A.D. to 1000 A.D." In the process, he could not resist cautioning the reader that "As the Vesali [sic] kings were all Buddhists one
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should not assume the kings to be Saivite."2 He just could not accept that they could have been anything but Theravada Buddhists.

The Third Era

The Purempura Dynasty (circa 600-649)

With the collapse of the Chandra administration the country entered yet another period of chaos. Johnston was of the opinion that according to the Inscription, [for a time] power shifted back into the hands of indigenous rulers [possibly tribal chiefs from the surrounding hills].

The text then indicated that Mahavira (meaning "Renowned Champion") took control. He reigned from circa 600-612, and was perhaps named after Vardhamana Mahavira, son of a nobleman of Vaishali, in India, founder of Jainism and a contemporary of Buddha. The Inscription implied that he was also the ruler of a realm called Purempura. The location of this kingdom still remains a mystery. However, Rustom felt that there was a similarity between the Purempura of the Inscription and the Barakoura mentioned by Ptolemy. She added:

"According to Renou's translation of [Ptolemy's] text, Barakoura seems to be in the region east of the Ganges Delta and north of the Silver country which is certainly Arakan."3

If it was indeed to the north, it was probably a small but ambitious realm adjacent to the kingdoms of Vanga, Samatata or even Eastern Bengal, and which would have been easily accessible by land and sea to Arakan.

Mahavira was succeeded by Vrayajap or Brayajap (circa 612-624), who also held power for twelve years and then experienced the delights of Svarga,

He was followed by Sevinren (?) (circa 624-636) who, according to Johnston, was known during his reign of twelve years by the soubriquet Mavukaghatin. However, during his time of authority there may have been power struggles, for the Inscription states that he had to put to death Mavuka (?), perhaps either a rival or an invader; a footnote in Johnston's article was unsure if the word was a title or a term meaning kingship.

Johnston felt that the names Vrayajap and Sevinren indicated a non-Indian origin [they may have been descendents of male members of aristocratic Hindu families who had taken local tribal women as concubines].
Next on the throne was Dharma Sura (possibly named after the monarch of the Survasenas whose capital was Mathura on the Yumuna River; Sura was also the name of a king of the Chandra vamsa (Lunar Race). Dharma Sura reigned circa 636-649. As his first name Dharma suggests, he appears to have been of a religious inclination. During his reign the realm enjoyed prosperity. He ruled for thirteen years, and being a devout monarch he entered Svarga.

This brief dynasty which held sway for forty-nine years may have ended with Dharma Sura.

**The interregnum**

It is a tremendous shame that apart from the document relating to Ananda Chandra, the rest of the texts engraved on various parts of the monolith have not been translated.

Johnston felt that many of the smaller inscriptions contained lists of names, which he assumed were of local lords, two of which he could decipher. These were the mysterious Prabha Chandra and Bhupalah Sri Candakeyura Varmma.4 Perhaps, one day, all will be revealed as to who these personages were, but one should not hold one’s breath.

**The Sri Dharmaraj-andaja vamsa (dynasty) (circa 649-729).**

A new and powerful ruling family then took command of the situation in the kingdom.

Johnston felt the above dynastic name implied that their ancestry could be traced back to Brahma and Manu, the latter being the ancestral progenitor of the ten lines of kings of classical India. It inferred they were of the noble kshatriya (warrior) caste.5 Sircar added that Sri Dharmaraj-andaja vamsa meant a succession of distinguished and righteous rulers belonging to the Dev-andaja clan (the deity Garuda (the sacred Brahminy kite: Haliastur Indus) which is also the vehicle of Vishnu. This was indicated and affirmed in the Inscription by the Garuda motif; the Gupta monarchs also employed this device).6

And for the first time, thanks to the compiler of the Inscription, we have evidence of the identity of the new ruling family and their origins.
In verse 64, he clearly states that Ananda Chandra was a descendant of the Saiva-Andhra monarchs[presumably of Vengi?] whose kingdom was located between the Godavari and the Krishna Rivers, and close to the Bay of Bengal.

Johnston was unsure, and felt it was a dynasty based somewhere in the Deccan [an immense region of middle India].

It is interesting that as late as the 7th century, ambitious members of some of India's princely houses were crossing the Bay to Arakan with the intention of carving out a kingdom for themselves. And they succeeded.

The founder of this new dynasty was Vajra Sakti ("The Thunderbolt of Karttikeya") reigned circa 649-665. In addition to having been descended from the Saiva-Andhra kings, he is also described as one who was of the Deva family, indicating that his mother was a princess of the Deva dynasty; we have here a scion of two prominent ruling houses. Unfortunately, this particular Deva dynasty cannot as yet be traced; the only Devas this author is aware of ruled in the kingdom of Harikela, part of Samatata, and which came into prominence well after Vajra Sakti's reign.

Vajra Sakti who was in power for sixteen years was renowned for his dedication to religion, and therefore, according to the text, comparable to a Vajrin (Indra); had he been of the Theravada persuasion, as is now suggested, would such a comparison have been used? The mention of danasiladisamyukta indicated that he was a follower of the Mahayana school of Buddhism — doubtless with a dash of Brahmanism.

His successor, who reigned from circa 665-701 (thirty-six years), was the devout Sri Dharma Vijaya (named after one of the Saiva-Andhra monarchs who was [according to the inscription] one of his ancestors; he could also have been called after a ruler of Ayodhaya who was of the Surya vamsa (Solar Race). Vijaya means victory and Dharma Vijaya indicates a person who had overcome human weaknesses.

This monarch was a pious devotee of the "Three Jewels", and it should be noted that when he passed away, he entered not Svarga but ascended into lokasukham Tusitam (Tusita heaven).

References to the "Three Jewels" and "Tusita heaven" reveal that he, too, was a Mahayanist, which San Tha Aung fervently denies. In fact, Rakhaing chronicles identify Dharma Vijaya as a Theravada Buddhist and the Con-venor of the Fourth Buddhist Synod allegedly held at Vaishali, in Arakan [see Chapter Eleven for
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further details on this incredible piece of Rakhaing religious spin].

And here, too, thanks to Mitchiner's researches, can be quoted the sur-prising and additional information to Dharma Vijaya's long and successful reign. Mitchiner has been able to prove, by numismatic evidence, that this monarch had expansionist tendencies, backed presumably by military might. He marched into Samatata and seized that kingdom from its Kara rulers [Dani said that Pattikera was the classical name of the capital of Samatata].

The annexation of this kingdom will certainly be news to Rakhaing histo-rians who will no doubt claim another triumph for a member of 'their' race.

It would seem that Dharma Vijaya ("The Victorious One") was aptly named.

Infuriatingly, little information is available as to when this significant event occurred, or the length of time Samatata was under the yoke of Vaishali. But with the death of Dharma Vijaya, which Mitchiner believes to be circa 680 [as opposed to Sircar's circa 701], in Samatata power passed into the hands of the Khadgas who founded the kingdom of Harikela10 [they were in turn replaced by the Devas].

With the loss of its rich vassal state, Vaishali probably began its slow decline.

Unusually, the Inscription then revealed the relationship between two rulers.

Narendra ("Monarch of Men") Vijaya (circa 701-704) who reigned for two years and nine months, is identified as the son of Sri Dharma Vijaya. Narendra Vijaya may have been a youth without progeny, for the line of succession then reverted back to the son of Vajra Sakti, the founder of this dynasty.

Johnston was uncertain of the new king's title and thought that it was either Viranarendra Chandra or Sri Dharma Chandra. Sircar interpreted it as Sri Dharma ("Upholder of the Religious Law") Chandra (circa 704-720). This monarch, who was the father of Ananda Chandra, is described as having descended from Is-anvaya meaning that his forebears were royalty; Johnston read this as "Isa" meaning Shiva.

The text described his attainments in glowing terms and indicated that militarily he, like Dharma Vijaya, was dominant. He reigned for sixteen years, and
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probably being elderly, since thirty-nine years had passed when his fa-ther Vajra
Sakti died in circa 665, Sri Dharma Chandra abdicated in favour" of his son Ananda
Chandra. On his death, he enjoyed the pleasures of Svarga,

Ananda [the name has various meanings such as "Compassionate" "Hap-pines" or
"Contentment", and is also an appellation of Shiva] Chandra, who ascended the
throne circa 720, had his Inscription engraved on the western face of the pillar set up
earlier by either Bhumi Chandra (circa 489-496) or Bhuti Chandra (circa 496-520).

This monarch may have had successors, but as the Inscription only took the
catalogue of events up to the year 729, further contemporary epigraphic information
is urgently required.

At this point, it is unclear if the titles some of the maharaja(s) bore in the Inscription
were used during their lifetime, or were given posthumously, as was the practice in
other Oriental courts. On the other hand, the names on some of the extant coins
seem to indicate that at least among the Chandras (circa 370-600) and the rulers of
the Sri Dharmaraj-andaja vamsa (dynasty) (circa 649-729), their regnal titles were
indeed employed.

Endnotes

3. Rustom, Colleen, "Some Coins of Arakan", The Nation Supplement, p. iv,
   November 11, 1962, Rangoon.
5. Ibid, p. 370.
7. San Tha Aung, Anandasandra-shit-yar-su Yakhaing Waythali min. verse 64,
   p. 152.
8. Vajra (thunderbolt), a weapon used by Agni, Indra, Kali and Karttikeya); Sakti,
   he was named after Karttikeya, god of War and the planet Mars (Skanda).
9. San Tha Aung, Anandasandra-shit-yar-su Yakhaing Waythali min, verse 38,
   p.125.
10. Mitchiner, M., The History and Coinage of South East Asia until the fifteenth
century, pp. 76-78.
Chapter Six

The Court at Vaishali

The following meagre but informative account of Vaishali is based partly on the data revealed in the Inscription, together with various other records of Ananda Chandra's predecessors. These chronicle events in the past and those at the time of engraving, and when combined contain a significant list of monarchs of an earlier but anonymous city state, together with those of Dhanyavati and Vaishali. Also included are some of the leading personalities at court.

Primary epigraphic documentations are beyond price and provide not only a chronology but also a glimpse into a way of life during those far off days.

In the Inscription, while the majority of the rulers were described simply as bhubhrt, bhupah, bhupo or naradhipa, a select few were elevated to dizzy heights. For example, Candrodaya (circa 202-circa 229) was singled out as a bhupalah ("Lord Protector of the Earth"), while Raja Chandra (circa 425-445), Kala Chandra (circa 445-454) and Virya Chandra (circa 575-578) were mahipatih ("Lord of the World"). Only Ananda Chandra has been given the impressive title of Maharajadhiraja [sic], a term used during the Gupta era (circa 300-467) for an Emperor or King of Kings.1

Although the vyasa (compiler) of the Inscription indicated that only Ananda Chandra was entitled to the designation Maharajadhirajena, Sircar in his translation of the earlier copper plate grant which he attributes to Bhuti Chandra (circa 496-520), noted that the monarchs listed in the text were all referred to as Maharajadhiraja [sic].2 One gets the impression that in circa 729, Ananda Chandra's vyasa was deliberately trying to eulogize the superiority of his lord and master over that of his predecessors; it is obvious that he could not have had access to the copper plate grant of Bhuti Chandra as it had been enshrined within a stupa.
As titles go, there is also no doubt that whoever erected the Inscription pillar and its mystic portal, assumed the appellation of *chakravartin* on the advice of his court Brahmin.

Though insufficient data is available regarding hierarchy, we learn from the copper plate charter that next in importance to the ruler was the *Maha Mantrin*, a senior Brahmin Counsellor of State. A *mantrin* or a judicious man, was also an adept in a vast range of protective mantras which were uttered with great ceremony at appropriate moments during the day, evening and night. We also know that during the reign of Bhuti Chandra the personal name of such an official was Rengadityadasa.

As in India, the existence of this position implied that there was a Mantri-parisad (Privy Council), an indication that the directives in the Arthasastra (Treatise on politics by Kautilaya, an official of Chandragupta Maurya, circa 321-297 BCE) were adhered to.

The employment of kshapatalika (s) (archivists) and the maintenance of court records is revealed by the text of the Inscription, for the compiler who was responsible had access to detailed documents, including those of the earlier rulers. How else could he have been able to quote the precise length of each reign from the 3rd to the 8th centuries?

At Court, ritualistic paraphernalia and ceremonials were organized by the powerful Brahmana and their assistants. A purohita (chaplain who was also competent in forestalling evil influences and neutralizing imagined occult attacks) and his priests, conducted magico-religious rituals and other Brahmanic rites, which were crucial for the monarch who was depicted as the representative of Meghavahana or Sakro (the cloud-riding Indra). As god of the atmosphere, Indra controlled the weather and bestowed rain and was therefore responsible for the fertility of the land. Indra's foe was Vritra or Ahi, the demon of drought, with whom he was in constant combat. Lack of rain would have been disastrous for the rulers of Vaishali, whose economy relied heavily on its grain production.

**The royal residence**

Being the delegate of Indra, who is also known as Sahasraksha (the thou-sand-eyed), the bhavana or mandira (palace) in Vaishali symbolically represented Vaijayanta, his fabulous citadel in Svarga; this tradition was adhered to by the Rakhaing and Myanmar kings during the centuries which followed. The Brahmana Master of Ceremonies, together with the court architects, probably
organized the design and layout of the buildings according to descriptions in the sacred texts.

In constructing the palace complex at Vaishali, a natural mound was used. The inner city is rectangular in shape with a length of 1,500 feet and a width of 1000 feet, with moats and fortifications surrounding it. Excavations revealed the foundations of large structures of brick measuring between 70 feet and 50 feet. The roof of wood, or terracotta tiles, was supported by wooden pillars.

Local tradition has it that the official residence of the yuvaraja or rajaputra (Crown Prince) reputedly lay to the north of the main palace, but from which source this information was acquired is unclear. Neither are we given the dates or the name of the particular dynasty to which these personages belonged.

Costumes and ornaments

Sculptural imagery shows that, as in the courts of India, the elite maintained an impressive state, wearing jewellery and using paraphernalia applicable to their rank. The ladies of the antahpura (harem) adorned themselves in ornaments then in vogue.

Costume and hair styles reveal themselves in the extant carvings. Scarves and hipsashes are reminiscent of Gupta fashions. Although designs of kiritamakuta (crowns), mauli (diadems) and bhuti yukta (jewellery) were complex, costumes were not elaborate, a choice dictated by the sweltering heat. Men and women wore an assortment of dhoti types of various lengths that were of cotton, muslin or silk, with long scarves draped around the hips and thighs. The ladies sometimes added a breast cloth and a long elegant shawl.

A description of Ananda Chandra and his Court

Although flattering accounts are provided for all the rulers in the Inscription, the effusive praise of the sycophantic compiler was reserved for Ananda Chandra.

According to Hirananda Sastri, Government Epigraphist for India, who partly translated the text in 1921, the monarch was "like Kama [the son of Surya (the Sun god) and rival of Arjuna [in the Mahabharata] in charity; like Yudhishthira [hero and eldest of the Pandavas in the Mahabharata] in speaking the truth."
He resembled Kama [god of love] in beauty and in splendour was like the sun."5

This was presumably an eyewitness account by the scribe, however ingratiating. More importantly, it also implied that the court was familiar with the Mahabharata and other classic literature of the subcontinent.

Indications are that the palace did not contain a Chamber of Justice, for the Inscription stated that the royal bhakta salayam (dining hall) was used daily for judicial purposes, with the monarch acting as Judge; this may also reveal that the palace complex was not designed on a grand scale with numerous buildings. It described Ananda Chandra as so compassionate that those accused of serious crimes were never sentenced to death but were freed [presumably after stern admonitions].

The monarch was also portrayed as victorious, an indication that his army had successfully subdued another state; and that he was feared by his vairi (enemies). It went on to claim that at a great pranata (homage paying ceremony), the reflections from the ratna (gems) which decorated the mauli (diadems) and mala (jewelled garlands) of respectfully bowing monarchs, who were his vassals, turned the pada padma (lotus-like feet) of Ananda Chandra ramjita (red).

As mentioned in Chapter Four, this description is in the style of the text on a copper plate dated 585 granted by the Maharaja Guhasena of Valabhi and discovered at Wala, South India.6 It is interesting that over 144 years later, in about 729, the same style of language was being imitated hundreds of miles away, across the Bay of Bengal, at the Court of Vaishali, Arakan.

Wicks commented that the section on Ananda Chandra was possibly obsequious flattery. He warned that any endeavours to designate secure dates for the monarchs of the Chandra dynasty should bear in mind that there was always the possibility that the compiler of the epigraph may have stooped to falsify, conceal and invent in preparing an inventory of the ruler's achievements and integrity.7

But then at the time, such adulatory accounts appeared to have been the norm on the subcontinent and further east.

As relations between kingdoms were improved by political vivaha (marriage), the Chandras no doubt exchanged princesses with their neighbours.

In particular, the Inscription mentioned an interesting association between Ananda Chandra and Manodhira, king of the wealthy port of Sri Tamrapattana.
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(tought to be Tamralipti, modern Tamluk, Midnapur District, west of the Hugli river), in the land of Sri Pattana [its inhabitants were known as Tamra-liptakas].

Sri Tamrapattana was a Buddhist kingdom which could boast a stupa built by the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka and ten vihara (s) (monasteries) which housed over 1000 bhikkus.

In the Inscription, Manodhira is referred to as a subordinate of Ananda Chandra.

This was obviously propaganda on the part of the compiler to please his lord by implying that Sri Tamrapattana was a vassal state.

Nevertheless, it is recorded that Manodhira sent Ananda Chandra his iti (beloved) daughter, the Princess Dhenda, whose beauty is described as stri ratna (a jewel among women or unmatched). However, it is not stated if Ananda Chandra reciprocated by sending one of his princesses in return.

As dowry, Dhenda brought jewellery and ornaments which were hasama (without equal). The collection would certainly have caused excitement among the palace women, and influenced the court suvarnakara (goldsmiths) as new patterns and techniques were acquired.

The Inscription also made a point of stating that before sending the princess, Manodhira had dug a well and built a vihara, a meritorious deed which was done in the name of Ananda Chandra in the usual Buddhist tradition. According to Sastri's interpretation, a town also named Sri Pattana was given as dowry, and it was here that the well and the monastery had been constructed.

Then again, it seems highly unlikely that a powerful and wealthy port-city like Sri Tamrapattana was ever under the jurisdiction of an obscure little kingdom like Vaishali, nearly four hundreds miles across the turbulent Bay of Bengal to the south east — the problems of maintaining control would have been immense.

Endnotes

1. San Tha Aung, Anandasandra-shit-yar-su Yakhaing Waythali min. The different titles for a ruler which appear in the verses of the Ananda Chandra Inscription. Bhuhrt (v. 7, p. 94); bhupah (v. 8, p. 95); bhupalah (v. 10, p. 97); bhupo (v. 15, p. 102); bhupatis (v. 13, p. 100; v. 35, p. 120; v. 44, p. 131); mahipath (v. 22, p. 109; v. 24, p. III; v. 29, p. 116); bhupatanam (v. 32, p. 119); Maharajadhiraiana (v. 45, p. 132); naradhipo (v. 52, p. 140); bhupatih (v. 59, p. 147); bhupena (v. 61, p. 149); naradhipa (v. 62, p. 150).
2. Sircar, "Fragmentary Copper-plate Grant from Arakan", p. 64.
3. Also chakra-vati; one of the requirement of such a personage was to be born with the chakra of Vishnu in his hand, or the disc of the full moon on his chest or forehead. Knappert, An Encyclopaedia of Myth and Legend: Indian Mythology, p. 65.
6. Gaur, Indian Charters on Copper Plates, p. xi. Ind. Ch. 43.
10. Sastri, Archaeological Survey of India, Burma Circle, 1925-26, p. 147.
The trade in bullion and grain meant that depending on the political situation, the kingdom enjoyed a thriving economy which led to commercial activity on a sophisticated scale, and the circulation of punch-marked coins from as early as the 4th century CE.

Mitchiner said that within the central mint at the capital, a pre-weighed globule of silver was first hammered flat, and then the relevant symbols and name of the ruler who issued the coin struck. The script used was Devanagari. Judging by the specimens illustrated by Mitchiner, the coins vary in size from 15 mm, 18 mm, 25 mm, 28 mm and 32 mm.

According to the Inscription, the periods of sovereignty for some of the long-lived rulers were from twenty-four, thirty-six, to fifty-five years, during which time vast numbers of coins were undoubtedly struck. As a result, hoards have been unearthed, usually contained in earthen pots and possibly buried during times of civil disturbances. Such find spots are generally in and around Veshali, but others have been recorded elsewhere on the coast. Mitchiner mentioned one collection consisting of about 500 coins having been discovered; this must have constituted a huge fortune at the time.1

Commercial links with foreign kingdoms were well established. Ray said that gold coins of the Eastern Chalukyas [of Vengi, circa 630-970 (Andhra Pradesh)] have been discovered in what was once the Chandra kingdom.2 In 1846, Latter included a drawing which appears to be one of these coins which had been "found on the sea shore of the Island of Ramree with several others. It is of gold, and thin. The central portion represents an animal like a pig with the representation of [what he took to be] the Bo-tree above..."
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The "pig" is in fact a Boar (an incarnation of Vishnu), it faces to the proper right, next to it is a chauri (fly whisk). Above the animal appears to be an ankusa (elephant-goad), all three symbols were used by the Chalukyas; traces of the crescent moon and sun can be seen.3

Collis stated:

"Wesali (Vaishali) must be regarded not as a Burmese but as a late Hindu State. With the whole tradition of the great Hindu past it had inherited coinage."4 [This sort of statement will now make modern Rakhaing writers go into convulsions with indignation] "They [the coins] have been picked up on the site and a considerable number are in existence. Some of them are as large as a modern rupee; others resemble in size a four anna bit. They are of good silver and well preserved. Stamped on them are the bull, Nandi, the avatar or Siva; Siva's trident [known as Pinaka]; on one is what appears to be a vase of votive flowers; on some there is an undecipherable Nagari inscription."5 [In 1925, Collis was unaware that the inscription represented the title of the king who issued the coin].

Gold and silver specimens are known, with some writers claiming that the latter consisted of four denominations. Then again, it is still unclear if surviving examples give this impression due to the habit of the people of clipping the edges.

San Tha Aung has gone further and insisted that there were five denominations and published proof of his statement. However, close examination of his 'evidence' has revealed that the smaller specimens had indeed been clipped.6 As a result, rounded or undamaged coins are difficult to come by.

Although the silver coin of the Guptas was called rupaka, nothing is known of the name chosen by the Chandras for their medium of exchange. Modern Rakhaing writers have now foisted 19th century Myanmar grading terms for the surviving specimens, such as kyat [1 rupee], mat [1A rupee], mu [1/8 rupee] and pe [1/16 rupee].

San Tha Aung claimed that by 1979, fifteen silver coins belonging to various rulers had been recorded, since then other examples have almost certainly come to light.

**Early and uninscribed series**

Some of the uninscribed specimens of the earlier series depict on the reverse, a Shaivite trisula, or trident of Shiva, flanked by a pendent floral decoration; this was the motif which Collis interpreted as "a vase of votive flowers".
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On the obverse is a *shankha* (conch shell, an attribute of Vishnu) from the sides of which appear to emerge curling buds (?). The Rakhaing, possibly misled by these "buds", and thinking them to be legs, have claimed the conch to be a scorpion without offering the reason for this interpretation.

As none of the coins in this particular series can be attributed to a specific ruler, they will have to remain anonymous for the time being. On the other hand, Mitchiner and others believe that it is one of the earliest series issued by Dven Chandra (circa 370-425).

**Foreign accounts on coins**

As far as this author is aware, the initial publication on the coins of ancient Arakan can be dated to 1846, when an article by Latter appeared in the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. In it they were referred to as "symbolical coins of Arakan".7

On the question of the coins being intended as religious tokens or something similar, Collis confirmed:

> "There is no doubt both from the number of them now in private collections, from their uniformity of design and varying values that they were coins and not, as has been suggested, commemorative tablets. Indeed, from what I have already noted of the size of Wesali and its foreign trade, to suppose that it had no coinage would be to postulate an exception, for at that period in India all States of any importance had at least a silver currency. "8

Rustom, too, agreed and said:

> "The persistence of these patterns [on the coins] without major changes for nearly 250 years is further proof that the coins were used as currency."

Understandably, for the early 19th century writers on ancient Arakan, little if any reliable historical works were available let alone information on the rulers of Vaishali. More than ninety-eight years passed before Johnston's translation of the Ananda Chandra Inscription with its invaluable list of the maharaja (s) responsible for these coins became available.

Latter said that of the three coins in his possession, the inscription on each varied, so that he read one as "Shri Vrieghau", a title which is not included in the list of Chandra rulers, and is incorrect. He also thought that it was "characteristic of Old Pali". Fortunately, the drawings of the two coins he presented can now be identified as having been issued by Priti Chandra(reigned circa 578-590) and Dharma.
Chandra (reigned circa 704-720), the father of Ananda Chandra.

Phayre read the title Dharma Chandra as "Varma Chandra", and de-scribed the symbols as "trident of Siva with garlands pendent from the outer blades. Sun and moon above. Below nine round dots." He said that these nine dots were "referring to the Buddhist Triad, is an expressive number among Buddhists, and notwithstanding the Sivaite emblems, may have been intro-duced here under Buddhist influence." As other coin's bore only five dots, he felt that "the number five is very expressive, as being the number of Buddhas allotted to the present world-period."9

This was pure speculation on Phayre's part.

As usual, one is invariably on dangerous ground when endeavouring to interpret from a 19th century perspective motifs created over a millennium ago. The present day Rakhaing authors [who are not qualified] are also guilty of similar attempts and are ready to 'identify' ancient symbols willy-nilly. Understandably, these readings of the motifs by the early writers cannot now be accepted. Needless to say, various other modern experts are now offering their own interpretations.

On one side of the majority of coins are the symbols of Surya (sun) and Chandra (moon), perhaps these descendents of the Licchavis were proclaim-ing their dual celestial ancestry? Or else, they were implying that they were lords of all the lands under these twin heavenly bodies? It should also be noted that the Eastern Chalukyas (circa 630-970) of Vengi (Andhra Pradesh) were also employing these two symbols on their coins and some of the seals which usually accompany copper-plate charters.

The positioning of the sun and moon on the coins can either be on the top right, or left, of the two curving hooks which flank a pointed implement or spike. While the sun is represented either as an empty circle or one with a dot enclosed, the moon is always shown as a 'squashed' crescent. The two in-ward curving hooks can sometimes look like inverted questions marks, or sharp sickles.

The entire motif rests on a curling saucer-like base, beneath which are rows of dots whose numbers tend to fluctuate between four, five, six and seven; Phayre reported seeing one with nine dots.
Inscribed coins

The inscribed coins from the time of Deva Chandra (reigned circa 370-425) onwards has on the reverse a figure of a seated Brahminy bull representing Nandikeshvara (Lord of Happiness) and the vahana (conveyance) of Shiva. The beast was a symbol of fertility and was seen as the defender or emblem of the Chandra kingdom. Interestingly, this animal was also the insignia used by the Pallava kings (circa 300-888) of Tamil Nadu.

Excavations in the vicinity of the palace grounds at Vaishali have revealed the remains of a disappointingly small and ineptly carved Nandi of sand-stone; nearby were a collection of beads and pottery. Nyunt Han’s report gives the measurements of this sculpture as 31 inches in length, 26 inches in breadth, and about 16 inches in height; the head and the front part of the animal are missing.10

On the coins, the bull is sometimes portrayed facing either to the left or to the right. Around its neck are a row of dots which have been variously described as a "wreath", "necklace" or "garland" (mala); sometimes the creature appears without the garland.

Rustom described an example issued by Dharma Chandra:

"The bull is very stylised: two blobs serve for its head and the hump is formed so imperfectly that it looks like a hook. The bull faces left and wears no garland. In spite of the poor figure of the bull this is the neatest and best-struck coin in the collection. The symbols on the reverse are well-proportioned and carefully executed."11

Above the couchant bull is the title of the reigning maharaja; the names found on known coins match those listed in the Inscription and have assisted in the identification process.

On the obverse is a motif usually referred to as a trident. Regarding this device, Rustom commented:

"The form of the trident on the reverse of the coins of Arakan (when the trident has hooked outer blades) is hard to match for the coins of India. In Indian iconography it is in the later forms of the trisula or the vajra that are similar." "On the reverse is a tripartite symbol consisting of three blades and a base. The central blade is straight and is flanked by two hooked blades which face inward.

The word "trident" will be used to describe this device.

Larger coins have a device resembling curved branches with leaves which fall outward from the space above each hooked blade. Catalogues usually
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describe these features as "garlands pendent from the outer blade." I propose to use the term "hanging branches" instead;"

[Modern Myanmar and Rakhaing 'experts' now insist that these branches represent sprigs of thant zin pan (orchid: Bulbophyllum sp.) without explaining how they had come to this conclusion; there is no contemporary evidence to suggest that orchids were being cultivated or used at court by the rulers of Vaishali.]

Rustom continued:

"On no Indian coin have I seen the hanging branch device used to decorate a trident." "A crescent [moon] and a dot (or a dot within circle, or a circle) [sun] are always present in the space above the trident one on each side of the central blade. Below the curved base of the trident there is a line of dots. All these devices are surrounded by a ring within a circle of dots."12

As stated further back, the meaning of these globules were explained unsatisfactorily by Phayre.

Collis remarked:

"Artistically they are a long way-behind the Gupta coins, but they lie in that tradition and are superior to many of the debased coins of Southern India. Though all the symbols that occur on them are to be found at one time or another among those struck on Indian coins, I have seen none that are precisely their fellows. They have a generic similarity to the coinages of some of the lesser Indian States.

All this data indicate that the coins of Wesali were in the pure Brahmanical tradition. But coins bearing Brahmanical symbols are not inconsistent with a Mahayanist dynasty. I am not aware of any Indian coin of a period later than the 1st century A.D., which contains a Buddhist figure, symbol or inscription.

The Mahayanist kings of the period mentioned above struck Brahmanical coins. Nothing is therefore more to be expected than that the Wesali coins should also be Brahmanical. It is another proof of how closely the Mahayanist Buddhism of 8th century Bengal approximated to Hinduism."13

The latest interpretations of the motifs on the coins have been by Mitchiner who felt that to identify the symbol with its inward curving hooks as a trident (trisula), was misleading since the religion of the realm which issued the coinage was of the Hinayana Buddhist persuasion and not Saivite.

It is possible Mitchiner was misled by modern Rakhaing writers such as San Tha Aung who, as I have made clear are adamant that only Hinayana predominated in the kingdom; San Tha Aung's The Buddhist Art of Ancient Arakan is mentioned in Mitchiner's bibliography.
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Accordingly, Mitchiner interpreted its meaning as a global place of worship with a yupa (pole) in the centre, and which was understood by Theravada Buddhists to be a stupa.14

On the other hand, one of the meanings of a yupa is described in the Sanskrit dictionary as a post used in sacrificial ceremonies and to which a living victim was tied [usually a horse sacrifice].15

Surely this is hardly conducive to compassionate Hinayana teachings? It is also difficult for the uninitiated, such as this author, to 'see' the menacing inward curving hooks with their central pole as representing a Buddhist temple or a stupa.

Besides, judging by the glaringly obvious terminology used in the Inscription, and other irrefutable evidence which I have pointed out, indications are that Hinayana Buddhism did not dominate in the Chandra kingdom, a subject which will be discussed more fully in Chapter Eight.

Although controversy still rages over these representations, Johnston and Indologists have confirmed that the symbols on the coinage have no equal on the subcontinent and are the earliest of their kind in Southeast Asia.

Gold coins

In early 1980 there was excitement among numismatists with interest in this particular series when the existence of a remarkably well-preserved gold coin of Priti Chandra (reigned circa 578-590) came to light. Pictures reveal that it was in mint condition, and measured 1.75 centimetres across. The designs on both sides were similar to the coins in silver issued by this monarch.

In a newspaper article, the archaeologist Myint Aung reported:

"This gold coin belonged to one U Kaung San Kyaw, a goldsmith, living at Ward no. 2 of the Southern Quarter of Mraukoo. But he was unable to explain the circumstance leading to the discovery of the find or how it came into his possession."

"Up till now, no gold coin of the Candra Dynasty has been reported in the published works cited above. The Candra Dynasty was endowed with a coinage in two media: silver and gold. The use of gold coins unmistakably points out the high level of prosperity that Vesali had attained. The scientific studies of the coins from Vesali bear testimony that they were struck as currency possibly in promotion of trade in the early Christian centuries."16 However, Myint Aung failed to quote the source from which he obtained this information on the use of gold coins during the Chandra period.
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Then again, being of a somewhat suspicious nature, one's distrust was immediately aroused when the word "goldsmith" was mentioned, together with the owner's resolute reluctance to offer any explanation as to the coin's origins. For instance, a mould could easily have been made from a genuine silver coin and from which a gold specimen produced.

Another smaller denomination, also in gold, was illustrated in a separate publication, but without background information the badly printed picture precludes identification or acceptance.17

Dubious coins

Among San Tha Aung's published illustrations of Arakanese coins, four are pictures of heavily retouched or painted specimens and not photographs of actual coins. These were reputedly issued by Sandra Bandu (Chandra Bandu, circa 483-489), Bhumi Sandra (Bhumi Chandra, circa 489-496), Weya Sandra (Vira Chandra, circa 575-578), and most suspiciously, by Thuriya Sandra (Surya Chandra).18

The last, in particular, will have to be placed in the highly doubtful category. This coin is purportedly of the legendary Thuriya Sandra who is not mentioned in the official list of rulers in the Inscription, but appears prominently in the Rakhaing chronicles in a reversed form as Sandra Thuriya and who allegedly reigned from 146 to 198 CE.

According to Shwe Zan, it was this monarch who was responsible for the founding of Dhanyavadi, the casting of the miraculous bronze image in the presence of Buddha himself, and the building of the Mahamuni Shrine. In his version, the event is dated as having occurred in 554 BCE and differs wildly from other accounts.19

By now, the reader will be aware that such dates belong in the realms of pure fantasy, and together with the above mentioned coins illustrated by San Tha Aung are obviously fakes. It would appear that the so-called Thuriya Sandra coin had been conjured up, rather naively, with the help of an artist to 'corroborate' the existence of this mythical ruler.

To begin with, the design is unlike any of the genuine Chandra coins; the form of the Brahminy bull is curious to say the least. The supposedly worn or clipped edges of the reverse and the obverse of this coin do not match, and as in all San Tha Aung's listings, find spots or present locations are never revealed.
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Suffice to say that when he published his books in 1975 and 1979 which mentioned the coins of Arakan, this 'rare' example was included, but when his Buddhist Art of Ancient Arakan appeared in 1980, the picture of this so-called 'vitally important find' had been withdrawn.

The discovery of four 'new' Arakanese rulers

Regarding the coins which were issued after the fall of Vaishali, in 1920 Banerji published a list of four examples under the title "Unrecorded Kings of Arakan"; these were names which did not appear in the Inscription. At the time, it must have caused a certain frisson among scholars with an interest in the region.

Banerji said, rather repetitiously:

"they are important as data for the reconstruction of the history of the ancient Indian kings of Arakan...There is no doubt about the fact that these silver coins were issued by the kings of Arakan, as the recumbent humped bull and the trident-like ornaments are very clear on the obverse and reverse of these coins...The names of these kings are to be found over the recumbent humped bull on the obverse...and are to be added to the list of mediaeval kings of Arakan:-

1. Laitakara.
2. Ramyakara.
3. Pradyumnakara.
4. Antakara or Annakara.

On palaeographical grounds these coins may be assigned to the 10th century AD."20

[Although Banerji had read three of the names correctly, Ramayakara was later interpreted by Mitchiner as Vagakara; Mitchiner also quoted two monarchs named Dharmakara and Ratnakara].21

At the time, Johnston was not impressed and found Banerji's readings distinctly conjectural.22 As it turned out, he was wrong in passing judgement on Banerji's interpretation, for it has now been revealed by Mitchiner that he had read three of the titles accurately.

Unfortunately, Banerji was mistaken in assuming that because of the by now familiar motifs of the humped bull and trisula on the coins, the titles could only have belonged to the monarchs of Arakan.

But they were not.
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In 1962, Rustom, too, quite rightly felt that the four titles had been mis-read and remarked:
"The four coins in the Tagore cabinet show a continuation of the deterioration in the quality of representing the bull and the inscription. The inscriptions are almost illegible and one wonders how Banerji read Lalitakara, Ramayakara, Pradyumnakara and Antakara or Annakara on the coins. It cannot be easily decided whether the second last letter of the inscription is a ka in a 10th century script as Banerji suggests or a crude na of an earlier script of North-East India. However, it is certain that these four coins are the last of the early coins of Arakan."23

Then again, one cannot blame either Johnston or Rustom, for in the 1930s and as late as the early 1960s, very little information regarding ancient Arakan and Samatata (southeast Bangladesh) was available.

According to Mitchiner, while two of the coins had been issued by the early Kara monarchs (circa 575-644) who ruled in Samantata, and possibly in the Chittagong area, the remaining two were by the later Kara whose territory had shrunk to the region of Chittagong.

Others coins in this series which were issued by the Khadga and the Deva rulers and which continued to display the bull and trisula symbols, no longer bore the name of a monarch but only that of their kingdom of Harikela (circa 680-800). This realm, which was in close contact with Vaishali, comprised a section of Tripura, Comilla, Noakhali and the coastal regions of Chittagong.

The find spots for these coins were predominantly at Mainamati.24

So much for the four “unrecorded kings of Arakan”.

To come back to the coinage of Vaishali.

In 1978, San Tha Aung published a previously unknown example belonging to Sri Simghaganda Sandra [he also read it as Thinghaganti Sandra]. Judging by the type of script, he dated it to either the end of the 9th or the early part of the 10th century.

Conversely, Mitchiner's reading was Simhaganticandra, and he assigned it to the early part of the 11th century. It is interesting that the bull and trident format was still being retained at so late a period.

In the 1930s, Johnston was able to decipher two names Simgha Vikrama Sura Candra and Simgha Ganapati Sura Candra, from the badly eroded north face of the Inscription. However, as the script is of a later date, thought to be the 10th century, it is not clear who these two rulers were or in what way they were
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connected with the dynasty to which Ananda Chandra belonged. More research needs to be done.

Mitchiner's work on the coinage of ancient Arakan is unsurpassed and he still remains the only authority. Readers with an interest in this subject should consult it for a fuller and in-depth account.

Forgeries

And here it should be mentioned that genuine Vaishali coins are now as rare as hen's teeth.

Forgeries of superb craftsmanship are in circulation in Yangon and abroad. Then again, one astute dealer told this author that these were instantly recognisable as the majority are in mint condition. To some coins, a black substance had been applied to suggest age, but with the raised sections artfully polished to reveal the silver beneath. As to be expected, many are without wear and tear to indicate that they had survived for over a millennium.

Doubtless, the forgers will soon be improving their techniques, and then, numismatists beware!

Endnotes

1. Mitchiner, The History and Coinage of South East Asia until the fifteenth century, p. 61.
3. Latter, "The Coins of Arakan — The Symbolical Coins", pp. 238-240, plate III [the illustration which is of extremely poor quality, was prepared by J. W. Laidley, lithographer, and was based on drawings sent by Latter].
5. Ibid, p. 487.
12. Ibid.
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18. San Tha Aung, Yakhaing-thon-ethkayar, 1974; Ananda Sandara etc., 1975; Yakhaing-dinga-myar, 1979,
Chapter Eight

The City of Vaishali

Regarding the prakara (fortifications) of the capital, measurements taken by the Archaeological Department show that the length of the outer walls from north to south measures over two miles, while those from the east to west are a little over one mile; this is considerably larger than the earlier Dhanyavati. The walls, strengthened with rubble, are faced with bricks, and it is estimated that they were originally about 15 feet high. Nevertheless, a question which needs to be asked is, unless there was an immense standing army, how did the city defend this vast area during sieges, particularly if the enemy decided to attack from several directions and used scaling ladders?

During the 2003-4 season, excavations on the city walls were concentrated in the north sector, as a consequence two gates were discovered, doubtless others are bound to be unearthed in due course.

The original walls were well constructed with the foundation area consisting of very large brick which were intended to bear the weight above. Over these were placed smaller bricks. The bricks from this first period are reddish-brown in colour. All the defences were once surrounded by moats, sections of which have now dried up and are being used for cultivation. The palace fortifications were also surrounded by a moat, fed by a creek.

During excavations, a variety of bricks were discovered, while the majority were plain others were decorated with markings. The motifs consisted of various patterns composed of lines; similar types were recorded at the Pyu capital of Sri Kshetra, the Mon city of Survannabhumi [Thaton], and certain sites in India; these can be dated to the 4th century CE.

Over the centuries, the original wall deteriorated and possibly collapsed, and a new one built.
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The second phrase of construction is of shoddy workmanship with more rubble than bricks, placed one above the other in a haphazard way; these later bricks are red in colour. The replacement walls evidently did not last, and finally collapsed. In the areas excavated, foundations were not dug, instead, the ground was compacted first and bricks laid on this hard surface, again probably finally causing the wall to give way.

The design of the city gates are interesting in so far as they are similar to those found at the Pyu sites of Beikthano (Vishnu City), Hanlin, Sri Kshetra and Tagaung in Myanmar proper.

The two sides of the gateway walls curve inwards forming a funnel, and was designed so that as the enemy hoards pressed forward they were involuntarily squeezed as they approached the main gate. No doubt, archers, spearmen and others with rocks or perhaps boiling oil or water, stationed on the ramparts, then made short work of the seething mass below. One gate was constructed with a thick wall forming a dead end, but with the entrance cunningly situated at the side. This no doubt caused confusion to the inrushing enemy.

The original road leading into one of the gateways which had been destroyed by fire was also exposed, it was about eighteen feet broad and the surface had once been covered in small pebbles and fragments of pounded bricks. Above this was the unmistakable layers of ashes, charcoal and burnt earth.

Excavations in one of the gateway recesses revealed sandstone fragments about six inch in height depicting an armed male figure, thought to be a guardian deity (possibly a dvarapala); similar plaques were also discovered at Beikthano and Sri Kshetra.

The north is the direction in which the Mahamuni Shrine lay, and it is possible that the royal family, accompanied by the court, may have undertaken annual pilgrimages to this site through one of these two gates.

Although modern Rakhaing authors claim that the Mahamuni Shrine and its 'living' bronze image at old Dhanyavati were celebrated since the time of Buddha, and revered by the monarchs, surprisingly, for such an important location it was not mentioned in the Inscription.

Excavations along the southern wall will no doubt reveal the existence of several gates which led to the important and rival port-city of what was to later become Mrauk U.
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The eastern wall does not appear to have had any gateways, none have as yet been found, which is unusual. In some sections, there are indications of two and three walls of defences which incorporated the steep and thickly wooded Chan and Shin Kan hills [these are later Rakhaing names] which provide natural barriers. These ranges separate the vast Kaladan valley in which Vaishali is sited, from the Lemro valley in the east.

Indications are that the population of Vaishali lived on the eastern side where the ground rises gradually. Allocating the habitation sites on this higher area meant that the people escaped the annual floods during the monsoons when the creeks burst their banks. It is in this area that the majority of the ruins have been located. Understandably, wells, implements, pottery, and curiously, platters of stone, were excavated in large numbers in this once inhabited area. Why heavy stone was used to carve plates is a mystery; perhaps their original functions are no longer known.

On the west, an aerial photograph disclosed three wide gaps in the defences, which may indicate erosion by the Rann (Yandawaddy) creek as they are too wide to be gateways. There is a possibility they were originally portals leading to the busy riverbank where trading vessels birthed, but over the centuries had been breached during the annual floods, or else the bricks had been carted off for other purposes.

Another tributary enters the south western sector. This area which is still within the city fortifications, slopes gradually towards the Rann creek and was reserved for agricultural purposes, primarily paddy. This practical plan meant that the city was self-sufficient in food and water during times of siege. It is incredible that these fields have been in continuous cultivation since well before the 4th century CE. As the fertility of the soil is renewed annually by the silt deposits they continue to produce bountiful harvests.

We know that the economy was strong at the time the copper charter, assumed to be by Bhuti Chandra (circa 496-520), was issued, because his consort donated the large village of Dengutta, the revenue from which yielded 3000 coins, a sizeable amount at the time. The huge donation indicates a thriving economy and a large population.

The Inscription recorded that Ananda Chandra built vithika (roads) which presumably connected his capital with the major religious and commercial sites. He also laid out streets, gardens, setu (bridges) and samkrama (cause-ways) at Pilkkavanaka, formerly Domaghha; perhaps this region was prone to flooding and was probably another urban site.
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One wonders if the Sanskrit names mentioned in the Inscription and other contemporary documents are replicated names foisted on the locality by the Licchavi in memory of the familiar places they had left behind in Bihar.

The Port of Vaishali

Collis, quoting an old chronicle, said that "the city [of Vaishali] became a noted trade port to which as many as a thousand ships came annually."\(^1\) Presumably they came from the subcontinent and other kingdoms. But who was it who made a note of such a precise number, and how did the small creek opposite the city cope with accommodating these vessels? Doubtless he was citing some later Rakhaing chronicle.

For transportation within the city and its environs, the gaja (elephant) and the asva (horse) provided transportation for the ruling classes. As in India, carts drawn by buffalos and bullocks would no doubt have been used, while a variety of boats and rafts were employed on the numerous waterways.

The reason why the city prospered was its geographical position and the lure of the bullion from Nanzhao and the locally grown grain. Vessels from neighbouring kingdoms could sail in from the Bay of Bengal and use the Kacchabha nadi (Kaladan River), the Sirima nadi (Thare [Sri]) and Rann creeks and discharge their merchandise by the outer walls. In the northern sector, smaller boats could penetrate the city via the Vaishali chaung, which is a tributary of the Rann creek. It flowed past the north wall of the palace fortifications, formed a loop, and then moved down and out of the southern wall towards Mrauk U.

Since the country was crisscrossed by waterways, there would have been a naval force of sorts to protect the trading vessels which converged on the port; doubtless, there were instances of piracy.

What is puzzling is that the site now known as Mrauk U, which later became the Rakhaing capital in 1430, had not been designated the principal port, as it was more accessible from the Bay of Bengal, about 45 miles away to the west. A highly navigable river known as the Theinga Nadi, and still in use, provides passage for vessels heading to this port. The ruins of Brahmanic temple sites now taken over by the Buddhists point to the existence of a once substantial Hindu mercantile community.

On the other hand, to reach Vaishali the vessels would have had to sail north on the Kaladan and then descend down Thare creek, its tributary, whereas the
position of Mrauk U would have been less complicated. Perhaps the configurations of the waterways were different then. It is thought that as the Kaladan is prone to changing its course at the time, the river was probably closer to Vaishali.

On the west of the city, the outer walls are intersected by two small creeks, tributaries of the Rann creek, which is itself a tributary of the Kaladan River.

As the prosperity of the port-city grew and there was an increase in sea going vessels, construction of a stairway consisting of huge stone blocks and a wooden pier became necessary near the city walls. Indications are that this area was a thriving waterfront and the creek was probably much wider and deeper during this period.

Some of the crafts from overseas were substantially built, for the Inscription stated that Ananda Chandra sent a hastiniko (female elephant) as a gift to a group of sangha (Buddhist monks) in the kingdom of the ruler Silamegha (a designation by which a number of the kings of Sri Lanka were known). Regarding the animal, it is unclear if it was a young elephant or a fully grown one.

According to the dates for Ananda Chandra (reigned circa 720-729?), the contemporary Sri Lankan monarch would have been either Manavamma (reigned 691-726) or Kassapa III (reigned 726-738) and not Aggabodhi IV (reigned 673-689) as was previously thought.

**Vaishali, the City of the Stone Stairs**

When Vaishali ceased to be the centre of administration, succeeding Rakhaing dynasties moved their capital to other locations, with the result that the area declined. The stone stairs, however, survived for centuries as later chronicles referred to the site as "Waythali Kyauk Hlaygar Myo" ("Vaishali the City of the Stone Stairs").

It should be worth remembering that such a title would have been un-known during the Vaishali period. This is a Rakhaing designation given to the site by their historians after the metropolis had ceased to be the capital; the original Sanskrit name for this part of the city is presumed lost. Over the millennia, the huge stone blocks which were more easily accessible were carted away and put to other use; a few are said to be still visible at low tide.
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However, during my visits in 2002 and 2005, enquiries among the villagers revealed they had not seen any.

According to Mitchiner, the economy of Vaishali prospered until the 6th century, thereafter the route of the silver trade bypassed the kingdom to Samatata, further north, causing an economic downturn locally. Nevertheless, he also said that during the reign of Sri Dharma Vijaya (circa 665-701) Vaishali extended its sovereignty to Samatata where his coinage was in circulation.3

If there was indeed a decline, there was no hint of this in the confident tone of the Inscription, perhaps the silver trade had been replaced by a more lucrative commerce in rice for which the land is still famous. The text implied that under Ananda Chandra it was a prosperous realm, and that many religious buildings were constructed and lavish gifts bestowed on religious establishments at home and abroad.

Structures

Amongst the ruins of Vaishali, the prevalence of dressed stone bases for wooden pillars reveal that the majority of the structures, religious and secular, were of timber. The carved depressions in the stone sockets indicate that the columns tended to be square, with a deep rounded centre inserted into the base for stability.

More substantial materials were employed on devaprasada thirthika (religious edifices) such as the Buddhist stupas and the Brahmanical temples. While the earlier buildings were constructed by sthapati (architects) from the subcontinent who no doubt were versed in the Sthapatya veda (science of architecture), their descendents evolved indigenous styles as evidenced by the decorative stone fragments excavated.

Gutman mentioned in her thesis that one of these builders left behind at the Mahamuni shrine a beautifully cast iron plummet, similar to a specimen now on display in the British Museum. As the latter, datable to the sixth century CE was excavated from the Surma riverbed in East Bengal, the former, too, may have originated from somewhere in that region. Although this author was told in 2002 that this important instrument was now in a monastery at Kyauk Taw, sadly, all traces of it have disappeared; it is probably now in some foreign collection.
By the time of the Inscription in 729, the places of worship in Vaishali would doubtless have increased.

A dedicatory inscription of Vira Chandra Deva (reigned circa 575-578) stated that he had constructed one hundred stupas. Considering that he ruled for only three years, building work would have been frenetic. Then again, these structures were probably votive stupas of brick or stone, about four to eight feet high, some of which have survived. Models of this type can still be encountered all over Eastern India, especially at the Mahabodhi temple, Bodh-Gaya.4

Other monarchs from this dynasty, and the ones which followed, also commissioned shrines and temples, since it was an established tradition for a ruler to build at least one religious edifice during his reign. As the region had been under the control of several dynasties, the number of Brahmanic temples and Buddhist stupas were probably considerable. This assumption has been confirmed by San Shwe Bu who observed in the 1920s that the area was "full of ancient monuments now mostly hidden by jungle."5 Sadly, few now remain as the bricks and stones have since been salvaged and put to other uses.

Regrettably, even though none of the buildings of the Vaishali period are extant, one can obtain an idea from a few surviving models of the type of Buddhist structures which once dominated the skyline of the old capital. The November-December 2005 issue of Arts of Asia, page 122 (no. 41), contained an illustration of a replica of a superb bronze shrine, which though incorrectly described as early 18th century, is of the late Vaishali period, or possibly earlier. As the architectural design is comparable to that prevalent in Orissa, it indicates that some architects from that region were responsible for many of the structures in Vaishali.

The convex-sided shikhara is crowned by a amalaka, a globular grooved finial with ribbed sides like the Indian gooseberry (Emblica officinalis), the cardinal points are decorated with smaller facsimiles. These amalaka have also been incorporated on to surviving smaller stone stupas of the period. The graduating roof is in five tiers, with the first and largest being ornamented by rows of tiny kneeling figures depicted in the act of paying homage. Other decorations consist of lines of quatrefoil motifs. Buddhas, either standing or in bhumisparsa mudra within kotthaka (s) (gate-chambers or porches) are flanked by elegant dvarapala(s) while other divinities which appear to be of Mahayanist origins, occupy niches.
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This superb object was originally installed in a relic chamber of a pagoda built by royalty, but had fallen victim to desecrators of relic chambers, no doubt organized by an antiquities dealer in Yangon, and now languishes in a private collection abroad.

Previously published artefacts from this period have been unimpressive, but this exceptional example proves beyond doubt that there were craftsmen capable of creating splendid works of art.

Models of shrines and Buddha images claimed to be of the Vaishali period have also appeared in The Buddhist Art of Ancient Arakan by San Tha Aung in his enthusiastic zeal to push back the antiquity of the city, oblivious to the fact that the architecture and iconography all date to a time after the 12th century. Just because these objects were discovered at Vaishali does not necessarily validate them as being 'of pre 8th century provenance. The former capital was still a provincial outpost and a place of pilgrimage well into the 14th century, but by then Brahmanism and the Mahayana form of Buddhism had been replaced by the Theravada version.

Understandably, by the time of the Inscription, many of the older religious structures built by former rulers were already in ruins. The text stated that Ananda Chandra had undertaken their restoration, indicating that conservation of sorts appears to have been known; in the process it also gained the much sought after religious merit for the pious restorer.

Arakan is lashed by monsoon rains from the Bay of Bengal for several months each year, and perhaps the brickwork, despite its stone facing, was substandard. This is very much in evidence at the excavated sites where the surviving masonry reveals large bricks stacked one above the other in a haphazard manner. Similar shoddy workmanship can also be seen at the contemporary Pyu city sites in Myanmar proper.

Ananda Chandra was not only a restorer of ruins, he was also a munificent patron of Mahayana Buddhist and Hindu institutions. All those endowed by him were prefixed with his name, including an undisclosed number of vihara (s) (monasteries) for the Buddhist Arya-Sangha. These were registered as Anandodaya vihara ("Monastery of Ananda, the Compassionate") and staffed by dasa (male) and dasi (female) slaves; land and cattle were allocated for the use of the entire monastic community.

He also built a substantial matha (priory) for the Brahmin priests which he named Anandamadhava; this was near the residence of the Brahmana of
Somatirtha. At Naulakka too, he erected another which he called Anandesvara [these two locations were possibly in the environs of Vaishali].

The monarch constructed four priories as well, each institution designed with rooms accommodating fifty Brahmana who ministered to the Hindu votaries of the city; this indicates there were at least two hundred officially recognised Brahmin priests, and an undisclosed number of their assistants. And all this feverish construction work was undertaken during the nine years of his reign.

These large self-contained communities were provided by royal bounty with ksetra (paddy lands), go (cattle) and mahisaïh (buffalo). Not only were these establishments ministered to by slaves of both sexes, vadaka (musicians) were on hand to entertain and to perform in the puja ceremonies with their vada (musical instruments).

One cannot help but wonder if the Brahmins were also provided with devadasi(s) ('attendant of God') or nityasumangalis ('propitious women'), to cater to their sexual needs as was the custom on the subcontinent from about the 8th and 9th centuries.

**The Ananda Chandra Stupa**

Only one stupa attributed to Ananda Chandra has survived [doubtless there were others now lost], and is located on the 510 foot high Thin Gyit Daw Taung ("Hill-of-the-Forehead-Band" [of Buddha]), southeast of Thairlarvati village, near the old southeast city wall; the stupa is known today by this name.

On the summit are three ancient stone images which have now been renovated and modernized, destroying forever their unique antique features. Sadly, such 'beautification' is the trend these days. The steep climb takes at least forty-five minutes, but the views from the top are superb and cover the entire city site of old Vaishali, to the Kaladan River and the hills beyond.

Ananda Chandra chose well when he decided to erect his stupa on the summit of this hill, for it can be observed from miles around; being a vantage point, there may originally have been an earlier stupa or Hindu temple on the site. It doubtless acted as a beacon for ships approaching Vaishali from the direction of what was later to become the city of Mrauk U, in the south, or down the Thare and Rann creeks in the north. This [restored] pagoda can still be seen, its gilded surface glinting in the sun.

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The locals assert that enshrined within this stupa is the thin gyit daw or ornamental forehead band, which is part of the magaik (crown) of Gautama. It would seem Buddha had quite a collection of these particular accessories in his lifetime, for when the Myanmar king Aniruddhadeva (reigned 1044-1077) of Bagan invaded Arakan "with an army 100,000 strong", he looted the Mahamuni Shrine of its treasures, which included a thin gyit daw- other forehead bands are also known in Myanmar proper.

This, of course, is pure propaganda of a later date, for the Buddha never wore such an accessory, and would have found this type of ostentation re-pellent. One has but to examine the foreheads of early images of Gautama prior to the 15th century originating either in Buddhist India or other South-east Asian countries to find that they are unadorned in this manner. This embellishment first made an appearance from about this period and was borrowed from the Myanmar. However, in the majority of such images, only this accessory is included, without the headdress.

As many centuries had passed since the death of Gautama, how could Ananda Chandra have acquired such a priceless relic in the 8th century CE?

Doubtless, the local monks will have a ready answer, and a fabulous one at that. Sircar in 1959, and San Tha Aung in 1979, identified the stupa as that built by Ananda Chandra and named after him. Possibly to disassociate themselves from a ruler of an Indianised dynasty, the local Buddhist monks have now decreed that it will no longer be called by the name of its founder, but is to be replaced by that of the hill.

Significantly, as Thin Gyit Daw is a later Rakhaing term, it would have been meaningless when Sanskritized Vaisali flourished as the capital. As the all-powerful monks are determined to remodel ancient shrines in the alien Myanmar style and eradicate any vestiges of Indian architectural influence, no evidence remains of the original forms from the Vaishali period.

Crafts

A royal capital such as Vaishali supported a diverse community of vaisya (agriculturists and artisans) and shilpin (craftsmen), many of whom would have been guided by the Arthasastra (a treatise on the mechanical sciences and the useful arts).
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The Inscription revealed that metal workers created from suvarna (gold), (rajata) silver, riti (brass), kansatamra (lead and copper), secular and religious objects, including models of temples and stupas.

Ananda Chandra also commanded ayas (makers of copper vessels) to produce begging bowls for each of the numerous bikkhu (s) resident in the city, parivarajaka (wandering monks) and for those who were visiting from abroad. These metal workers also incised dedications in Sanskrit on bells, and documents on sheets of copper, such as royal land grants; an indication of the high standard of literacy.

The presence of woodcarvers is supported in the Inscription by the fact that among the gifts sent by Ananda Chandra to a select group of monks in Sri Lanka was a dharma sanam (carved throne to preach from, possibly gilded).

Buddhist and Hindu pratima (images) were also fashioned out of various types of wood, pusta (plaster) and sailas (stone).

There were also artists at the capital, for some of these images were citritah (painted or ornamented with colours).

Vast numbers of mṛtpakva (terracotta plaques of Buddha) which were intended for enshrinement in relic chambers were produced from metal moulds.

Interestingly, the text also mentions the word pasadaru, which could mean a certain type of wood or, intriguingly, pratima (images) created out of a combination of leather and wood.

Ananda Chandra commissioned scribes to copy religious works for distribution to monastic libraries, and to the Brahmin priests, these pustaka (s) (manuscripts) were undoubtedly on palm leaves. The text was either incised with a stylus or written with a small brush on the surface of a prepared fan palm (Palmyra; Borassus flabellifer) or the talipot (Corypha umbraculifera). Conservation of the fragile leaves was known; in Orissa, the pothi manu-scripts regularly had to be recopied after about fifty years. As the talipot was widely used in neighbouring Bengal, it is more than likely that the scribes of ancient Arakan were familiar with it; the palm grows locally. A village by the Rann creek and just outside the western city wall, is called Pe pin yin (“Village-near-the-Talipot-tree”).

The Inscription stated that civarani (monk's robes) were included among the gifts sent to the monks of Sri Lanka. Surprisingly, these were of netro (silk) and described as jvala (shimmering), a vanity which would not have been tolerated by the orthodox. However, it is not clear if these textiles had been
produced locally or had been imported; little is as yet known of the local textile industry of this period.

There were manufacturers of gold and silver leaf, for the lavish interiors of saktitah (chapels) are described as suvarnanvita and rajatanvita ( overlaid with gold and silver).

Among the religious paraphernalia Ananda Chandra commissioned for allocation to the various shrines were padma (lotus) flowers of precious metals and gems. These were used as part of the elaborate rituals of puja (image worship) performed before the Hindu deities, icons of Buddha, sridhatu (Buddhist relics), together with the ceremonies carried out in temples to Bodhisattvas and Chunda.

Johnston read the latter as Cunda, which would have identified him as the goldsmith who provided Buddha with his last meal containing a dish of pork which was the cause of his death by dysentery. Seized with remorse, Cunda became a monk.

If it was Cunda, it would have been an extraordinary choice.

In all probability it was the sixteen-armed Chunda [another variant has twelve arms] one of the five goddesses called Tara, who are the consorts of the five Bodhisattvas in the Vajrayana form of Mahayana Buddhism practiced in Eastern Bengal which was also prevalent in the Chandra kingdom. According to Mitra, about this period, the Chunda icon at Pattikera [Mainamati Hills, Tippera District] was a place of pilgrimage celebrated throughout this vast region.10

[Predictably, in San Tha Aung’s translation of Johnston’s account on the Inscription, the true identity of Chunda was not revealed, instead, he described Chunda as a mahtay (monk), as it would have conflicted with his strategy to present Ananda Chandra as a Theravada Buddhist. In fact, San Tha Aung assiduously tries to omit any references to Brahmanic terms and topics, or else misinterpret them to make them fit in with Hinayana Buddhist doctrine].11

The Kon Daw Gyi Monastery

At the village of Thairlarvati, and within sight of the Ananda Chandra stupa on the hill, there is a monastery now known as Kon Daw Gyi ("Monastery-on-the-royal-mound"). Local tradition maintains that on this site, Ananda Chandra built the
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Ahnanaydra, a corrupt Rakhaing version of what is possibly the vihara listed in the Inscription as Anandodaya. As the text mentioned the construction of several vihara(s) with the same name, it is tempting to identify this site as being one of them.

Beneath the monastery are reputed to be subterranean passages which have never been investigated, and when I visited in 2005 there were alarming indications of subsidence. It is possible that they once contained cells for meditation.

Above ground and within the precincts were over sixteen scattered stone bases for pillars and a huge rounded slab, which was probably originally placed at the entrance to a mandapa (hall). Recently, when the ground was cleared, stone fragments carved with floral patterns and stupas were unearthed; the majority are thought to have been used as ballast in the erection of a new hall for ordination ceremonies.

All these remains found within the monastery compound are of the Vaishali period.

An indication that Vaishali once held a large population is revealed by the number of stone vapyau (wells), such as the one in the monastic grounds which is still in use. Although it had been renovated on the outside, the curvilinear blocks in the interior are still intact.

Again, it is tempting to identify this well, which according to the Inscription, was one of a pair Ananda Chandra had dug and which he named Pundinga and Somasangha (its waters like "nectar to the Buddhist clergy"); the former at a location called Dankangamar-ganga-duvara and the latter at Bhurokan-aulakka-lavaraka. Both sites cannot as yet be identified. On the other hand, could one of these be the original Sanskrit name of Thairlarvati village?

The last days of Vaishali?

At this point in time, it is still not clear if Ananda Chandra was the ultimate maharaja of the Sri Dharmaraj-andaja vamsa (dynasty), or that there were other rulers after him. All that is known of this monarch are his nine event-filled-years recorded in the Inscription.

Indications are that as the 8th century progressed, conditions within the kingdom became unstable. There may have been several reasons which contributed to
the final demise of the dynasty, for example, power struggles within the administration, or prolonged adverse weather conditions such as floods or droughts could have caused an economic meltdown. It is possible that Ananda Chandra's dynasty terminated sometime during the second half of the 700s.

Presumably, the situation in the region grew increasingly volatile.

Rakhaing accounts are very confused. There are reports of invasions by the Pyu from the kingdom of Sri Kshetra in the east, followed by the "Shan" [the latter were probably the aggressive Man people of Nanzhao]. During this period, it is doubtful if the Shan (Tai) tribes were organized enough to attempt an assault over the lofty Yoma mountains on Arakan; no doubt, to the Rakhaing chroniclers of a later age, an enemy who came from the direction of the highlands in the east of Myanmar, could only be the Shan.

The Pyu themselves were overrun by Nanzhao in 832 and eventually disappeared as a race.

In Arakan, these incursions allegedly led to the destruction of Vaishali in 957. As a consequence, the great city which once derided the splendours of Indra's Paradise then descended into obscurity.

Inexplicably, the Yakhaing Yazawun (History of the Rakhaing) provides another date for the termination of Vaishali. It claimed that the country had been torn asunder by "thu pon min" (rebels kings) one hundred and sixty-three years earlier in 794, and that this had resulted in the capital being moved, in that year, from "Waythali" to Sambawak, by Nga Ton Min.\textsuperscript{12}

So, did the cessation of Vaishali as the capital occur in 794 or 957?

Depending on which version one accepts, this is a problem now facing historians. Pertinently, taking into consideration the dated sequence of capitals according to the Rakhaing chronicles, as shown in Chapter Four, after Vaishali was allegedly abandoned in 794, the city never regained its status as a capital again. This list maintains that in 957 the capital was at Pyinsa (circa 818-1103), not Vaishali.

Concerning the name Nga Ton Min, the king who relocated his seat of administration to Sambawak, it is interesting that as it is Rakhaing, one must conclude that he was not of Ananda Chandra's line — the titles of all the rulers of this dynasty, and their predecessors, are in Sanskrit.
On the other hand, Nga Ton Min could also be an epithet foisted on the king by a Rakhaing chronicler of a later age.

We shall probably never know the true facts as to the series of cata-strophic events which took place during those turbulent years, but whatever occurred must have been sometime during the second half of the 8th or the first part of the 9th centuries. Some of the short records engraved on the north face of the Inscription are from about this period, and include the titles of possibly later rulers who wielded little power. Regrettably, attempts have still not been made to decipher the Sanskrit text. For reasons best known to them-selves, one senses a curious reluctance on the part of the appropriate authorities to have this task undertaken.

In 1925, Collis, quoting the "Mahamuni Thamaing (The True Chronicle of the Great [Mahamuni] Image), translated for him by San Shwe Bu, repeated a slightly different version of events:

"Such was the kingdom of Wesali, an Indian state in the style of the period. But in 957 A.D. occurred an event which was to change it from an Indian into an Indo-Chinese realm and to endow the region of Arakan with its present characteristics. The "True Chronicle" records that in the year 957 A.D., a Mongolian invasion [other sources identify them as Shan; it is still unclear who these so-called "Mongols" really were] swept over Wesali, destroying the Chandras and placed on their throne Mongolian kings [this sounds utterly absurd]. This important statement can fortunately be amply substantiated.

Over the border in Bengal the same deluge carried away the Pala kings. The evidence for this latter irruption is fully cited in a paper by Mr. Banerji and there is no doubt that the Mongolian invasion, which terminated the rule of the Palas, closed also the epoch of the Chandras."

[Collis was obviously not aware that the Chandra dynasty had ended in circa 600 with the possible demise of Dhriti Chandra (circa 597-600). It is difficult to accept that the Sri Dharmaraj-andaja vamsa (dynasty) (circa 649-circa 729?) to which Ananda Chandra belonged, survived until 957. Besides, according to the Yakhaing Yazawun, Vaishali had already ceased to be the capital by 794. Some foreign authors, too, have been confused by the common 'surname' of Chandra used by various rulers who succeeded the Chandra dynasty.]
THE CITY OF VAISHALI

Collis continued:

"But while in Bengal the Hindus regained their supremacy in a few years, it would seem that in Arakan the entry of the Mongolians was decisive. They cut Arakan away from India and mixing in sufficient numbers with the inhabitants of the east side of the present Indo-Burma divide, created that Indo-Mongoloid stock now known as the Arakanese.

This emergence of a new race was not the work of a single invasion. The MSS record subsequent Mongolian incursions. But the date 957 A. D., may be said to mark the appearance of the Arakanese, and the beginning of a fresh period."

Regarding these invaders who are identified as being either "Mongolians" or "Shan", Thin Kyi's proposition was thought-provoking and highly credible. In 1970, she said,

"In spite of what the Arakanese chronicles insist, the writer is inclined to the view that the so-called "Shans" who came into Arakan after 957 A.D. actually were the Arakanese, one of the early Burmese branches who probably came by way of the Myittha, Upper Yaw, Mon and Man Valleys into the Lemro Valley, and from thence spread into northern Arakan."

So much for the present Rakhaing claims that they had been in their country since 5000 BCE.

Another Rakhaing chronicle recorded that Vaishali continued to be occupied until 1018, but by then it had become merely the seat of feudatory lordlings who may have continued issuing coins using the traditional bull and trident symbols. A further source said that the old site, which was probably now a large village, was still functioning into the 15th century.

During excavations in 2003-4, when a city gateway was discovered with indications that a great conflagration had taken place in the vicinity, it was at first assumed that this evidence vindicated the later Rakhaing chronicles which stated that Vaishali had met its end by fire in 957 at the hands of Mongolian invaders. However, on investigating the remains of large charred posts, a fragment from one was radiocarbon dated to sometime between 1260-1400 an indication that the site was still in use centuries after the seat of power had moved elsewhere.
Endnotes

1. Collis, "Arakan's Place in the Civilization of the Bay" etc., p. 486.
3. Mitchiner, The History and Coinage of South East Asia etc., pp. 60-61, 76-78.
4. On my visit in 2002, U Aung Kyaw Zan, my Rakhaing guide, pointed out that many of these surviving cylindrical stupas bore a striking resemblance to Hnga(s). As some sculptures at the Mahamuni Shrine have had their Mahayanist characteristics chiselled out by Theravadins of a later age, it would not surprise me to learn that the sacred Hnga(s) enshrined within the Hindu temples were cunningly transformed into miniature stupas by these disapproving Buddhists; being consecrated objects of worship, they perhaps found it uncomfortable to have them destroyed completely?
10. Mitra, Buddhist Monuments, pp. 238 and 244, said an illustration of this figure exists in the Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita, an eleventh century manuscript in the Cambridge University Library (ref. no. ADD. 1643).
12. Aung Tha U, Yakhaing Yazawin, p. 36.
13. Collis, "Arakan's Place in the Civilization of the Bay" etc., p. 488.
15. Judging by Mitchiner's identification of the Simhaganticandra coin quoted in Chapter 5, this ruler may have been one of the penultimate kings who ruled in name only at Vaishali.
Religious beliefs

Regarding the ever-shifting religious scene in old Arakan and the large number of surviving icons of Hindu deities, Nihar-Ranjan Ray stated that strong Brahmanical beliefs had been in evidence from the earliest times. He also felt that the titles of the rulers were:

"Obviously Indian and the symbols Saivite. It is thus reasonable to conjecture that the Candra dynasty of kings of Arakan who ruled from c. 400 A. D. to c. 1000 A. D. belonged to the Brahmanical fold and were evidently followers of the cult of Siva." 1

[Ray was clearly uninformed of the fact that the Chandra dynasty terminated in circa 600, and that although some of the rulers who followed used the 'surname' Chandra, they were not of that line; this was evidently a common name].

The ruling classes probably propitiated the deities of Tribhuvana or Triloka, the Lords of the Three Worlds, these being Svarga (Heaven), Bhumi (Earth) and Patala or rauravam (Hell). 2

In the copper plate charter thought to be by Bhuti Chandra and translated by Sircar, the ruler [in the extant section] described himself and six of his royal predecessors as Paramamahesvara (dedicated adherents of Mahadeva), in other words they were devout Saivite (s); this description was repeated six times [possibly eight, as the two top lines of the copper plate had been deliberately cut off during World War Two by Japanese soldiers]. Such recurring confirmation is without doubt an unmistakable indication at the time of the predominance of Shivaism, combined with Mahayana Buddhism in its various forms. 3

Indeed, Sircar felt that all the epithets of the maharaja (s) indicated that they were "Saiva" (s). He was also of the opinion that the consort mentioned in the charter was a [Mahayana?] Buddhist, while her husband was a Shaivite which was not unusual for the
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period [in later times, some of the Mughal Emperors often added Hindu princesses to their harems and where they were allowed to practice their faith].

As mentioned earlier, a carving of Nandi which would have been placed facing the sanctum of a Shaivite temple and in front of a linga, was discovered in the palace complex, a clear substantiation of the veneration of Vishvanatha. Sculptures of Narayana also point to Vaishnavism.

This was corroborated by Luce, who felt that at first the inhabitants were Vaishnava, but that later Shivaism predominated. In turn, it was replaced by a Mahayanist form of Buddhism from about the 7th century.

Johnston thought that because of references to relevant deities and terminology in the Inscription and other contemporary lithic sources, even at the time of Ananda Chandra in the 8th century, the rulers of Vaishali were adherents of the Mahayana school of Buddhism from Eastern Bengal. Not only was the script influenced by that of Bengal, but the texts, too, followed a widespread Mahayanistic form. Words such as danaparamita and Bodhisattvas were used.

The term devalokam Tusitam (Tusita heaven), the abode of Maitreya, employed in verse 40 indicated the presence of Vijananavandin, devotees of the Vijnanavada sect, together with Mahayanist Sarvastivadins of that particular cult.

Collis, too, commented:

"If we now turn on to the history of this Ganges area at a period contemporary to that of the Chandras, we find a further development of the same tendency. The ruling dynasty, the Pala, was Mahayanist; it was in communication with Tibet, to which country it sent two missions; and the last of the Palas developed the Tantric side of Mahayana Buddhism.

These are some of the data for forming an opinion as to the religious condition of Bengal from 400-1000 A.D. As Wesali was a Hindu State adjacent thereto, the presumption is that its religious history was similar. Hinayanism had vanished; Mahayanism had compromised with original Hinduism to such a point that Buddha had become one of many gods; even the sexual magic of Tantricism was no anomaly. Such, it appears, was the Chanda kingdom of Wesali, Mahayanist in the sense that word carried in the Bengal of the 8" century. It is significant that at least one Tantric sculpture has been found in Wesali."

And there is an even more intriguing question which needs to be asked.

Was the first dynasty of Arakan founded by Jains?
RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

No other writer on this period appears to have noticed this, but the name of the first ruler in the Inscription, albeit assumed to be mythical, is that of Bahubali.

As explained in Chapter Four, he was called after Bahubali, a Jain Tirthankara (someone who, metaphorically speaking, was capable of finding a way of fording a formidable river [obstacles of life], so that his adherents could cross over in safety and consequently become enlightened). Such an adept is also known as a jina ('conqueror' or 'vanquisher'). Bahubali was one of the twenty-three sages who preceded Vardhamana Mahavira (circa 540-468 BCE) the founder of Jainism in Bihar; centuries later in Arakan, the first maharaja of the Purempura Dynasty (circa 600-649 CE) also bore the name Mahavira.

During the 3rd century BCE, to escape a devastating famine in northern India, Bhadrabahu [flourished circa 290 BCE] then head of the Jains, led a large number of his followers away from the area. They split up into groups and travelled to various regions, such as Gujarat, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka where they settled.

This leads to the inevitable question.

Did one of these groups take the easy route and venture further south east, along the Ganga River, and then down through Vanga and Samatata (Bengal) into the lush fertile plains of Arakan where they founded a community, and a dynasty? Moving down from Bengal, the group would have first encountered the site where the old capital Dhanyavati now stands; Vaishali is sited further south. Sircar tentatively dated the reign of the Bahubali listed in the Inscription as circa 158 BCE.

As stated in Chapter Three, an inscribed figure of Saccakaparibajaka (ji) na, a Nirgarantha Jina ascetic who lived at Vaishali, in India, was discovered in 1922 near the former capital of the Chandras; could its presence point to a community of Jains who once settled in the area?

So far, according to some Rakhaing writers, such as San Tha Aung, all these observations regarding the existence of Vaishnavism, Shivaism and Mahayanism, [and perhaps Jainism?] in ancient Arakan had been by foreign-ers whose [presumably devious] intentions regarding the purity of Buddhism in the land had to be considered highly suspect.
Consequently, it was revealing to see Aung Thaw, the Director of Archaeology, himself a devout Theravada Buddhist, confirming in his *Historical Sites in Burma*, that "these early kings [did indeed] profess Mahayanism." 8

Nevertheless, the subsequent discovery of several small stone slabs inscribed with the Yedhammahaytu verse, prompted San Tha Aung to declare in 1979 that here was verification that only the purest form of Theravada Buddhism had flourished from the earliest times in the kingdom of the Chandras. 9

This is difficult to accept because substantial archaeological evidence of Brahmanic and Mahayanist artefacts contradicts this claim - a classic case of late 20th century pious Theravada devotion clouding judgement; a regrettable attitude which persists today in an ever-increasing fanatical way. 10

Although several ancient statuettes of Krishna playing his flute in the traditional and recognised way have been found in Arakan, they have now been classified by the Rakhaing People's Council, Sittwe (formerly Akyab), as princely Rakhaing flautists. 11

**Comparison of the newly-built capital to a Hindu Paradise**

As mentioned in Chapter Four, Rakhaing 'experts' conveniently forget that, when comparing the capital of the kingdom to Paradise, the compiler of the Inscription had used as an example the Hindu Svarga and Mahayanist equivalents, rather than a Theravada Buddhist one. 12

If indeed old Arakan was predominantly a Theravada kingdom as is now vigorously claimed, surely the description used would have been a suitable term pertaining to that school of thought.

Instead, throughout the Inscription, its compiler had employed terminology such as Svarga (Indra's paradise), Svarogopa bhogabhak (enjoyed the bliss of Indra's heaven), Svaragam (Indra's divine abode), Tridivam (Indra's heavenly domain) and Svarloka (Indra's Utopia). 13

One is tempted to conclude that when Brahmanism was strong at court and encouraged by the monarch, when he died, he ascended, appropriately, into Svarga, as recorded in the Inscription.

And when Mahayana Buddhism predominated, the paradise its enthusiastic advocate was rightfully wafted up into was Lokasukham Tusitam (Tusita heaven) 14 the paradise of Mahayana Buddhism.
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Perhaps the popularity of these two religions depended on the beliefs of each reigning monarch and his advisors. In other words, could each form have predominated according to the royal whim?

Had the Hinayana form dominated, surely, the compiler of the Inscription would have used the term Tavatimsa [Tavartmsa/Trayastrimsa], the paradise of the thirty-three deities, and which Buddha visited to lecture on the Abbidhamma ('Basket of Definitive Doctrine') to Maha Maya, his mother.

More relevantly, and this is important.

Since the text was composed in 729, the use of the term Svarga clearly indicates the still prevailing influence of Hinduism in the kingdom at that late date.

San Than Aung, in his interpretation of passages in the Inscription which mentions Svarga, has adroitly evaded this analogy by declaring that the real meaning of the word was "nat pyai" or Tazvadeintha [Tavatimsa], the world of the Theravada Buddhist nat (spirits) as it is now known among the Myanmar and Rakhaing).\textsuperscript{15}

Again, when translating a dedicatory inscription which he thought was by Dharma Chandra (circa 704-720), the father of Ananda Chandra, he quoted the term "Svarge" [sic], indicating that it was a Buddhist "heaven".

As in India at the time, there was clearly a tolerant and liberal society in Arakan unaffected by religious prejudices, with the result that animism, Hinduism, Jainism, Mahayanistic form of Buddhism coexisted side by side.

One should also take into account the mindset of the period which was dominated by highly superstitious beliefs, occult practices, physical hazards, thereby causing the canny to propitiate all known deities without discrimina-tipn as a precaution.

That Vaishali was visited by pilgrims from neighbouring Buddhist and Hindu kingdoms is revealed by finds of foreign religious objects. In 1986, Nyunt Han reported a terracotta plaque of Buddha, similar in design to those found at the Pyu city of Sri Kshetra and near Pra Pathom in Thailand; both examples have been dated to the 7th or 8th century.\textsuperscript{16} The Buddha is depicted seated in the 'European' fashion [as if on a chair], and not with his legs crossed as is the usual position. He is flanked by elegant Bodhisattvas. Above these three images are a trio of tiny figures representing the previous Bud-dhas, Kakusandha, Konagamana and Kassapa, with Gautama, the last Buddha, beneath them.
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Among some of these introduced artefacts are bronze models of the Mahabodhi, the stupa at Bodh Gaya. While San Tha Aung implied that these were produced locally, the British Museum has on display an identical exam-ple labelled as originating from Gaya and dated to the 12th century. Images of Hindu gods, the Bodhisattva Manjusri and Buddhas from East Bengal and other parts of India and Sri Lanka have also been discovered.

Although an impressive collection of bronzes from the Vaishali and other later periods is now on display in the Museum of Buddhist Art at Sittwe, in 2002, much to the consternation of this author, he was told by a reliable source, that many of these images were "only made recently". The situation in which antique artefacts are expertly replicated is now endemic throughout the country.

One fears for the antiques trade when some of these superb imitations, suitably aged, are dispersed in the international art market. But then it would seem this process has already begun. In recent articles on Buddha images from Myanmar by enthusiastic, but inexperienced and naive writers, numerous suspicious-looking examples have been spotted.

Endnotes

3. Sircar, "Fragmentary Copper — plate Grant from Arakan", p. 64.
5. Luce, "Early Burma History", Southeast Asian History and Historiography, p. 33.
8. Aung Thaw, Historical Sites in Burma, p. 117.
9. Cover, Myauk U lan-hnun (Guide to the historical sites of Mrauk U).
10. Despite denials by the government, the Internet revealed that members of other religions, such as the Christians and Muslims, are suffering covert discrimination when applying for jobs; for example, those with foreign or English names do not stand a chance, it is therefore prudent to use a Myanmar name.
12. San Tha Aung, Anandasandra-shit-yar-su Yakhaing Waythali min. The terms are listed according to the verse number in which they appear Divam (v. 11, p. 98); Tridivah (v. 17, p.104); Svargga (v. 21, p.108);
Svarga/Divam (v. 22, p.109); Svargam (v. 23, p.110); Svarga (v. 24, p.111); Divyam (v. 27, p.114); Divam (v. 31, p.118); Svargo pabhogabhak (v. 34, p.121); Svargam (v. 36, p.123); Devilkin (v. 38, p. 125); Devalokam Tusita (v. 40, p.127) and Svargam (v. 43, p.130).


14. Other heavenly locations from this form of Buddhism are Sukhavati ("Happy World") or the Western Pure Land (a transitional paradise), known as the Region of Amitabha, the dhisattava of Compassion, and Potalaka, the Paradise of Avalokiteshvara. There are several such blissful regions in which the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and other gods reside. Knappert, An Encyclopaedia of Myth and Legend: Indian Mythology, p. 239; Jansen, E. R., The Book of Buddhas: Ritual Symbolism used on Buddhist Statuary and Ritual Objects, pp. 47 & 61; McArthur, M., Reading Buddhist Art: An Illustrated Guide to Buddhist Signs & Symbols, pp. 38,173; Chaturachinda et al., Dictionary of South & Southeast Asian Art, pp. 21 & 197.

15. San Tha Aung, Anandasandara shit-yar-su Yakhaing Waythali-min, no. 21, p. 108.

Chapter Ten

Vaishali Today

At present [2005], visiting Vaishali is definitely for the intrepid traveller. The type of vehicle one is travelling in is also important. Many of the taxis in Mrauk U are decrepit jeeps left over from World War Two and still in use. However, small reliable cabs can sometimes be hired from the better class hotels.

After driving about five miles along the indescribably bad road from Mrauk U, the low mounds of the south city wall are encountered. The discomfort, however, is offset by the wild scenery along the way with thickly wooded hills, golden paddy fields, creeks and reservoirs covered with flowering aquatic plants.

Between Thairlarvati and the main village of Vaishali which has sprung up on the former palace site, is the picturesque Ahbaungdaw, a large lake and part of the inner moat, now the haunt of water fowl. Where the ground has not been cleared for rice cultivation, numerous knolls, the foundations of ruined secular and religious structures can be seen. Over the centuries, the latter have been at the mercy of thaik saya (s) (treasure hunting-occultists) who have smashed their way in with impunity in search of valuables secreted in the relic chambers.

Needless to say, the loss to archaeology has been immense. Gold and silver objects were invariably melted down; one must not forget that although Buddhists, one is dealing with disadvantaged rustics desperate for cash.

In his report, Nyunt Han noted that artefacts of precious metals had not been recorded by the Department of Archaeology, and as a result it was unable to comment on the quality of the handiwork of goldsmiths of the Vaishali period. There are several reasons for this paucity of precious objects. Either Vaishali had
been ransacked systematically several times in its long history, or vigilant treasure hunters, who have had all the time in the world, and who would not have encountered obstructions from the authorities, had done their work thoroughly. Besides, peasants who found precious objects were hardly likely to report their finds.¹

Sometimes, a guilty conscience triggers one of these looters' to present the local monastery with a priceless image or artefact. It would not, of course, be of precious metal. The usual excuse is that it was found in the undergrowth, stream, or that the spot was indicated in a dream. Although the recipient knows exactly how the object has been acquired, no questions are asked.

Recently, antique dealers from Yangon have been visiting the local monasteries and persuading the monks to part with artefacts for a considerable donation. Others have offered to repair their decaying buildings. Understandably, in poverty-stricken areas such blandishments are eagerly accepted as the locals no longer have the means to support their religious establishments on a grand scale.

Visits by Western archaeologists

Although the British were entrenched in Arakan from as early as 1826, little attention was paid by the authorities to cultural or religious issues.

It was not until 1884 that Forchhammer, the first Superintendent of Archaeology, put in an appearance. His tour would presumably have been undertaken some time between November and January which is known as the cool season, for during the rest of the year according to the Akyab District Gazetteer, one had to contend with the intense heat, fierce rain storms, cyclones and water spouts.²

One must also bear in mind that in the early 1880s the problems involved in travelling through this wild province where malaria is still endemic were immense. Provisions and camping equipment had to be carried, together with the heavy photographic paraphernalia, including fragile glass negatives. Servants and porters would certainly have had to be engaged. As travel could only be undertaken by horse, cart or boat, it must have been a monumental enterprise for a foreigner.

In his report on Arakan, Forchhammer said that he first visited the old city of Mrauk U, where he undertook extensive and meticulous surveys at the former capital. This implied that he had travelled by steamer from Rangoon to Akyab
[an unpleasant journey at the time]. He was then rowed from Akyab by country boat to Mrauk U through the maze of innumerable tidal creeks, probably having to sleep several nights along the way [it now takes less than five hours by fast motorized vessel to reach Mrauk U].

Forchhammer then headed for the Mahamuni Shrine over twenty-miles to the north, passing Vaishali on the way. Regrettably, he did not mention having stopped at this site, There is a possibility that since the area was overgrown, as parts of it still are today, he failed to notice anything, or else he was not informed of the site by his guide. On the other hand, he may also have travelled up by boat, in which case, he would not have entered the walled site of old Vaishali.

Had he stopped and investigated, an invaluable opportunity to record the archaeological material still above ground would not have been missed. Al-though he took photographs of other historical places, none are known of Vaishali by him. This is most unfortunate as he was an extremely competent and exacting observer.

Sadly, the indefatigable Forchhammer died young, no doubt from some virulent disease picked up during his numerous tours in such unhealthy re-gions. Charles Duroiselle, another Superintendent, Archaeological Survey, said that he passed away soon after his visit to Arakan.3 However, the list of Superintendents of the Department of Archaeology still showed Forchhammer in office in 1890.

It was not until about thirty-six years later that the old metropolis re-ceived a brief visit by Duroiselle. San Sh we Bu, Honorary Archaeological Officer for Arakan, appeared to have been overwhelmed with gratitude at the visit, for it must be remembered that at the time, the British colonial government displayed little interest in Arakanese culture or history.

San Shwe Bu enthused:

"By far the most outstanding feature of the year's work was the visit to Arakan by M. Chas. Duroiselle, Superintendent, Archaeological Survey, Burma. Being the first of its kind, it marks a distinct epoch in the annals of this country. For several years such a visit was contemplated, but owing to some thing or other, the project did not come off. It was however, reserved for M. Duroiselle to usher in a new era of goodwill, understanding and hope for the patient people who were on the verge of despair."

"He proceeded to the site of ancient Wesali [Vaishali] and remained there in camp for a couple of days. There he saw Shwedaung [Golden Mount], originally intended to be excavated during this visit but postponed owing to want of time. A hurried survey of a part of the city revealed the ruins of demolished building and stone sculptures scattered
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about and overgrown with jungle. A double-lined inscription in old Devanagari was also found."4

Regrettably, photographs were again not taken.

And that was it.

Nothing further was done.

Subsequently, when Collis inspected Vaishali in 1924, he reported:

"The ruins of the city are still to be seen on the bank of a tidal creek about six miles from Mrauk-U, and about fifty miles inland from the Bay of Bengal. The site has neither been surveyed nor excavated, but the casual observer may perceive the remains of brick walls enclosing a large area.

On the south side was to be seen until lately portions of a stone pier. Within the walls are numerous mounds and lying on them are pieces of stone statuary, bas-reliefs, capitals, floral designs in stone and inscriptions in the Nagari character of the 8th century. All these remains are purely Hindu in execution and subject.

The figures represent deities; on the capitals is the sacred bull of Siva; the style is rougher than the best Hindu work, but is not debased. Various Nagari inscriptions, still undecipherable, have been found in the vicinity of the city; and at Mahamuni, 15 miles N.E., are to be seen surrounding the mound on which once sat the great image of the Buddha, which is now in Mandalay, a number of statues and bas-reliefs of the Hindu Pantheon, incomplete and insufficiently worked out as is this archaeological evidence, it suggests that in the city of Wesali were practised both the Hindu and Buddhist religions or that it was a Mahayananist city."5

It is intriguing that several "capitals" with the "bull of Siva" were still standing as late as 1924. None are now known. These probably resembled, in format, the capitals found on the subcontinent, in particular, examples attributed to Ashoka. At this point, one wonders whether because of its small size, the damaged carving of Nandi found within the palace complex at Vaishali, and mentioned previously, could have come from one of the capitals observed by Collis.

As late as the 1970s, San Tha Aung justifiably complained that carved stone sculptures, and mutilated Buddhist and Hindu images could still be seen on many of the mounds. Disappointingly, on all these occasions photo-graphic records were not kept.

But who was responsible for such mindless depredations?
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The culprits were the destructive animistic hill tribes such as the Mru and the Kumi, who, after the fall of Vaishali, raided the area whenever the Rakhaing dynasties descended into their periodic state of acute anarchy.

Others who wrought devastation were the Kaman (archers) in the service of Shah Shuja, sibling of Muhi ud Din Aurangzeb Alamgir I (1658-1707), the Mughal Emperor.

Fearing for his life, Shuja had fled from his brother, with immense treasure, to Mrauk U, where he was first outwardly welcomed, and then murdered in 1661 by the covetous Rakhaing king Sandathudamma (1652-84). Shuja's vast wealth was confiscated, and the female members of his family incarcerated in the harem. The Muslim archers, however, were spared and conscripted into the Rakhaing army.

Smarting at this treachery to their former lord, and the insult of 'defile-ment' heaped on royal Muslim ladies by an infidel, the archers subsequently become so powerful that they eventually controlled the weak government, murdering and installing kings at will. They brought terror and devastation to the kingdom for about fifty years. Any type of image, Buddhist or Hindu, would have been fair game to these iconoclasts.

Then there was the invading Myanmar army of 1783-85, whose soldiers had a pathological fear of 'magical images' as they were believed to protect the Arakanese kingdom and occultly impede occupation. Presumably, for the superstitious soldiers any carving which was of a non Buddhist nature had to have its 'powers' nullified by defacement.

The surviving sculptures were further vandalized by Muslim sepoys from the First Anglo Burmese War of 1824-26 when Arakan was annexed. These sepoys were particularly infuriated at the sight of images, and like the archers of the 17th century, had a tendency to decapitate or desecrate them; Forchhammer recorded seeing in 1884 many sculptures peppered with shot, probably used for target practice.

However, at Vaishali, the worst offenders are the villagers, who continue to salvage building material from the ruins, thereby destroying primary evidence from buildings and sculptures alike [bricks and stone blocks can still be seen scattered around the present village which was once the palace complex].

Is it little wonder that only a few undamaged stone carvings have survived?
Another infamous hamlet is Than Chaung.

In 1925, San Shwe Bu recorded:

"During the year under report, some of the villagers of Than Chaung ["Iron Creek"] broke open a small stone pagoda situated on a steep hill known as Sabasu Taung ["Hill-of-Piled-Paddy"]. It is about five miles to the north of Mrohaung [Mrauk U] and hidden among the numerous hills of the locality. The hill itself is about 300 feet high and its isolation favoured the sort of work usually done by treasure seekers.

I am informed by the 1st Township Officer of Mrohaung that the people of Than Chaung are traditionally notorious for breaking into old pagodas. The locality is full of ancient monuments now mostly hidden by jungle. Six people were sent up for trial and fined Rs. 50 each by U Mr a Tha, the Subdivisional Officer of Kyauktaw. Whether this paltry punishment will act as an effective deterrent is for time to show." 8

Over eighty years later, it still does not. Judging by what is sometimes available in glossy art magazines from abroad, the Internet, and the international art market, the vandals have become even bolder. The arrival of metal detectors to this ancient land is inevitable and just a matter of time.

A raid on Than Chaung in 1925 produced only twelve artefacts which were confiscated by the authorities; a considerable amount, including the more valuable, would have been secreted away. None of the items were photographed.

The list was mouth-watering.

Among these were images of precious metals and relic caskets of brass and stone. One image was decorated with ornaments and may have represented either a royal donor or a Bodhisattva. Although the collection was sent to the Mandalay office, all have now disappeared.

While the majority of the cultural remains at Vaishali have vanished, surprisingly, fragments are still being unearthed — by those with sharp eyes.

The badly worn trio discovered by the author in 2005 are of sandstone, and represent a royal personage or celestial being wearing what would have been an elaborately decorated crown; the head of Buddha with a small rounded usnisa; and a smiling male with oblique eyes, sporting a domed cap with a broad forehead band.

Regrettably, the workmanship is not of the highest quality and may date from a time when culturally Vaishali was deteriorating.
The Let Khat Kon Monastery

Within the grounds of Vaishali's only large monastery on Let Khat Kon ("Mound-of-the-Loom-Batten"), huge architraves, cornices and other architectural fragments can be seen scattered haphazardly on the ground. Many are sunk deep into the earth.

The mound and the monastery take their name from a colossal stone cornice which the locals insist resembles a let khat (loom batten); the Sanskrit name of this site during the Vaishali period will now probably never be known. That it was once an important cult centre on which stood a sizeable Hindu temple is indicated by its proximity to the palace complex.

The entire precinct is crying out to be excavated by professional archaeologists before primary evidence is destroyed. There is always the possibility that some wealthy benefactor (frantic to accrue merit in the Buddhist tradition) will clear away the 'rubbish' to erect a brick monastery for the resident monks. Should that happen all will irretrievably be lost.

According to the villagers of Vaishali, this spot was also the original location of the Inscription together with its magic portal until its removal to Mrauk U by king Mong Ba Gree during the 16th century [bizarrely, this Buddhist king also sported the Islamic title of Zabauk Shah].

The inscription pillar and its attachments probably once stood in their own protective structure. Among the debris of large stone slabs is a lintel bearing a shallow sculpture of a pqdma (lotus) and the dhamma cakka (The Wheel of the Law) which is almost identical with the motif on another lintel now at the Shitthaung pagoda at Mrauk U [described in Chapter Four]. Unusually, there are drilled holes in the centre of the lotus and in the area surrounding it. Their intended purpose is not known.

This lintel, too, is broken. Is it possible that during the 16th century, on dismantling the Inscription and its portal, the original gigantic slab was shattered into two pieces, and while one section was taken, the remaining segment had been abandoned?

A careful study of the two portions, one at Mrauk U and the other at Vaishali, should reveal whether they once formed a single piece or were designed for separate use.

An idea of the type of sculptural material which at one time littered the city can be seen within a shed next to the monastery. There are massive and systematically
mutilated sculptures of once cherished and venerated Hindu icons datable to the early period. Judging by the remains, the workmanship is of high quality and no doubt the creation of sculptors from the subcontinent.

These images are now called [Buddhist] nat (spirits) by the simple villagers who are totally ignorant of their origins. They have also taken to plastering cheap strips of gold and silver leaf on them — further disfiguring them. Sprigs of leaves and flowers in small tin cans can also be seen in front of the images [one must remember that this is a poverty stricken area]. Apparently, the placing of such 'offerings' is a recent innovation to impress the tourists, and attract Rakhaing spirit worshippers from outside the area in the hope that the site would in time become a cult centre. Should this happen, it would undoubtedly bring employment in a variety of ways for some of the villagers who are predominantly extremely poor cultivators.

It is to be hoped that these sculptures will not be renovated, with new heads and faces added, as has been perpetrated on other ancient but damaged works of art.

Amongst this depressing collection is an image of possibly Bhagirathi, the second consort of Shiva. Another substantial figure is now beyond recognition.

When the palace enclosure was excavated, a large headless and badly disfigured carving sculpted out of a dark stone was discovered [this indicates that there may have been a royal shrine for the private use of the royal family]. The fact that the image once had four arms, and the inclusion of two small figures flanking its feet, identifies it as Vishnu. These attendants are Sudarshana (Chakradeva) and Kaumodaki (Gadadevi), personifying the attributes of the god, the chakra (discus) and the gada (mace). At the back of this stone figure is engraved a conch shell, an identical design can also be seen on the cap stone of the Inscription now at Mrauk U.

One carving, possibly of Avalokitesvara, is depicted with its sinuous torso bent in a tribhanga pose, and adorned with traces of elaborate jewellery. In its original condition, it would have been an outstanding piece comparable to those found in India. The head is framed by a double halo. Vestiges can be discerned of a highly structured jatamakuta, in which the hair is twisted, plaits, and piled into a tapering crown.
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The body ornaments consist of a broad hara (crescent-shaped necklace) and a kuchabandha (breast band) — these are barely visible. Around its lithe hips are several mekhala (belts) and an elegantly knotted kathibandha (band-like sashes) securing a dhoti with pleated folds. Some of the other sculptures show hip sashes and side draperies arranged in a complicated manner.

Despite their deplorably ravaged state, it is a miracle these carvings have survived and have not been pulverised for use as foundation stones; other priceless images were probably not so fortunate.

Perhaps when more enlightened times prevail, a few temples in Vaishali or Mrauk U could be reconstructed in the process known as anastylose, in which carefully selected surviving architectural fragments such as architraves, pillars and door-jambs, belonging to a particular ruin, are reassembled.

Then again, judging by the political situation and the traditionally in-grained Myanmar antipathy for the Rakhaing, and the latter's determination to eradicate Brahmanic evidence, this is unlikely to happen for a considerable time.

Regrettably, by then it will be all too late.

Endnotes

1. Nyunt Han, Departmental Report, p. 21, December 1986, Yangon.
2. In 2005, some Italian tourists, their guide and boatmen were drowned during such a storm on their way to Mrauk U; although warned not to travel as a storm was imminent, they insisted on proceeding, and at night.
Chapter Eleven

The Museum at Mrauk U

As yet, a museum does not exist in Vaishali, nevertheless, artefacts spanning vAythe Dhanyavati and the Vaishali periods have been conserved at the rebuilt [2002] archaeological museum at Mrauk U, and at the Mahamuni Shrine Museum. The majority of these exhibits are from ruined sites on which had once stood Hindu temples, but which have now been taken over by Buddhists. That Hinduism predominated in the kingdom is revealed by the presence of deities such as Indra, Shiva, Vishnu, Ganesha, Mahadeva, Narayana, Savitar, and Devi in her guise as Mahishasura-mardini slaying Mahishasura (the buffalo demon), together with several others.

A visitor, however, should be wary of some of the labelling at both museums as there is a tendency to transform Hindu gods into Buddhist deities, or attribute an earlier date for most exhibits. The identification of Hindu gods can also be wildly erratic.

In 2002, a large and finely cast bronze Jumbupati (image dressed in royal robes) which is clearly dateable to the 17th or 18th centuries, was labelled as a product of the Vaishali Period; despite protests on my part, the label was still in place on my second visit in 2005.

Irritatingly, while one did not have to remove one's footwear in 2002, a new ruling by the officious presiding officer meant that one had to in 2005, the reason being that the museum contained so-called sacred Buddha images [the museums at Bagan and other sites which are full of images do not insist on this ridiculous stipulation]. If footwear is to be banned, at least they should have the decency to have the floor cleaned!

In 2002, I was appalled to find heaped in the village dump at Vaishali, numerous stone carvings and architectural fragments which spanned the entire period of the city. Amongst these were items I recognized from Gutman's article and thesis.
To the consternation of my guide, I promptly loaded the more portable onto our transport and took them to the Department of Archaeology in Mrauk U. Only to discover that this act of mine, done with the best possible intentions, was to the intense annoyance of the curator.

I later learnt that the owner of the site was charging tourists to view these carvings, and must have been equally exasperated at my unexpected meddling. However, at the time he was powerless to intervene as I was accompanied by a Military Intelligence Officer of the dreaded Htauk Hlan Yae Department (SLORC) who actually encouraged me.

On my second excursion in 2005, it was gratifying to see at the Mrauk U Museum, now under a new curator, two of the pieces I had rescued in 2002. Unfortunately, both had been scrubbed and badly restored. When sandstone is scoured with a wire brush, it loses all the patination it had accumulated over the centuries, and which brings out the detail of the carvings. However, when thoughtlessly cleaned it presents an almost blank surface and becomes difficult to photograph, unless special lighting is employed.

One figure is that of a bearded rakshasa (demon) with bizarrely inverted feet, a characteristic of evil spirits both locally and in India.

The other is a pot-bellied dwarf-like being framed within a spoked wheel (chakra: variously described as a disc or the representation of the sun. Vishnu was provided with this missile by Shiva to annihilate the evil forces). While the label vaguely identified the figure either as a “sun-god” [Surya] or a “deva”. Gutman thought it represented Indra. It also resembles a gana (midget attendant of Shiva). Then again, the chakra held in its hand may also indicate that it could be a local variant of another aspect of Shiva (Nila kantha "blue-throat") or even Vishnu.

A photograph of this very same sculpture used by Gutman in 1986, revealed that it had been broken off from a column. In 1924, Collis mentioned seeing carved figures, including Nandi, on capitals, could this be one of the few last surviving examples, minus its pillar?

Sculptures of this type of the fourth century CE in the Archaeological Museum at Gwalior, Rajasthan, and another dated to 485 at Eran, Madhya Pradesh, are identified as possibly Surya or Vishnu; the inscribed pillar is described as dhvaja stambha (flagpole), presumably to be sited outside a temple.
If the carving from Vaishali represents Vishnu, it may characterize a chakravartin, one of the numerous forms of this deity.

The head of Vishnu

A large damaged head of Pundari Kasha ("lotus-eyed"Vishnu) is all that remains of a massive image of sizable proportions from a Vaishnava temple at Vaishali; in its entirety it would probably have been about five foot high. Judging by the excellent quality of the craftsmanship it was created at the height of the city's cultural period. It has a serenely smiling countenance, with eyes almost closed in contemplation. The kirita makuta (cylindrical crown) with a pirambani (band) at the top was once crowned with a lotus bud. A netripatta (forehead panel) is embossed with rows of circular ornaments within square frames bordered by globules. Above it are three purima (leaf-like motifs). Gutman dates it to the sixth century.3

Another image of Vishnu

The carving of this deity which was discovered at Mrauk U is wrongly labelled 15th century. It is in fact one of the few relatively intact survivors from a time when culturally the glory days of Vaishali had passed. Compared to the previous head of Vishnu, the work is awkward. The oriental cast of features, with its slanting eyes, also indicate that it was crafted by a local sculptor for a Vaishnava temple in the grounds of which now stands the Buddhist Parabaw monastery.

The four-armed Vishnu is shown in sthanaka murti (standing with feet together and with lower hands resting on his attributes, the chakra (disc; with four spokes as opposed to the usual eight, is either called Sudarshana or Vajranabha) while the gada (mace) is known as Kaunodaki. The former is some-times called Cakrapurusa, while the latter is Gada Devi. These two are usually represented by a small male and a female figure, identified as ayudhapurusas.

As these symbols should have been held in his major two hands, which are now lost, it indicates a laxity amongst the Vaishnava community in regard to regulations in iconography.

Then again, this neglect could have begun much earlier, for this piece is a copy of an almost identical and older sculpture of superior artistry now in the Mahamuni Museum. Gutman has noted that as far as she was aware, apart from
being popular in eastern India, this particular form of iconography has not been seen in Southeast Asia. The idea, brought in by image makers from the subcontinent, no doubt spread as far as the Chandra kingdom and did not progress further East, perhaps because of changing religious trends.

Despite crude attempts at renovation in the past by incongruously covering it in red paint, when it should have been blue, enough remains to reveal a wealth of ornamental details.

The makuta (crown) backed by an oval prabhamandala (aureole), is almost identical with that worn by the image of Vishnu at the Mahamuni Museum; this design is remarkably similar to some of the ornate cylindrical crowns from South India, but there are also local innovations here.

Body ornaments consists of vritha kundala (earrings), kandikai and savadi (neck bands) together with the kaustubha (sacred gem), tollvali (armlets), sudakam (bracelets), mekalai (girdle) and silambu (anklets). The lengthy yajnopavita (sacred thread) extends down to its knees, showing the important status of the deity portrayed. Lower down, ribbon-like draperies crisscross the ankle-length dhoti.

The lintel in the style of Sambor Prei Kuk, Cambodia

One of the most intriguing objects in the collection has to be the huge patanga (lintel), which I last saw also in 2002 at the overgrown Tharapabbata pagoda site in Mrauk U, but then it was still lying in the jungle where it fell. Because of its size, it had to be photographed in three sections, as a platform would have been required to capture the entire piece in my viewfinder.

[Unfortunately, the lintel has now been thoroughly cleaned and the minute details can no longer be distinguished].

Among the scattered debris of darkish grey stones were architectural fragments, including a large panel depicting a shuka (parrot), one of the vehicles of Kamadeva, the god of carnal pleasures. Although the lintel is now labelled as being from a Buddhist stupa, these remains had evidently once been part of an extensive Hindu place of worship. Had these pieces been systematically collected by archaeologists, I am convinced part of the original structure could have been reassembled — this is now no longer possible.
Astonishingly, according to relevant illustrations in Ancient Cambodia, the unexpected motifs on this lintel are comparable to similar examples found on the pre-Ankorian structures at Sambor Prei Kuk (Ishanapura on the Mekong River) the capital of Ishnavarman I (reigned circa 616-635) of Zhenla.

The mystery is how did a lintel carved in the style of a culture from so far away come to be in the Chandra kingdom?
It would seem that despite language barriers some stone masons from Zhenla were travelling west and procuring commissions.

On the other hand, they may have been of Indian descent and fleeing the turmoil which followed the demise of Jayavarman I (reigned 657-681) and which lasted for nearly a century. As the overland journey would have been hazardous, they most likely embarked in one of the vessels which plied be-tween their realm and India, some of which are known to have called at Vaishali on route.

The lintel is composed of undulating bands, three curving arches on top and two below [because of its size, the present illustration had to be cropped and reassembled, giving the false impression there are only two curvatures above, instead of three]. These are flanked by a makara (a marine composite creature and vahana (vehicle) of Varuna, a Vedic deity connected with fertility, rain and water; the makara is also the insignia of Kama (Makaradhvaja) the deity of sexual pleasures). On this example, each head faces inwards.

The 'rolling' strip of carving is decorated in a distinctive style with the lower band sculpted with interlocking swags. Where the bands dip, there is a rounded cartouche with foliate design and curling vegetal shapes contain-ing a square surmounted by a medallion and ending in a terminal. The layout and motifs are strikingly similar to the Sambor Prei Kuk style.

Another lintel excavated in the grounds of the Mingala Manaung monas-tery nearby may also be the handiwork of the same masons, as the distinctive swags and the makara, facing out, are present.

This leads one to conjecture whether the architectural forms of the two original Brahmanic temples these lintels once adorned had been modelled on those at Sambor Prei Kuk.

Among the other sculptures on display at the museum is a wilfully dam-aged representation of Sujata, a rich man's daughter, offering a bowl of rice boiled in milk to Buddha. Although the craftsmanship is not outstanding, in Sujata's costume one can glimpse the dress style of the court ladies at the time the carving was produced.
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As befitting someone of high rank, she is depicted wearing jewels, a broad neckband, a long shawl and a breast cloth. Her skirt, which is made from a flimsy and clinging material, is secured at the waist by an ornamental belt. Her features are decidedly Indian.

Another piece portrays a damaged carving of either Buddha, a Hindu god, or a noble, seated with his legs crossed. Broken off fragments on either side of the main figure indicate that it was originally flanked by attendants. In all probability it was a Hindu deity accompanied by his consorts as the pendant legs of one can still be seen [had it been Buddha, this figure would have been shown kneeling respectfully].

Below the throne are men with hands held in a deferential attitude. Each one is portrayed with a different hair style.

An architrave in the Gupta style

An architrave of another design wrongly captioned 15lh-18th century, which was retrieved from the grounds of the Nibuza stupa, also at Mrauk U, is clearly from the earlier part of the Vaisali period.

The fragment, which was part of a Hindu shrine which once stood on the site, is a kudu (ornamental recess) a characteristic architectural feature seen on temples of the Gupta period. In particular, the curling flame-like brackets flanking the niche bear a resemblance to those on the 5th century Shiva Temple at Bhumara, Madhya Pradesh.

Within the alcove is a male figure with long wavy hair which juts out from under a cylindrical crown. As it holds a lotus in each hand, the presence of these flowers may identify it as Vidyadhara, a spirit of wisdom; the example at Bhumara depicts Yama (god of Death).

The pillar of the River Goddess

An unusual item of further interest is a square column which reveals post Gupta influence, and contains a rare representation of possibly the original temple itself. This competently executed piece from the precincts of the much later Buddhist Tayzaryama monastery at Mrauk U, would have, in its entirety, presented an impressive sight.

It is not surprising that an entire structure could disappear so completely leaving behind only one column, for the stones from this 'heathen' temple had almost...
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certainly been salvaged by Buddhists for other purposes, such as foundations for a stupa which replaced the original Hindu temple.

Two octagonal pilasters and foliate motifs on a panel enclose an elegantly coiffured lady with a small karanda makuta (crown), with the hair at the back arranged in a tamizham (chignon). She holds an auspicious chamaradharinis (fly-whisk or chauri) and is accompanied by a dwarf-like attendant. Two smiling males, who may be dvarapala (s) (door guardians) can be seen on each side of the column. Then again, as they both look so inoffensive, it is difficult to identify them as fierce door keepers.

The central figure should be one of two river goddesses who flank the main access to a shrine so that their presence would purify devotees entering for puja. This sculpture is part of a pair, but as only one is known, it is unclear if the lady depicted is Yamuna (Jumna) Devi or Ganga Devi (also known as Bhagirathi, the second spouse of Shiva). As this deity is associated with both Vishnu and Shiva, could the original temple have been dedicated to either one of these gods?

If the sculpture is that of Ganga Devi, her feet should be resting on a makara monster, which is her vahana, instead, she stands on a alambana (plinth). Conversely, as she carries a fly-whisk she may represent Jumna Devi, although it must be said that the akupara (tortoise), her vehicle, is missing.

However, on one of my visits to the museum, I noticed a smaller fragment in the corner which showed the lower half of an identical figure — with the legs facing the same way as the one in the illustration. It is possible then that originally there were several panels of the goddess which decorated the outside, and the lower half of the building, with Jumna Devi on one side and Yumuna Devi on the other, converging onto the entrance. The principal and larger sculptures of the two goddesses were probably placed at, and flanking the main portal.

The foremost object of interest which is of vital importance, however, is the structure above the goddess as it is indicative of a type of architecture at Vaishali, and which may also have been used on palaces and monasteries.

In the carving, between the pillars of the building which hold up the roof, are high jali (windows), while the facade of the gopura (temple gateway) itself is in the style of a chaitya-hall of Cave XIX, dateable to the 6th century CE, at Ajanta, Maharashtra. The overlapping roofs resemble those of the gopura(s) of south India, especially that of the Saivite temple Nilakanthesvara of Laddigam, Tamil
Nadu. Immediately above the temple is a panel ornamented with a kodi karukku (curling flower and tendril-like vines).

If at some remote point in the future, and under a more benign and unbiased authority, attempts are made to reconstruct a building of the Vaishali period, this architectural design should serve as an excellent example.

**A sculpture of Surya**

This important piece was discovered by San Shwe Bu, the Hon. Archaeological Officer, who found it on the curiously named Shin-nge-det-taung ["the-hill-climbed-by-a-young-novice"], Mrauk U. His original study is worth quoting as this object has been irretrievably damaged since its discovery:

"It depicts on the obverse face Surya riding in his chariot drawn by seven horses. The horse in the centre is facing outward and is placed in a niche of horse-shoe shape. The figure of the chariot driver is missing. The principal figure of Surya has a high headdress, large ear-lobes and a necklace, and is flanked on either side by remains of a small standing figure, which looks like a female. The one on the right is carrying a bow, and that on the left a staff or an arrow. These two small figures probably represent the two goddesses, Usha Devi and Pratyusha Devi [his consorts].

The interest of the stone lies in its being the first and only one of its kind that has yet been discovered in Arakan or Burma proper, and perhaps in its being the oldest piece of sculpture to which we could assign a date with any degree of certainly.

The reverse face is filled with a writing in North Indian characters. Unfortunately, the writing is much defaced, and it is to be feared that not much will be made out of it."\(^5\)

At the time, although the inscription was thought to be of 8\(^{th}\) century provenance, it is now known to be much earlier, as the script is of the Gupta period (circa 320-467 CE).

**The Wunti Taung sculptures**

Objects of a Brahmanic nature were particularly abundant on another hillock now known by the Rakhaing name of Wunti Taung, where parts of the foundations of a Hindu temple from the Vaishali period can still be seen; the present name is possibly a corrupted version of a Sanskrit word.
Duroiselle, writing in his Report of the Archaeological Survey, Burma, 1923, thought the images to be Vaishnava.

Forchhammer, who examined these remains earlier in 1884, recorded:

"The sides [of the hill] are covered with stones that once formed part of an ancient Hindu shrine crowning the top; on the latter are a number of small sculptures appertaining to the Hindu Pantheon; they constituted the contents of the temple. The hill is called the Wuntituang (or Wantitaung) and the shrine Wunticeti; the latter is of unknown age. In native [Rakhaing] records it is first mentioned in connection with King Amrathu, son of Candadevi; he was a chief of the Mru tribe [they still live in the hills of Arakan] and is said to have erected a palace on the Gyetthare taung ("Auspicious Hill") in Myauk-U (Mrohaung) in the year B.E.320 (A.D. 958)."

However, as later Rakhaing accounts for so early a date are not to be trusted, it is difficult to accept this story of Amrathu.

Seeing that only a few examples from this site are conserved in the Mrauk U Museum, it will be worth citing Forchhammer's first-hand observations. Since he noted that the workmanship was not of the best quality, one must assume that the temple may have been erected when the power of nearby Vaishali had waned. He also said that the sculptures were much damaged. Given that at least one image was included among his illustrations, Forchhammer evidently made a photographic record, but the total number is not known nor of what became of his glass plates.

[1] "The central piece is a female figure standing [it is in fact Vishnu]; the head is wanting; the arms hang down by the sides [although originally carved with four arms, the upper two are now missing]; the palm of either hand rests on a smaller naked figure in squatting attitude; the body of the latter is human, the head appertently that of a monkey; heavy bangles cover the wrists and ankles; a narrow strip of cloth is fastened to the loins, otherwise the whole figure is nude; it is 2'3" high, and 1'5" across the shoulders; the base of the pedestal rests in a massive stone socket; the statue is coarsely hewn out of dark sandstone; the fingers and toes are brought out by four incised lines of the same length and running parallel, so that even the thumb is not distinguished by its position and size. The figure is in high-relief.

[At the time of Forchhammer's visit, because of the thick jungle and deplorable conditions at the site, he probably did not notice that the central figure was accompanied by another smaller attendant, both being his personified attributes, Sudarshana (Chakradeva) and Kaunodaki (Gada Devi). Gutman has dated this sculpture to the early part of the 6th century.7 During my visits which were undertaken during the month of November (the cool season) 2002 and again in 2005, many of the sites were still covered in thick jungle and were therefore difficult to investigate. The best time to explore would probably be in the dry
season when there would be less vegetation. But be warned, the heat will be intense."

[2] "To the left is a small stone image, 10" high, in semi-relief; it appears to represent a female figure to judge from the high head-dress, the long pendants in the ears, and the necklace; the left hand holds a long staff with an ornamental conch-like top; the image is too much damaged to distinguish details and is besides not well finished." This sculpture appears to have vanished.

The Wunti spirits

The stone slab which will be described below was found on Wunti Hill and is now on display in the museum. Although the original identity of the three figures depicted may now be lost, the locals have traditionally accepted the trio as the Wunti nat spirits. Gutman felt that in style they resembled icons connected with the Sakti sect which was prevalent during the Middle Ages in Bengal; she also thought that the carving was dateable to the 17th or 18th centuries.

[This sect was presided over by the awesome and terrifying Durga, the shakti of Shiva; she is also another aspect of the frighteningly destructive Kali]

Its remarkably crude workmanship indicates that it was created by a local sculptor. Interestingly, Shwe Zan confirmed that Wunti is the name by which Durga is known to the local Rakhaing. However, he failed to explain the reason for the dissimilarity and the connection between the two names. Nevertheless, he added that in the days of monarchy, a festival officiated by a person of rank, and sometimes the king, was held on the hill at the end of the Buddhist Lent; the timing coincided with the Durgapuja held in the autumn in India.8

Dallapiccola said that before the British Raj abolished human sacrifices in 1835, a boy was butchered in front of Durga's image every Friday at her temple in Kolkata; one can but hope that the child was heavily sedated.9

It would be intriguing to learn just what the Rakhaing of old got up to during their festival to Wunti at Mrauk U, and more importantly, how did they reconcile their bizarre behaviour with being such pious Theravada Buddhists.
Forchhammer's inspection of the Wunti sculpture revealed:

[3] "To the right hand is a stone slab 2'8" high and 2'2" broad; six figures are cut out in semi-relief; the central and highest is the image of a female deity [depicted naked above the waist with tiny rudimentary breasts] standing upright on the back of [what he assumed was] a bull [traces of the animal can still be seen]; because of the presence of this beast, which could either be a bull or a buffalo, the figure might represent an inept representation of Mahishasura-mardini slaying Mahishasura (the buffalo demon); she wears a simple dress round the loins; the hair is bound in a knot on the top of the head; the face is well rounded, the nose prominent, the eyes straight, the cheek bones not protruding; no other characteristics can be distinguished, the surface of the stone being much corroded by exposure.

To the right is a male figure, only a foot high [Gutman though that it represented Shiva]; the left leg is bent, the left hand rests on the knee, the outstretched arm supporting the weight of the body; the right knee is raised; it is nearly a squatting posture, but the knees are turned outward; a strip of cover hangs over the lower part of the abdomen; he squats on the back of what appears to be a horse." [Forchhammer did not mention that it was squatting on what appears to be a large alambana (plinth), held up by what he took to be a "horse"].

"To the left of the central image is a female figure somewhat smaller, but in all other features identical with its neighbour; beneath its feet is a winged creature in flying attitude, with a human body and a monkey's head; the hands are joined over the breast in the attitude of paying homage [although much of this lower portion has been lost, the head, which Forchhammer believed was that of a "monkey", together with either its wing or a tail can still be seen; it probably represents a Garuda].

[4] Next follow two smaller stone images; they are much injured and almost defaced; one appears to represent Buddha sitting cross-legged, with his right hand over the right knee, the left resting in his lap. The other depicts a human figure squatting in adoring attitude [this piece is now missing].

[5] The last group is again a large stone slab, 3' 4" high and 2' 8" broad; it exhibits two female and one male figure, the image of a bull, horse, and a winged monkey-headed being, all in the same relative position as on the other stone slab [no longer in the collection].

[6] Close to the images lies a stone 5' 8" long and 2' 8" high with a badly executed Burmese inscription bearing the date B.E. 833 (A.D. 1521)."

This inscription was set up by the Rakhaing king Minraja or Mong Khaung Raja, (reigned 1521-1531) recording the repair work he undertook on the hill in which he replaced the Hindu temple with a Buddhist stupa. As there is no doubt that the original structure was constructed during the Vaishali period, organised excavations in parts of the precincts which remain untouched should be illuminating.
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As many of the objects on display in the museum are datable to a period prior to the 9th century and were retrieved from the ruins of Brahmanic temples in Mrauk U, indications are that a large Hindu population lived there. Judging by the type of finds, experts such as Duroiselle and San Shwe Bu, felt that the majority of the inhabitants were Vaishnava.

Unfortunately, the original Sanskrit name of this port city is still not known, the Rakhaing word Mrauk U only came in to being in 1430 when a new capital was inaugurated by Narameikhla Mong Saw Mon [also known as Salman Khan] (reigned 1430-1433).

According to Forchhammer, the Sabbathanapakaranam (Sarvasthana-prakarana), a work of uncertain age but claimed by the Rakhaing to date from before the Vaishali period, lists "the 198 ancient and modern cities in Arakan, 99 on each side of the Gacchabha or Kaladan river."11

Assuming that this work is indeed old, how was its author able to foresee and include the modern cities of the future as well?

As Mrauk U is situated to the east of the Kaladan River, surely its original Pali or Sanskrit appellation should have appeared on this so-called 'ancient' list. Instead, the name which only came into being in 1430 is shown.

This leads one to propose that in all probability this work, like so many of the other 'venerable' tomes, only dates to a time after 1430.

We will let Forchhammer, that great Pali scholar, have the last word. In a footnote, he commented:

"Some of the names [of the towns mentioned in the work] are modern and quite fanciful."

As Rustom wisely commented in her article on the coins of Arakan:

"The value of late chronicles as a source of accurate information for ancient times is always doubtful: only excavation can reveal the historical geography of the area."

It is clear that over the centuries the names of new habitation sites had been added to the list in the Sabbathanapakaranam, and the text reworked and updated as is usually the case.
Endnotes

Chapter Twelve

The Mahamuni Shrine and Museum

The extraordinary genesis of the Mahamuni Shrine at Dhanyavati which is fully recorded in the *Sarvasthanaparakarana*, has been translated by Forchhammer and appeared in his *Ancient Arakan*. It is a mine of exotic information and invaluable for the anthropologist and folklorist. As so much has been published regarding this celebrated site, it will be pointless to repeat the Rakhaing version of the story here; interested readers can consult the Internet or my Bibliography which will point to relevant sources.

As to the real origins of the Mahamuni Shrine, Gutman felt that the spot could initially have been a local fertility cult centre 1 [later, perhaps Bhu Devi or Bhumi Devi, the Hindu Earth Goddess, was probably propitiated here].

This 'outrageous' suggestion will certainly not please the present Rakhaing trustees, as it would conflict with their established claims of an untainted Hinayana Buddhist genesis.

Apart from the massive walls of the three terraces which supported the original Mahamuni complex, nothing now remains. As stated elsewhere, Rakhaing history claimed that the site was looted and destroyed by fire several times either by the wild tribes from the nearby mountains or invaders. Obviously, this necessitated rebuilding.

When Forchhammer visited the site in 1884, he observed that the two lower terraces were "covered in jungle." On seeing signs of numerous excavations, he commented that "Treasure hunters are at work, especially on the north side of the second enclosure."2

Fortunately, during one of her visits Gutman recognised an architectural fragment that she presumed was from the original roof of the inner sanctum — vital evidence that it was built of stone.3
THE MAHAMUNI SHRINE AND MUSEUM

Could this have been part of the primary Hindu temple which occupied the site, and which was later destroyed by Buddhists with the intention of installing the Mahamuni bronze? They could then have fabricated the Mahamuni legend [see Chapters One and Twelve].

Although the fragment examined by Gutman is badly damaged, enough survived to reveal the bust of a male looking down from a rounded window with a kudu frame, a motif common throughout India, but more predominately in the south [excellent examples can be observed on the rock-cut temples [566-894 CE] of the port city of Mamallapuram, Tamil Nadu].

Gutman dated this remnant from the original structure to the late Gupta period (circa 300-467). Leading one to wonder whether the cult of the Mahamuni bronze originated at about this time, and not, as it is now vigorously claimed, during the lifetime of Buddha.

I saw this fragment in 2002, but on my second visit in 2005, it had dis-appeared. In other cultures, such a piece would have occupied pride of place, but not here — perhaps it was too Hindu for the taste of the present Buddhist trustees, and its very presence a threat to their beliefs.

Nonetheless, my visit was rewarded.

My vigilant eyes spotted several small stone fragments sculpted with looped tendril-like motifs, lying discarded in a heap near one of the terraces. The guide at the museum informed me that the pieces had been discovered when an extension was being built. Judging from the design, they could not have been from the later Mrauk U period (1400-1785), but belonged to the early phase of the Mahamuni history.

Since my visit, one can but fervently hope that they have not been incarcerated in some dungeon, or worse, used as ballast for the new extension.

Nothing is known of the original Mahamuni shrine, or its replacement buildings, apart from descriptions in fictitious Rakhaing accounts which extol the stunning opulence of the complex, with pavilions roofed with sheets of bronze, and the dazzling treasures it contained, reputedly the generous gifts of monarchs from other Buddhist kingdoms. If true, the treasure was almost certainly the lure for covetous and destructive eyes.

As for the earliest visual record of the shrine, the only example we have is very late. What little remained of the decrepit and vandalized shrine had been renovated between 1866 and 1870 by Maung Shwe Hmon, a Shan pilgrim. This
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is the ugly and badly constructed brick structure Forchhammer photographed in 1884.

Forchhammer described the building as:

"The image-house is a clumsy brick and plaster structure 18' high with a flat roof, and on this are five small pagodas, the largest in the centre and a smaller one on each corner; they are badly gilded and each wears an iron umbrella covered with gold leaf."

Today, the brick structure has been replaced by a cluster of tall spires of wood and corrugated iron. Near the shrine is the recently built Mahamuni Museum where numerous sculptures, some from about the 5th century are on display. The majority of the faces are unquestionably Gupta in style.

The Mahamuni Image

Local histories assert that the Mahamuni Shrine, together with its bronze image, was destroyed on several occasions by invading forces and the hill tribes, but that each time when order was restored a replacement bronze was recast by the reigning monarch.4 A study of the last and present image, which was looted by the Myanmar in 1783-84 and which is now in Mandalay, clearly reveals that its features are reminiscent of the Mrauk U period, and that it was created possibly sometime during the 15th or 16th centuries.

Conversely, Thaw Kaung, quoting Gutman, claimed that this bronze im-age could date from as early as the 4th century CE.5

This is highly unlikely.

The blatantly obvious fact which seems to have escaped everyone is if according to the Rakhaing chronicles the Mahamuni Shrine and its image had been destroyed numerous times, how could this particular bronze possibly be the prototype and date from the 4th century?

Nonetheless, despite strong evidence that this image is not the original, the present Myanmar Trustees of the Mahamuni Shrine in Mandalay are ada-mant that it was cast in the presence of Buddha himself, declaring at the same time that it is the first and only true likeness of Buddha.

The claim that it is the oldest image in the Buddhist world is totally unacceptable.
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One of the earliest representations of Setkyamuni, now in the Musee Guimet, Paris, only dates from the 2nd century BCE and is from Mathura, India.6

It is also on record that early Buddhists, the Aparaseliya and the Mahisasaka sects of Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda, did not worship images as it would have been against the express wishes of Gautama. Even in the Sanchi (1st century CE) and the Amaravati sculptures (2nd century CE) Bud-'dha is depicted in aniconic form by means of symbols, such as a padma (lotus), a pair of pada (feet), a vacant throne or the Bhodi tree.

Regarding the authenticity of the present Mahamuni image, San Shwe Bu and others have riveting stories to tell.

"The excess of patriotic fervour led some people a few years ago [in about 1910] to declare that [in 1784] the real image was lost in the creek close to the site in the course of its removal [by the Myanmar] and that the soldiers fearing the king's wrath took away a substitute." 7

According to the chronicle [circa 1842] by Saya Nga Mair (Master Black) when the bronze was being prepared for transportation on a huge raft, blind-ing rays suddenly erupted from the image and it vanished into thin air. In fear of the Myanmar king's anger, the soldiers seized another bronze 8 and that this replacement, known as the Shin Kyaw phayar 9 was sent to the capital instead.

However, according to Tun Shwe Khine, apparently, the original image has never left the site at all and that "the Mahamuni remains buried in the ruined cave under this tree", presumably hidden by the Rakhaing prior to the Myanmar invasion.10 The tree in question is a huge banyan (Ficus indica) known as Thagya Min Nyaung-pin ("Indra's Banyan") in the northern sector of the shrine. Evidently, Buddha himself stood under its shade to superintend the casting of his bronze portrait.

When I saw this tree in 2002, at a conservative estimate, its age could not have been more than three or four centuries. I also noticed that the entrance to the cave is now completely blocked and hidden by the thick serpentine roots of the banyan.

In about 1930, Aung Tha U allegedly met someone who had ventured into the cave and seen this magical image and had been dazzled by its beauty. He described the chamber as being very spacious.11
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This author was told in 2002 by one of the Trustees that this massive 'living and breathing' bronze sits meditating in this underground chamber - excavation of the site should produce a startling encounter between the ar-chaeologists and the rudely awakened colossus.

Another farcical account is that the Phara Paw image, which is of stone, and had been installed at Mrauk U in 1605, is the original Mahamuni icon. However, the 17th century features of this coarsely sculpted icon will soon dispel this ridiculous assertion [see Chapter Thirteen].

And finally, like all good mysteries, the persistent and touchingly poign-ant belief among the Rakhaing is that the original Mahamuni bronze is still extant, but concealed in thick impenetrable jungle, and that this site is known only to Chin tribesmen who worship it as the Mokaung image. Infuriatingly, it is claimed that they have refused to disclose the location!

One must face the fact that it is extremely doubtful if a scientifically proven and factual history of the Mahamuni bronze will ever materialize.

The guardian deities of the Mahamuni Shrine

Nearby, and placed in the vicinity the main structure and terraces are Lokapala (s) (one of the defenders of the [Buddhist] world), and other minor deities such as naga (s), and rakshasa (s). Many of these sculptures of sandstone have been ruined with whitewash. On some, attempts had also been made to paint in the features and jewellery.

According to Gutman, who has provided an excellent and extensive de-scription of these carvings, the majority have had their Mahayanist characteristics and symbols removed at some point in time by Buddhists of the Theravada persuasion. Several of the figures were even reshaped as Bud-dha icons. Almost certainly, the oh-so-pious Theravadins's devious intentions were to ensure that the images conformed to Hinayana iconography.

While Gutman said that this vandalism was undertaken on orders of Aniruddhadeva (reigned 1044-1077) the Myanmar king of Bagan, Forchhammer quoting from 'ancient' Rakhaing sources, recorded that some-time between 935-951 CE, an [unnamed] king of Bagan,

"sent two ministers called Lasaka and Majalon to the Mahamuni pagoda with the instruction to replace the stone figures of nats [spirits] by images of Buddha; but the King of Vesali opposed this change and only two of the nat figures were allowed to be chiselled into images of Buddha. (These two figures stand on the east side of the second platform; they show traces of the old original nat figures chiselled clumsily into Buddhas.)"
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However, Chan Htwan Oung, who did not indicate his source, said that Aniruddhadeva invaded Arakan and that this king "believed in Black Magic. He defaced the magical figures on the outer part of the shrine [could these have been the present stone sculptures?]. He unearthed the magical figures buried in the shrine and uprooted the magical trees planted in the neighbourhood," He then apparently reburied "the magical figures to prevent the Arakanese invasion of Pugam [Bagan]."17

Except there is no contemporary lithic evidence to substantiate many of these unlikely tales, and like all the others will have to be consigned to the realms of pure fantasy and propaganda by over-zealous local monks.

One has to admire the ingenuity of these virtuous men, who, locked away in their isolated monasteries, wove extraordinarily exotic tales which are now accepted as 'gospel' — and woe betide anyone who dares to refute them.

A full examination of these carvings was first undertaken by Forchhammer in 1884, who at the time counted twenty slabs which were "much damaged and covered with debris and jungle". Eight images were on the first terrace, and twelve on the second platform leading to the shrine. As to their date, he though that "on stylistic grounds, they are not anterior to the late Gupta period, and may also be later."18

When Collis was at the site in 1924, he, too, saw these guardian figures and declared them to be "sculptures of the Hindu pantheon in the Gupta style of the fifth century AD," and assumed that "they must have belonged to a Hindu temple in the vicinity."19

It was not until December 1958, that a small group headed by U Pho Lat, the then Director of the Department of Archaeology [1953-1960], visited the Mahamuni mount and inspected the carvings. Apart from arranging for a few to be dug out of the ground, stabilised, and the undergrowth cleared, no further work was undertaken.

In the 1990s, each sculpture was relocated by the present trustees and installed within its own small brick shrine [said to be often mistaken by foreign tourists for an outdoor toilet]. A few were also moved up to the topmost terrace where they were not originally intended to be. This slapdash and arbitrary act has destroyed the original and magically important sym-bolic configuration of the figures.
The inscription slab

One of these sculptures with a back slab, about five feet in height and two feet wide, is of particular interest as it once contained a lengthy inscription. Regrettably, the entire text had been so defaced that it is now almost impossible to decipher. San Tha Aung who examined it in the late 1970s, noticed that

"on the upper portion of the stone behind the figure are traces of 12 lines of an inscription which contains only a few legible letters", and added that "the line must have continued to the base. Only the two lowest lines are legible now."20

Providentially, the characters which survived indicate a similarity to the Gupta script (4th-5th century CE).

One can only speculate that the text may once have contained a record of the installation of the sculptures, together with the name of the donor and other information relevant to the event.

Could this document have also provided a description of the casting of the bronze Mahamuni image and the construction of its shrine?

To continue with this line of speculation, might this original documentation have been deliberately defaced by the Theravadins as it contained derogatory and 'explosive' data, in other words, damning evidence which would have sabotaged the now established, but imaginary version, of the Mahamuni legend?

In 1958, U Mya, Superintendent of the Department of Archaeology (1931-1935), noticed in the headdress of the figure a barely discernable tiny Buddha image [the Dhyani — Buddha Amitabha]. This led him to correctly identify the carving as Avalokitesvara.21

Conversely, Gutman later read the line of inscription beneath the figure and discovered that it mentioned Rakshasa Senapati Panada, one of the twenty-eight demon generals headed by Kubera or Kuvera [also known as Dhanapati, the god of wealth; in another guise, he is Ashtadikpalas, Protector of the North, and as an ally of Lord Rama is propitiated by Vaishnavas].

And here we have an insurmountable problem.

Demon generals are never ever depicted wearing a headdress which includes a Buddha image.

So, who does this sculpture represent?
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It is possible that the caption "Rakshasa Senapati Panada" was simply part of the lengthy text which once contained a list of deities and other celestial beings guarding the shrine. Was it by pure chance that the name happened to end up just below the figure?

U Mya was an extremely competent and well-trained archaeologist of the old school, who, long after his retirement and until well into his eighties, was employed as a Special Advisory Officer by the Department of Archaeology.

I for one would accept his identification.

It must be remembered that in 1958, the sculptures were still exposed to the elements — Arakan is notorious for its fierce monsoon rains and scorch-ing sun. By the late 1970s, when San Tha Aung saw them, this exposure would no doubt have accelerated the erosion process. Neither San Tha Aung or Gutman may have been aware of the existence of the tiny Buddha image in the headdress.

During my visits, although I searched diligently for this particular sculp-ture I could not find it — I wonder why? In U Mya's article published in 1959, the entire slab could be seen. But according to the illustration in San Tha Aung's book, taken in the late 1970s, the lower half appears to have been buried in the concrete floor. If this portion also contained an inscription, however defaced, it will undoubtedly be destroyed.

By chance, I spotted another figure, and although it depicted either a Lokapala, or a demon general, holding a sword, it, too, had been provided with an elevated back slab. As the other sculptures had not been carved with this distinctive feature, I felt that this space was intended for an inscription. However, as the entire pitted surface had been whitewashed, now covered in mould, it was difficult to see if it contained a dedication; dissolving this obstruction with chemicals may well be the answer.

No doubt, sometime in the future, new and undreamed of technology will become available whereby damaged lithic inscriptions such as these can be deciphered. And then, perhaps, the true story of what really occurred at this site will be revealed?

Among the other exhibits on display at the Mahamuni Shrine, is a strange mutilated figure of Narasinha (Man-Lion), the fourth avatar (incarnation) of Vishnu, but mistakenly identified as Hanuman. The face, with its square gape is remarkably similar to a carving at Eran, Madhya Pradesh, and dates to the early omid 5th century.
CE.22 Gutman, however, identifies it as a Dvarapala (door guardian).

The presence of Hindu deities at this Buddhist shrine which was originally a Brahmanic cult centre, has been explained away blithely by the present Rakhaing trustees who claim that these 'inferior' and subservient gods had congregated in their eagerness to worship Buddha.

These very same country folk would be horrified and outraged to learn that according to Brahmanic teaching, Setkyamuni is none other than the 9th avatar of Vishnu, who materialized at the beginning of the Kaliyuga (the present epoch), which is considered an age of degeneration.23

As late as the thirteenth century, in the Gita-Govinda of Jayadeva, poet at the court of Lakshmanasena (circa 1179-1206) of Radha (western Bengal), Gautama is supplicated as the ninth manifestation of Vishnu.24

**The Mahamuni Museum**

At the Mahamuni Museum, which opened in October 1997, many of the carvings are of the finest quality, with the features and details revealing that the sculptors were possibly not indigenous but itinerant craftsmen from India.

And here it must be brought to the attention of the reader that in Gutman's Burma's Lost Kingdoms, many of the relevant illustrations are described as being of red sandstone, and understandably are depicted with a delightfully pale reddish hue. But this is extremely misleading. Imagine my disappointment when visiting the site to inspect these very sculptures, to find the vast majority a dull insipid grey.

It would appear that at the time the pictures were commissioned, because of a series of power cuts, the photographer had to improvise, using such mundane items as oil lamps, candles and light bulbs — these predictably provided the red glow. His experience is hardly surprising, during my tours in 2002 and 2005, the electricity was switched off at about 9.00 pm in Sittwe and Mrauk U, plunging both towns into darkness — the fortunate few have their own power generators.

At the museum, I also noticed that the surfaces of some of the sculptures had not been washed after excavation and that a fine film of red earth still clung to the grey stone.
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To list but a few examples of sculptures on display at the Mahamuni Museum.

There are images of Buddha which were excavated at the base of Selagiri hill, on the eastern bank of the Kaladan River, facing Kyauk Taw town. According to Duroiselle, the original Selagiri "is a hill to the south-east of Rajgir (Rajagriha) [India]; it is well known in Buddhist writings as the Gijjhakuta or "Vulture Peak".25 Predictably, the Rakhaing have 'borrowed' the ancient name of Selagiri to bring a sense of sanctity to their region. And now, as far as they are concerned, this is the only Selagiri in the entire Buddhist world.

The first sculpture was discovered as far back as 1923 and the remainder as late as 1986. While Duroiselle was of the opinion that they were roughly from about the Gupta period (circa 300-467), Gutman dates them to 600-700.

The carvings depict the foremost incidents in the life of Buddha, such as his enlightenment under the bodhi tree; the preaching of his First Sermon, seated on a splendid throne, with the crowds who attended represented by two figures. There is a sensitively portrayed depiction of his Parinirvana, with distraught attendant mourners.

And then, surprise, surprise, we have sculptures of Lakshmi and Vishnu, Durga and Shiva, also excavated at Selagiri.

What were Hindu deities doing at this sacred spot which is now asserted by the Rakhaing to be an exclusively Hinayana Buddhist site?

Vishnu is portrayed with hands resting on his attributes, Chakradeva and Gada Devi. On his left is Lakshmi with a lotus in each hand.

Its companion piece, by the same sculptor, is considerably eroded, and depicts Shiva, with Nandi seated below the throne. An armed Durga, Shiva's fearsome spouse, is mounted on a rampant lion; much of the details have worn away.

If the two surviving sculptures depict Vishnu and Shiva and their con-sorts, there may originally have been a third specimen which portrayed Brahma and Sarasvati. A set to represent the sacred triad — Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva?

It is difficult not to conclude that these icons originally came from the inner sanctum of a ruined Hindu temple on Selagiri Hill, which was disman-tled and the site appropriated by zealously pious Buddhists. A stupa was then built and the Selagiri legend invented [see Chapters Two and Three].
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In both surviving sculptures, male and female wear their elaborately dressed long hair, secured by diadems, in a large bun on top of their heads. The earlobes are weighted down by heavy cone-shaped earrings, reminiscent of those seen in sculptures from early Cambodia and Indonesia. Jewelled ornaments are worn. The costumes are not complex.

Although the workmanship is unsophisticated, nevertheless the robes, accessories and hair styles are invaluable as they represent the mode of dress at court at the time these images were carved.

Among the other deities on view is an image of either Avalokitesvara or Vishnu, although its four arms are missing, the padma, one of its attributes has survived. Many of these sculptures are not the accumulation of centuries, but are the work of a master and his assistants, and were probably undertaken at about the same time. This is indicated in the details, such as the features, costumes, jewellery and elaborate hairstyles which are all identical.

The portrait of Bhikshatanamurti

One superb piece identified by Gutman as a Bodhisattva, has had several interpretations foisted on it by recent Rakhaing writers. Shwe Zan, in particular, is adamant that it represents the legendary Sanda Thuriya, the alleged builder of the Mahamuni Shrine to house the bronze image of Buddha. This is despite the lack of an original inscription identifying the sculpture as such.

"See what you want to see" appears to be the maxim amongst the inhabitants of Rakhaing Land.

On inspecting this superb carving, a competent scholar will immediately notice the pair of kundala (earrings) which it sports, and which do not match. This identifies it as a representation of Shiva in his aspect as Bhikshatanamurti, the patron deity of ascetics. While one earring symbolises Shiva's linga, the other, round and perforated, represents Parvati's yoni.

Bhikshatanamurti is adorned with a superb hara (necklace), and an equally splendid waist band. A long beaded yajnopavita [a type of sacred thread] hangs down to the knees and is taken up at the back. The diaphanous dhoti is secured at the hips by a belt. A sash is draped across the thighs and knotted stylishly at the right hip, from where it falls in graceful loops — a typical Gupta affectation.
THE MAHAMUNI SHRINE AND MUSEUM

The glory of this sculpture is in its exquisitely tranquil face and elaborate hairstyle. While the rest of the head, which is backed by a large halo, is covered in small curls, framed by an ornamental keshabandha (forehead band), the long hair from the crown has been tightly braided and arranged in three tiers of loops. The style is reminiscent of those in use in the early kingdoms of Cambodia; part of the coiffure of a seventh century head of Hari-hara (an amalgamation of Shiva and Vishnu) from Prasat Phnom Da and now in the Musee Guiment, Paris, sports a similar design.

Regrettably, for people such as Shwe Zan, their self imposed tunnel-vision precludes them from widening their knowledge regarding Hindu iconography or the Brahmanic gods. Anything Indian is usually looked down on by Rakhaing Buddhists who feel immensely superior. This superiority, which the Myanmar are also guilty of, can be compared to the way the Raj sahibs and memsahibs treated their native subjects.

Three mysterious deities at Oak-pon-taung

Less than a mile to the east of the Mahamuni Shrine, is a range of hills, one of which is called Oak-pon-taung ("Hill-of-the-mound-of-bricks"). The descriptive title indicates there were once ruins here, perhaps a monastic complex. Conversely, there may have been kilns where bricks were made. When I visited the spot in 2005, several stone architectural fragments, large decapi-tated images of Buddha, and bricks, were being excavated by the monks of the nearby monastery.

There was also a newly built shrine containing three mystifying figures, which on closer examination of their ornaments, revealed the work to be from the same period as the sculptures at the Mahamuni shrine. Regrettably, and to my intense irritation, the trio had been insensitively renovated, thereby obliterating the original details.

Earlier in 1988, a chapter in Myauk U lan hnun had mentioned "several ancient stone images" which could be observed at the foot of this particular hill. As it described the sculptures as being "seik htu" ("stuck-into-the-earth-and-erected"), the expressive phrase implied that they were to be seen as they had been left for centuries, either standing or lying on the ground.

In 1988, the carvings were obviously untouched and in their original form. The abbot of the present monastery then decided to take matters in hand and have the trio
'brought up to date' so that they now look brand new and covered in cheap gold paint.

When I complained — as I usually do when confronted with such desecration — the young 'guardian' of the shrine looked incredulously at me, and could not understand what all the fuss was about. After all, as far as he was concerned, by performing this 'meritorious' restoration, an otherwise damaged collection of sculptures had been elevated to a pristine condition — this is the present attitude of the Rakhaing and the Myanmar — even among the educated.

As the identity of the trio is no longer known, the monks have expediently provided them with the epithet "Bo Bo Gyi nat yoke myar" (Great Grandfather spirits); this is a popular title by which unidentifiable divine beings thought to be 'ancient' are recognized throughout the country.

Who did these figures originally represent? Could they have been moved from the Mahamuni shrine at some point in time, or was there a separate cult centre at the bottom of this hill?

These are questions which need to be answered.

Apart from the usual nonsense, no one at the site could provide any satisfactory information.

A notice board dated January 1, 2003, warned pilgrims:

"Scented water must not to be sprayed on the images; pebbles are not to be placed in their hands; food offerings are prohibited; candles must not be lit; no graffiti on the walls".

The figures had evidently been remodelled recently and the shrine opened to the public.

It was clear the abbot of the monastery did not want the sculptures to be propitiated by Buddhist pilgrims, as they were once Hindu deities of some sort and not Buddhist spirits. Had the pilgrims done so, God knows how their actions would have effected their spiritual well being - something I should have asked the abbot!

I was at the Mahamuni Shrine in 2002, but had no knowledge of the existence of these statues. Had I visited the present site then, perhaps I may have had the opportunity to photograph the trio in their original form - and now it is too late.
THE MAHAMUNI SHRINE AND MUSEUM

The Rakhaing craftsman who undertook the 'restoration' had covered the rough stone surfaces in plaster. Whether he retained the original mudra of each or had changed them at the direction of the abbot is anyone's guess. At present, the position of the hands of the trio look remarkably neat, as if deliberately rearranged to form an artistic and complementary 'set'. All three have one of their hands cupped, as if it was meant to hold either a bowl or an object. The gestures are quite unlike any of the carvings at the Mahamuni Shrine.

Fortunately, the restorer had preserved some of the identifying features which can also be seen on the corresponding Mahamuni sculptures. These are the distinctive diadems, huge earrings, the strange wing-like appendages behind the shoulders, the ample neckband, armlets and the characteristic belt with its curious buckle-like loop arrangement in the centre. On the other hand, if the images had each been originally sculpted with a rounded back slab, similar to their counterparts/ these appear to have been removed.

At the Mahamuni Shrine and its environs, full scale systematic excavations and research, unhindered by present biased Buddhist beliefs and superstitions, invariably orchestrated by the local monks and trustees, need to be undertaken urgently.

Endnotes

1. Gutman, "Between India and Southeast Asia" etc., p.12.
3. Gutman, Burma's Lost Kingdoms etc., p. 34.
5. Thaw Kaung, The Selected Writings of U Thaw Kaung; The Mahamuni, p. 133. He was quoting Gutman, Burma's Lost Kingdoms etc., pp. 7-10.
12. Ibid, p. 137.
14. Gutman, Burma's Lost Kingdoms etc., p. 35.
15. Ibid p. 35.
16. Forchhammer, A Report on the History of Arakan etc., p. 6. [sections from Forchhammer's account were plagiarized by Tun Shwe Khaing in his Guide to the Mahamuni, 1994.}
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23. Ions, Indian Mythology, pp. 28 and 72.
24. Mitra, Buddhist Monuments, p. 239.
Chapter Thirteen

The Buddhist Council Hill at Vaishali

On arrival at the site of the former capital, one runs immediately into controversy.

A little to the north east of the present village of Vaishali is a seventy foot high hillock known as Thanga-yana-tin-kon ("Hill-where-the-Buddhist-Council-was-held") it was here, according to Rakhaing chronicles that the Fourth Buddhist Maha Sangiti(s) (Great Council) was convened in 638 CE;¹ a claim which is pure religious propaganda from a later age, and a confused one at that.

According to local accounts, the event occurred during the reign of Thiri Dharma Wizaya, a name which possibly equates with Sri Dharma Vijaya (reigned circa 665-701) in the Inscription, in which case the dates do not correspond. According to Mitchiner, this was the famous conqueror who annexed and extended his authority to Samatata in Bengal.

If we are to accept the date 638 as shown in the local chronicles, it should place this event at the time of Dharma Sura (circa 636-649) of the Inscription.

Unfortunately, all the dates in the Rakhaing chronicles cannot be reconciled with those based on evidence accepted by international scholars.

Regarding these Buddhist Councils, the sequence of events is as follows [several versions, together with dates, are known, and this is but one.]

The First Council was held under Mahakasyapa, at Rajagriha, in modern Rajgir, Bihar, in 473 BCE.

The Second Council under the auspices of king Kalasoka, also known as Kakavarnin, at Vaishali, Bihar, in 336 BCE.
The Third Council was organized during the reign of Ashoka, at Pataliputra (Patna) sometime between 274-236 BCE.

The Fourth Council under the patronage of Kanishka (circa 78-101 CE), the Kushan king, in Kashmir.

Historically, the Fourth Council was conducted not in the kingdom of the Chandras, in Arakan, but by the Theravada Buddhists in Sri Lanka. The Mahayana Buddhists, whom the Theravadins considered 'heathens' then organized their own event either at Jalandhar or Kashmir in about 100 CE.

In Arakan, there is here either a deliberate attempt to mislead, or to be more charitable, confusion, on the part of the native chroniclers over the association of the words "Vaishali" and "Buddhist Council", leading them to take for granted that the location was their Waythali. Over the centuries, the vast majority of the Rakhaing historians had probably never heard of the original Vaishali in India, believing that their Waythali was the only one.

It is unclear why the Rakhaing decided to assign 'their' council as the Fourth.

As stated above, what they failed to realize was that the site where the original council was held in 336 BCE was at Vaishali, Bihar, after Buddha's parinirvana at Kusinagara in circa 486 or 483 BCE, and it was designated the Second Council [even at Vaishali, Bihar, it is still not known in which part of the city this event took place].

More importantly, that this so-called momentous occasion was held in Arakan is not recognised in other Buddhist countries.

Although the true facts are known today, such distortions continue to be fostered by unscrupulous monks in an attempt to draw pilgrims and, more importantly, their donations, to the locality.

Here it must be said that San Tha Aung who normally would not have hesitated in bringing such a significant event to the attention of the English speaking world, was obviously aware of this charade, and thought it prudent not to include it in a chapter on the history of the Buddhist Councils. His comment was simply:

"These were the Four Great Councils held in different part[s] of India after the parinirvana of Buddha."

According to U Khaymarthiri, the present abbot at the Thanga-yana-tin hill, the supposed Council at Vaishali in Arakan was attended by 1000 monks from Sir
Lanka and 1000 monks from the city, together with the court and entire city.

As this would have been a crucial occasion in the local Buddhist calendar, why then was it not included in the Inscription for the reign of either Sri Dharma Vijaya or Dharma Sura. As pointed out in Chapter Nine, one must also remember that at the time the Inscription was incised in circa 729, the Mahayana form of Buddhism, together with Brahmanism, was still being practiced at Vaishali.

Whoever composed the text for the Ananda Chandra Inscription was extremely meticulous and listed all the significant incidents from the earliest times. In 729, would he have omitted this great event which had allegedly occurred so recently, sometime between 665-701?

In 638, to organize the transportation of 1000 monks and their followers from Sri Lanka would have needed a large flotilla of sea-going vessels.

U Khaymarthiri has circumnavigated this dilemma by claiming that these pious men from Sri Lanka had been conveyed through the air by their super-natural powers; it is unclear if they brought their attendants with them by such means.

One is left with the distinct impression that this event had been introduced into the local tradition by calculating persons in an attempt to glorify their local history.

Recently, Shwe Zan published a lengthy poem supposedly composed by one Maydapyinna, a high ranking minister allegedly from the Court of Vaishali. In it is described in great detail the holding of the Fourth Buddhist Council within the city. The subtle implications are that as this was a 'contemporary' source, it confirmed that the event actually did take place.

Unluckily for Shwe Zan, the poem is written in the Rakhaing script [borrowed from the Myanmar in about the 12th century CE]. Had this been an original document from the time of Sri Dharma Vijaya (reigned circa 665-701) who apparently organized the Buddhist Council, surely, it would have been composed in Sanskrit and in Nagari characters, after all, at the time, even the Myanmar did not exist as a race at the locality now called Bagan.

It should be noted that the oldest surviving poetical work from Rakhaing only dates from circa 1455 and is known as the Rakhaing min-thami ei-gyin ("Lullaby for a Princess of Rakhaing").
One is not arguing that the poem by Maydapyinna is a fake; it is undoubt-edly
genuine, but was composed at a much, much later date, perhaps sometime between
the 15th or 16th centuries with the scene set during the Vaishali period.

Blatant falsifications such as these make modern Rakhaing scholarship difficult to
take seriously.

Part of the area where the Buddhist Council is claimed to have been held was once
known variously as Thanga-yana-tin-kon ("The Buddhist Council Mount"), Shwe
Taunggyi ("The Great Golden Hill") and curiously Thayetcho Taung ("The-Hill-of-the-
sweet-tasting-Mango-Tree"). It has now been renamed Minthamee Taung ("Hill-of-
the-Princess"); all the names are Rakhaing, its original Sanskrit name from the
Vaishali period is now lost.

Several monks have taken up residence on this hill, headed by the ener-getic and
business-like U Khaymarthiri who has an agenda of his own, namely to procure vast
sums through donations to replicate an immense hall where the fictitious council
ostensibly took place. As head of this establishment, he would then enjoy enormous
influence, power and prestige. In 2005, his plan was to organise a lottery, but it is
doubtful if his ambitious campaign will ever materialize in this almost destitute region.

In an area where the locals dress in rags, malnutrition is rampant, despite being
surrounded by fertile paddy fields. As there are no amenities of any kind, medical or
otherwise, to display such misguided ambitions is breath-taking.

In close proximity to the huts which pass for a monastery, several large sculpted
stone fragments from the Vaishali period are still in situ, a clear indication that this
hilltop once housed a Brahmanic temple of some impor-tance.

A mutilated headless torso of a Hindu deity, possibly all that remains of the central
icon, was claimed by the abbot to be that of Sri Vighneshvara (Ganesha) despite
there being no evidence of an elephant's trunk.

There were also numerous sculpted fragments, pedestals, a linga and yoni. Such
primary evidence of a Brahmanic nature, particularly the last two, now seen as
'repellent' by the celibate and puritanical monks, may soon be spirited away in their
efforts to 'decontaminate' the location to assimilate with the Buddhist Council myth.
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This particular hill top is thickly wooded and isolated, and according to the U Khaymarthiri, visited by a variety of wild animals, such as pythons, tigers and leopards. He revealed that some of these beasts actually came into the shrine area at night to eat the food offerings placed before the altar [this sounds most alarming as I noticed his bed was just a few feet away].

Within the principal shrine, which is also his sleeping area, are recently renovated sculptures of a large clumsy Buddha (its iconography suggests the 17th century) flanked by a bearded raja rishi (royal ascetic) and a princess. As the two figures, claimed to be of the Vaishali period, have been remodelled and revamped with garish colours, it is impossible to either date them or identify who they originally represented.

The so-called royal ascetic

A freshly written caption identifies the rishi as Thiri Detra-daywa [possibly Sri Detra Deva] apho shin (ancient spirit), a name which could be an invention of the present custodian, for how could such an uninscribed, supposedly antique sculpture have retained its identity for well over a millennium?

The title may be a confused rendition of Durvasas [this is the closest to Detra Deva in the list of celebrated ascetics and sages]; it must be remembered once in the hands of the Rakhaing or the Myanmar, the majority of Pali or Sanskrit words become corrupted beyond all recognition. According to Dallapiccola, Durvasas was an extremely cantankerous ascetic who was a miraculous extension of Shiva.6

Although not an ascetic, another possible contender might be Dhrita-Rashtra, son of Vyasa, who took part in the war of the Mahabarata.7 If it is indeed him, how he came to be propitiated in Vaishali, Arakan, is a mystery.

The hairstyle of the ascetic is in jatamakuta, held in place by a keshabandha (band). Sri Detra Deva is armed with a shakti (javelin) [indications are that this could be a recent addition moulded on to the figure]. This projectile is identified by U Khaymarthiri as the legendary Arindama, which was capable of performing miraculous deeds or crushing enemies.8 According to Rakhaing and Myanmar chronicles, this is the celebrated projectile Indra was allegedly in the habit of presenting to Rakhaing and Myanmar kings alike throughout history.9

Sri Detra Deva has also been provided with a bamboo dhanu (bow), which is probably meant to represent Shiva's magical weapon known as Ajagava.
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The sculpture sports earrings which do not match, and signs are that originally it represented Shiva in his aspect as Bhikshatanamurti, the patron deity of ascetics [described "in Chapter Eight]. A rudrakshamala (circlet of beads) adorns his neck and upper arms.

It is also possible that the application of such ornaments may identify the portrait [if genuine] as that of a prominent cult figure of a Saivite sect which was propitiated during the Vaishali period.

Regarding the date of this image, the mode in which the ankle length dhoti is depicted, together with the two ribbon-like draperies around the thighs, identifies it as belonging to the same period as some of the mutilated sculptures in the Let Khat Kon monastery shed described in Chapter Nine. Therefore, the possibility is that beneath the paint is an original carving.

As mentioned previously, an older and superb Bhikshatanamurti can be seen in the Mahamuni Museum. The contrast between the two works is startling, and reveals the type of vandalism being perpetrated by some monks, and which the Department of Archaeology is impotent to prevent because of its exaggerated respect for the clergy.

The sculpture of the princess

Facing the ascetic is a figure said to be the princess Saw Pyi Nyo [a Rakhaing name], daughter of Thiri Sandra [a corruption of Sri Chandra, unknown in the Inscription] a [supposed] ruler of Vaishali; the reason for naming the hill after her is not stated.

According to U Khaymarthiri, the princess was a poetess. This identification was endorsed by Shwe Zan, who said that she wrote the Thein-kan-mein-twin yadu (poem) which obligingly included an impressive genealogy of the Vaishali dynasty [the Rakhaing version].

Like the poem by Maydapyinna, it, too, is composed in Rakhaing and probably dates from sometime after the 15th century.10

Shwe Zan then made the extraordinary claim that she was the daughter of Sri Dharma Vijaya (reigned circa 665-701), he of the Buddhist Council fame and conqueror of Samatata. On reaching puberty, she was married to Sri Dharma Chandra (reigned circa 704-720), and as his Chief Queen was given the title of Suvarna Devi. According to Shwe Zan, Saw Pyi Nyo was in fact none other than the mother of Ananda Chandra.11
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How he came to this conclusion is not clear.

Are we to accept this information from a poem now thought to be written about 700 years after the supposed event? This was at a time when the Ananda Chandra Inscription was very much a closed book to the Rakhaing literati of the day, as they were incapable of reading Devanagari.

The carving of Saw Pyi Nyo probably once depicted a Hindu goddess, but has now been crudely remodelled beyond all recognition in 20th century Rakhaing dress and hairstyle, the face looking for all the world like some simpering Hollywood starlet of the 1930s. It holds a naga dragon in one hand, and a lotus in the other. According to U Khaymarthiri, the lotus, a symbol of Buddhism, overcomes 'heathen' faiths, presumably one of them being Brahmanism.

Such recent and wilful defacement of antique objects provides an excellent example of how works of art are being ruined with impunity by members of the Buddhist clergy or by the pious faithful. Since conservation laws are unknown, this is occurring all over the country.

Then again, as so many 'ancient' sculptures are now being skilfully reproduced in the region to endow religious centres with an aura of antiquity, there is a gnawing suspicion regarding the pair's authenticity.

For the tourist, excellent 'antique' sculptures can be seen within the grounds of the better class hotels, such as the Mrauk U and the Nawarat, together with some of the more celebrated temples and pagodas.

The Phayargri Image

To the north west of the Buddhist Council Hill, is the seventeen foot high Phayargri image, said to have been sculpted out of a massive block of sand-stone. It was purportedly commissioned in 327 by Thupaba Devi, queen of Maha Taing Sandra, when Vaishali was allegedly designated the new capital during that year.12

Conversely, the Inscription implied that the founder of [possibly] Dhanyavati or Vaishali was Dven Chandra (reigned circa 370-425) and does not mention a "Maha Taing Sandra".

[As there is no contemporary epigraphic evidence regarding the installation of the Phayargri image, one has to assume that this fictitious date is based on later oral tradition].

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The legend, however, is a pretty one, with copious variations, depending on the skill and imagination of a particular author. The most common being the version reported by Dhanyawaddy Aung Zayya who appears to dwell in a magical world of his very own creation.13

Apparently, Queen Thupabha Devi had a large stone image from Kapilavastu [birthplace of Siddhartha Gaudama and supposedly her home-land] conveyed to Vaishali, but on the way a storm sank the ship and the statue was lost.

[The assertion that a huge stone image weighing many tons was conveyed from near the foothills of the Himalayas, over three hundred miles, to the mouth of the Ganga, and then a further three hundred miles in a wooden ship to the Chandra kingdom beggars belief. But then, such claims in the 'ancient' chronicles of the country are nothing new.

What is surprising is that in the 1960s, Htin Aung, Rector of the University of Rangoon (1946-1958), writing about the massive one hundred foot high stone sculpture of Buddha at the Pyu city of Sri Kshetra, suggested that it could have originated in Arakan.14

How such a colossus, sculpted in Arakan, was transported over the steep Yoma mountains and then rafted across the mile wide and swiftly flowing Irrawaddy River is inconceivable, but readily believed.

In 1785, the invading Myanmar army experienced immense difficulty in carrying off the Mahamuni bronze image which is only about ten foot high; it had to be cut into three pieces and then reassembled.]

At Vaishali, when Thupabha Devi became inconsolable with grief at the sinking of the Kapilavastu image, the king had a stone replica sculpted — the present Phayargri. But understandably, and judging by the results, his consort was disappointed and prayed to be reborn as a princess at a time in the future when the original image had been salvaged from the ocean. She felt that she would then be able to worship it.

And like all good tales of enchantment, it came to pass. -

Thupabha Devi's wish was miraculously granted, and during the reign of Mong Raza Gri also known as Salim Shah (1593-1612) she was reborn in 1603 as Pan Thanda (Princess "Coral Flower"), the daughter of queen Shin Mi Hnaung. On that very day, although thousands of men tried to retrieve the massive image from the ocean bed, their efforts met with failure. How-ever, when the end of a long silken rope which was attached to a huge net was placed in the infant's
hand, the sculpture became as light as a bubble, floated up to the surface and was
taken to Mrauk U.

The so called Kapilavastu image, now renamed Phara Paw ("Image-which-has-
resurfaced"), rests in a temple of that name.

However, a study of its iconography will shatter this delightful fable, as it in no way
resembles the style representative of sculptures at Kapilavastu of the 4th century
CE.

For a start, like the Pharagri image, the coarse expressionless Rakhaing features are
in the Mrauk U style (1404-1782), and betray the fact that it was probably
commissioned by Mong Raza Gri sometime during the 17th century, and a 'legend'
conveniently concocted.

Most readers will be aware that spin doctors are not a modern phenom-enon, and at
the time the king's simple subjects must have been suitably impressed — it was all
such good publicity.

Back at the replica Phayargri image site at Vaishali, the head of the sculp-
ture has now been renovated by monks who decided to open the closed eyes [it should be
noted that images from the Vaishali period are usually depicted with eyes closed in
meditation]. The brethren sent for flat glass eyes from Mandalay, and had them stuck
on to the lids, with the result that the image now stares vacantly into space. Not
content with damaging the eyes, they have also added an unsuitable thingyt
(ornamental band on the forehead) of glass mosaic.15

It is claimed that the image and the lotus throne on which it sits had been carved out
of an immense block, but since both have been painted over, it is difficult to verify
this statement.

As to the date of the image, like the Phara Paw, the iconography suggests a much
later period, and there is a reason for this statement.

Over the centuries, the Rakhaing chronicles have declared that the region had been
subjected to periods of lawlessness when shrines and images were looted and
vandalized, for the sanctity of a sculpture did not protect it.

To provide an excellent example. As explained in Chapter Twelve, the celebrated
Mahamuni bronze had been reputedly destroyed several times and that a
replacement had to be recast.

To return to the subject of the Phayargri image at Vaishali.

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One suspects that the Phayargri Shrine, too, was desecrated at some point in time, and a substitute image was installed possibly during the 16th century, or later.

It is significant, and this is important.

When San Tha Aung included in his Buddhist Art of Ancient Arakan wrongly attributed images from a much later date and which he claimed were from the Vaishali period, he omitted the all-important Phayargri image, the pre-mier icon allegedly sculpted at the founding of Vaishali itself in 327 CE.

It seems that he, too, was not taken in by the propaganda.

The locals claim that the image was originally placed in a gu (cave, meaning a brick structure with a chamber), but that over time, it had collapsed. When I inspected it in 2002 and 2005, it was enshrined in a modern pavilion with a dilapidated corrugated iron roof. The huge monolith is flanked by two renovated sculptures of Buddha taken from the Shwetaung ("Golden Mountain") ceti and the Ngwetaung ("Silver Mountain") ceti (pagodas) nearby. These two figures are reputedly ancient, but because of the thoughtless re-painting and ornamentation they have undergone, now look brand new — but this is how the modern day Rakhaing like their images — flashy.

Recently installed statues in cement of Maha Taing Sandra and Thupabha Devi in historically incorrect 18th century Rakhaing robes, can be seen within the Phayargri complex. This deliberate inaccuracy stems from the fact that depicting the couple in the appropriate Indian attire of the Vaishali period would be unthinkable to the biased Trustees. Having a visual reminder that Indians once actually ruled at Vaishali would be anathema to the Rakhaing.

Conclusion

When the supremacy of the early Hindu colonists had been established in ancient Arakan, and their ruling elite took control, their religious and secular beliefs soon predominated. For at least a few centuries, the settled areas became an extension of Bharatavarsha.

Surviving sculptures now act as indicators of the fortunes of the realm. When the dynasty and economy prospered, the artistry of murti (carvings) were of the highest quality. With recession, the flow of qualified craftsmen from India ceased and were replaced by less skilled locals who were no longer knowledgeable regarding the iconography of religious imagery. Carvings from this decadent period are of crude and coarse workmanship. Despite the current absurd claims
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of 5000 BCE for some of the surviving sculptures, the antiquity of the earliest can be
dated only to the 5th century CE.

Duroiselle confirmed in his Report on the region:

"From the evidence afforded by the discoveries made on the ancient site of Vesali [sic], it may be safely inferred that so far nothing has yet been found in Arakan to
ascribe any of the antiquities there to an age earlier than the Gupta period [circa 300-
467 CE]. On the other hand, the stamp of Gupta influence has been found indelibly
marked on votive stupas, sculptures and coins, and there can be no doubt that during
that period Buddhism [of the Mahayana School] and Hinduism were flourishing side
by side." 16

As adequate conservation can no longer be provided by the Department of
Archaeology, Vaishali languishes, and many of the Buddhist sites in the region are
being taken over by the clergy. The entire location needs to be excavated by
competent archaeologists. One can but hope that before the remains of artefacts
and sculptures, produced during the period of the dynasties mentioned in the
Ananda Chandra Inscription disappear through religious vandalism, this old
metropolis will receive the attention it justly deserves.

Meanwhile, the valiant and overworked staff at the Mrauk U Museum carry on trying
to conserve and protect as much as possible with the ludi-crously meagre funds
allocated to them.

In December 2005, driving back to Mrauk U at twilight, past the over-grown and
desolate moats and reservoirs, the blue night lotus (Nymphaea cyanea) and water
lilies were beginning to open. Known to the Vaishalians as nilotpala or pushkara,
they are one of the attributes of the moon god, and now perennial reminders of the
Chandra vamsa and other Indianized dynasties which once lorded it in Vaishali.

Endnotes

2. Mitra, Buddhist Monuments, p. 73.
4. Shwe Zan, Yakhaing-thamaing etc., (Rakhaing history and its various periods), pp.
94-96.
5. Anna Allott et al., Burma, South-East Asia: Languages and Literatures: a select
guide, p. 11.
8. "The Arindama spear was a remarkable flying spear possessing supernatural
powers. It was presented by Thagyamin [Indra] to Maha Taing Sandra, the first of the
Sandra Chandra monarchs. The word is the Pali Areindama "foe vanquishing." San
Shwe Bu, "My rambles among the ruins of the Golden City of Myauk-U", p. 102.
9. King Theebaw (reigned 1878-1885) of Mandalay was rumoured to have possessed one, but that it was confiscated by the British when they annexed his kingdom in 1885. The thought of such a miraculous spear languishing in the bowels of some provincial museum in Britain, instead of being put to good use in these troubled time is intriguing.

10. Shwe Zan, Yakhaing-thamaing etc., (Rakhaing history and its various periods), pp. 33-34.


Addendum

Excavations and artefacts discovered

The neglect suffered by Vaishali was somewhat alleviated when the cash strapped Department of Archaeology finally undertook excavations between 1978-1997, then again in 2003-2005; before then, only brief visits which amounted to nothing had been paid by the relevant officials. However, apart from Hudson's account, a full official report on the finds in English will be difficult to come by due to the entrenched policy of secrecy. Small scale digs are known to have been undertaken, and continue, intermittently, but the findings have not been published.

Artefacts discovered are extremely disappointing. These are of stone, brass, bronze and a few [allegedly] in gold and silver, and were of religious icons, models of temples, images, inscribed bells and oil lamps of brass. Many are from a later period when the old site was no longer the capital, but continued as the headquarters of a provincial chief, and as a religious centre. Just because these artefacts were discovered within the old city walls, some authors, such as San Tha Aung, have made the mistake of assuming that they date from the Vaishali period.

Over 588 beads brought to light were identical with those from the Pyu cities of Sri Kshetra, Vishnupura and Hanlin, in Myanmar proper, indicating the existence of extensive trade routes. The majority are of baked earth, with a few in precious and semi precious materials.

Judging by some of the illustrations in Gutman's Burma's Lost Kingdoms: Splendours of Arakan, it would appear all the best examples from the Vaishali period, in particular images of a religious nature, are either in monastic collections or in private hands. How long these artefacts will remain in the country is anyone's guess, for dealers and their agents in the antiques trade have now penetrated into the remotest regions in search of unique items for their foreign clients.
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In her book, Gutman included a splendidly carved intaglio of a recumbent bull from Vaishali, even so, it is unclear whether this is an import as similar pieces have been recorded in Cambodia (Oc Eo), Sri Lankan sites (Jetavan Thupa, Jetavana Vihara, Anuradhapura) and on the subcontinent.

It has been claimed that in the past, the villagers had supposedly found gold-chains, rings, bracelets, earrings and other ornaments, but being items of precious metals these would have been melted down and reused; the normal procedure was to take their finds to the local goldsmith. An ancient artefact's value was not understood, making such surviving examples exceedingly rare.

That brass was extensively used is indicated by the models of shrines, temples, images, and oil lamps now in state and local collections.

Regarding the oil lamps, although San Tha Aung claimed that these were of indigenous workmanship, the design clearly point to an Indian origin. As almost identical examples have appeared in relevant illustrations on the crafts of India, one must conclude that they were imported from somewhere on the subcontinent and later, some were inscribed with the local script.

There was a flourishing ceramic industry as attested by the numerous surface finds, these were mainly of plain red ware in a variety of shapes.

Between 1979-84, five selected mounds were excavated by the Department of Archaeology. The excavations revealed large halls of brick, one of which measured between 85 by 60 feet, and which was used for either religious or secular functions.

The sites of the stone stairs on the Rann creek, palace complex, and religious ruins are still in a state of disarray as there is no one to take care of them. Unlike some of the other later city sites such as Parein and Laung Kyet, where erosion by the river has washed away a good deal of the habitation sites, Vaishali remains undisturbed by the elements, much archaeology still remains below ground crying out to be investigated.

As official reports in English are difficult to come by, extracts from Min Nyunt Han's "Third season of excavations at Vesali", part I and II, in The Working People's Daily, 9-10 September 1982, should be worth quoting. Comments in square brackets are mine.

"Excavations at Vesali were begun in 1979-80 and resumed for the third season in 1981-82 with the aim of unravelling the ancient culture of early Arakan and ascertaining whether Vesali had cultural contact with the other ancient civilizations of Pyu in middle Burma and Man in lower Burma [no mention is made of the invaluable influence from India]."
ADDENDUM

The mound selected for excavation in the third season is mound No VSL (2) which lies about 150 yards to the south-west of Vesali palace site on which stands the present Vesali Village.

In fact this mound is quite large, measuring 165 feet east-west and 150 feet north-south with a height of 17 feet from the paddy field level. Excavations at this mound was started in 1980 and exposed in 1980 some portions of the brick wall of a rectangular building.

The second season of work brought to light the upper portion of the wall of that building. Since the upper portion of the wall has been dug up to about five feet it was necessary to expose the whole structure by digging down to natural soil.

The painstaking eight week’s excavation work brought to light a huge brick religious building, together with its cultural assemblages which in fact are the vestiges of prosperous ancient Vesali.

The walls of the rectangular building measure eight-five feet in length, sixty feet in breadth and fourteen feet in height.

The wall consists of two parts; a massive lower wall and a thin upper wall. The massive lower wall is eight feet high from the floor level with a thickness of 7 feet 9 inches at the base and 5 feet 9 inches at the top forming a trapezoidal shape in cross section.

The thin upper wall has a thickness of one foot and nine inches on all sides of the building while on the western side the thickness is three feet and four inches.

The interior of the hall measures seventy-nine feet in length and fifty-four feet in breadth. In the centre of the hall is located a brick platform three feet square and one feet high. On this platform a stone pedestal of two feet square lies in-situ, it has a square hole six inches wide in the centre.

The entrance into this hall is found in the north-eastern corner of the building. The rectangular building is enclosed by a massive outer wall on the four sides measuring about 160 feet in length, 7 feet in thickness and 8 feet in height.

It is assumed that the building was used for religious purpose. The building lies 150 yards from Vesali palace site and is situated outside the palace moat. The two parallel brick stair-cases extend from the northern side of the enclosing outer wall down to the moat.

10 September 1982.

"Among the excavated cultural objects were earthen-ware such as shallow bowls, cooking vessels, long-bottle necks, spouted jars, oil lamps etc. The pottery of Vesali
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is characterised by the predominant occurrence of undecorated red-plain ware [ex-cavations undertaken in 2003-4 revealed decorated pottery shards].

Among the pottery the long-necked water jug outnumbered other earthen vessels. The characteristic lids are concave incurved lids having a small knob in the centre.

Rusted iron axes, adze and a broken part of a stone sculpture of heavily defaced (probably Dwarapala [sic] [dvarapala] image was uncovered near the stair-case in northern side.

Coins bearing a Srivatsa on one side and a couchant bull on the other have been frequently discovered inside Vesali old city. As the Srivatsa was considered an auspicious symbol used during Pyu period at old Pyu cities such as Beikthano, Hanlin, Srikssetra etc, scholars generally assume that Vesali flourished in the western part of Burma as Pyu kingdoms in middle Burma reached the zenith of power and prosperity.

The lithic inscription of Anandacandra found inside the old city of Vesali adds some more historical facts to our knowledge of early history of Arakan.

[This inscription was not discovered at Veshali, but was removed from it in 1536 and is now at the entrance to the Shitthaung Pagoda at Mrauk U].

According to the Anandacandra inscription it was learnt that three Candra dynasties ruled over Vesali [this is incorrect]. The palaeographical study shows that king Anandacandra recorded the inscription sometime during 8th century AD. That date agrees with the date of lithic Brahmanical icons found at Vesali.

Excavated finds from Vesali indicate that Vesali flourished between 4th -5th century AD to 8th century AD.

Among the finds from mound No VSL (2) were some terracotta beads and semi-precious stone beads which of course are suggestive of contemporaneity [sic] between Vesali and other Pyu cities. As is well known terracotta beads and semi-precious stones beads are the characteristic ornaments used by Pyu people of middle Burma.

Thus the finds of terracotta beads and stone beads from Vesali excavation suggest two probabilities. One is that there was long-distance trading between Vesali and contemporary Pyu cities (probably Srikssetra); the merchants of the latter city would have probably brought these beads from Srikssetra to Vesali in exchange for some goods from Vesali, if it is assumed that these beads were not manufactured in Vesali.
ADDENDUM

Another probability is that the people of Vesali would have acquired the technology of making terracotta and stone beads and would have manufactured these beads locally because of the occurrence of the cultural tradition of wearing terracotta stone beads at Vesali city just like in contemporary Pyu cities.

The absolute date for Vesali is to be confirmed by Radio carbon dating by testing some charcoal samples obtained from occupation layer of the VSL (2) assembly hall.

_The mosaic picture of ancient Vesali culture will eventually be pierced together as more discoveries are made in future excavations._

It must be said that the finds during the 2003-4 season have been very unsatisfactory. One can but hope that future attempts will be more rewarding, and the artefacts scientifically dated and the results published in English.
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The Sorcerer-King and that "Great Abortion" at Mingun (2004)
Plates
The world according to Strabo (circa 63/64 BCE-24 CE). Parts of Africa, Europe, the Middle East and Asia are depicted. Author's collection.
Clockwise: Maps of ancient Arakan based on Ptolemy, published in 1695, and detail below. Another dated 1618. Several versions are known. Author's collection.
The Chandra realm and adjacent kingdoms (c. 370-c. 729 CE) showing mercantile and silver trade routes. Map by the author (not to scale).
(1) The Setkya Muni shrine, Sittwe. (2) The Setkya Muni image. (a) So-called Brahmi inscription on its back. (b) Genuine Brahmi script from pillar erected by Ashoka at Lumbini.
(1) The Ananda Chandra stupa and the paddy plains of Vaishali.

(2) Remains of city wall.

(3) View of Vaishali city site.

(4) The Sirima nadi (Thare [Sri]) leading to the port of Vaishali; looking south.
(1) Stone stupas ranging in height from four to eight feet; it has been suggested these were originally linga(s) remodelled by Buddhists of a later age. Courtesy of Daw Saw Saw Sarpay.

(2) Model of the Mahabodhi temple, Bodh-Gaya, found in Vaishali.
Mutilated sculptures at Vaishali village. (1) Figure of Bhagirathi, the second consort of Shiva. (2) Anonymous image. (3) Carving of possibly Avalokitesvara.
(1) The earliest picture of the Mahamuni Shrine by Forchhammer in 1884. (2) The shrine in 2002. (3) "Indra's Banyan," marks the site of a chamber in which the original 'living' image of Buddha is claimed to sit meditating.
The redecorated interior of the Mahamuni Shrine with its three icons. 2005.
Sculpted fragments, and sections of the terraces built of stone blocks; remains of the original circa 5\textsuperscript{th} century CE Mahamuni shrine.
Sculptures from Selaigiri Hill, probably 6th century CE. (1) Buddha in Bhumisparsa mudra. (2) Buddha in Dhyana or Dhyanamudra, preaching the Mahaparinirvana of Buddha, with weeping figures.
(1) Vishnu (right) hands resting on Chakrdeva and Gada Devi. On his left is Lakshmi. (2) Shiva with Nandi below throne. An armed Durga is mounted on a lion. Found at Selagiri Hill which is now asserted to be a purely Buddhist site.
(1) Avalokiteshvara or Vishnu, its four arms are missing, one of them once held a padma. (2) Detail of shiva as Bhikshatnamurti (deity of ascetics).
Sculptures from the Mahamuni shrine. (1) The first recorded image of one of the carvings by Forchhammer in 1854. (2) A deva (1920s). (3) A Lokepala, detail obscured by application of thick whitewash, 2005.
Architectural fragments and a vandalized Buddha image.
Decorated sections from demolished temples.
Sculptures rescued by the author in 2002 from Vaishali village. (1) Rakshasa with inverted feet. (2) Possibly a portrait of Vishnu; (3) the same figure in 2005 after cleaning.
(1) Prang (lintel), with details, found in the jungle by the author in 2002. The design is similar to those on the pre-Angkorian structures at Sambor Prei Kuk (Ban Chlap) and the capital of Ishnavam (Prasat Kravan, circa 616-636) of Cambodia. (2) Mahara marine monster, vehicle of Ganesa Devi and Varuna, and insignia of Kama Deva.
(1) Sujata offering milk-rice to Buddha. (2) Varnelized carving of Buddha (7) and devotees. (3) Architrave, with detail of Vajrapani, spirit of wisdom.
Pillar of a river goddess. (1) Dvarapala (guardian) with model of the original temple at the top. (2) Composite image showing the architectural details of the temple. (3) A Portrait of possibly Ganga Devi.
Surya the sun god, horses and chariot from Shin-nge-det Hill, Mrauk U.
Inscribed sculptures. (1) & (2) The slab in 1958 and in 1979. Although it bears the title "Rakshasa Senapati Pantada", it may represent Avalokitesvara. (3) Another similar sculpture. No.2 Courtesy of Daw Saw Saw Sarpay.
Deplorable neglect at the Mahamuni. Three images of the same Naga king as seen by (1) Forchhammer in 1884, (2) in the 1920s and (3) in 2005.
Lokapala(s) guarding the central Mahamuni shrine. Crowns and jewellery echo the style of the early period. Possibly 5th century CE.
A mutilated figure of Narasimha (Man-Lion), the fourth avatar of Vishnu, mistakenly labelled as Hanuman. The face, with its square gape, is similar to a 5th century carving at Erain, Mathiya Pradesi.
The Bo Bo Gyi nat(s) (Great Grandfather spirits) at Oak-pon-taung, east of the Mahamuni Shrine - inappropriate renovations by a local monk.
(1) Remodelled sculpture of a raja rishi. (2) Image of Shiva in his aspect as Bhikshatanamurti. (3) The revamped figure of princess Saw Pyi Nyo, alleged mother of Ananda Chandra.
Interior of a hut near the Buddhist Council Hill, Vaishali, showing the extreme poverty prevalent in the region. 2005.
(1) The dubious 'Kapilavastu' Buddha, now renamed Phara Paw, Mrauk U. (2) The Phayagri image, allegedly sculpted in 327 CE at the founding of Vaishali. (3) Portraits of Maha Taing Sandra and Thupaba Devi, revered donors of the Phayagri.
(1) Ancient reservoir in Vaishali. (2) Remains of building covered in jungle. (3) Blue night lotus (Nymphaea cyanea) and water lilies, one of the attributes of Chandra, the moon god, flourish in Vaishali.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Noel F Singer was born in Myanmar in 1937. In 1962, he moved to London and worked as a commercial artist and held exhibitions. Having been trained in the classical dances of his country, he often took part in performances. Enthusiasm for Myanmar archaeology and culture, knowledge of the language and frequent visits to the Motherland has qualified him, since 1988, to produce thirty-one articles and reviews for *Arts of Asia*; he is now one of its Contributing Editors. His unique paintings of the thirty-seven national *nat* (spirits) were specially commissioned for *Nat Pwe: Burma's Supernatural Sub-Culture* (1992).

Published titles include *Burmese Puppets* (1992); *Burma: A Photographic Journey* (1993); *Old Rangoon: City of the Shwedagon* (1995); *Burmese Dance and Theatre* (1995) and *The Sorcerer-King and that "Great Abortion" at Mingun* (2004). He has also written Myanmar language articles in magazines such as *Myawaddy* and *Ngwe Tar Yi*. More articles and books are planned.