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# The Epigraphic Archive of Arakan/Rakhine State (Myanmar): A Survey

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The old inscriptions of Arakan in Myanmar have hitherto attracted little scholarly attention.<sup>1</sup> While many epigraphic documents in the Irrawaddy valley have been collected and edited since the colonial period, relatively few inscriptions from Arakan were copied and made available for study purposes (Luce & Pe Maung Tin 1933–1956; Nyein Maung 1998). One of the best known has been the Anandacandra pillar inscription, a rare Sanskrit source that provides information about a dynasty of Candra kings that ruled in the Kaladan valley in the first millennium CE. The bulk of Arakan inscriptions were written in literary Myanmar tainted with local variants of Arakanese, a dialect of Myanmar.<sup>2</sup> A few of these inscriptions have appeared in local magazines since the 1990s. Virtually none has undergone a thorough investigation or critical edition in a Western language.<sup>3</sup>

The idea to systematically collect copies of the inscriptions in Arakan and create a record of the extant epigraphic material was born in 2004 as our work on historical manuscript sources at the EFEO centre in Yangon progressed. Kyaw Minn Htin's work initially focused on the discordant chronologies of the reigns of the Lemro period (12th–15th c.), while Jacques Leider

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1. Arakan is the most widely spread term in Western languages to refer to the former kingdom as well as the British province of the same name before 1948. The contemporary administrative division in Western Myanmar is officially called Rakhine state, but many authors on the country still prefer the old spelling “Arakan” for the sake of convenience. “Arakan” and “Arakanese” will be used in this survey to refer to the country as a geographical, historical and cultural expression before 1948. The unfortunate spelling “Rakhine” that designates the modern administrative division leads to mispronunciations among both Western and Asian readers. Following standard Burmese pronunciation, Arakan is also often referred to as Yakhine. The alternately used spelling “Rakhaing” comes much closer to the actual pronunciation in the local tongue and is more readable both for English and many non-English language speakers.

2. Arakanese phonetic spelling as practised by various authors is idiosyncratic and inconsistent and slightly differs from Myanmar. For geographical terms, we follow a conventional transcription that reproduces names in the way they are spelled and pronounced by the Arakanese. The name of the ancient capital of the early modern kingdom of Arakan is Mrauk U, founded in 1430, not Mrohaung (or Myohaung according to the Myanmar pronunciation), which means “Old city” and was a name introduced after the British annexation of Arakan. “Mrohaung” was widely used until 1979 when the name was officially changed to Mrauk U. Inscriptions have often been named with reference to the places where they were found or are currently located. To keep the names of inscriptions reader-friendly, we have kept conventional transcriptions, notably for the titles of kings. For references and citations from the inscriptions, we have broadly followed the principles of Indological transcription as adjusted to the needs of Myanmar by H. Braun and H. Bechert (see the introduction in Bechert & Tin Tin Myint 1985). A transcription must ensure that a text can be retranscribed back to its original without any fault but also without any problem. It is for that reason that we use “:” rather than “h” as a tonal marker and “è” instead of “ai”.

3. An excellent introduction to early Arakan is provided in Gutman 2001. For a detailed account of the Mrauk U kingdom up to the late seventeenth century, see Leider 2004; for a summary overview, see Leider 2002: 53–87.

kept on working on the generally better known Mrauk U period (1430–1785) and its archive of historiographic material. As the dates of most reigns or foundations of pagodas could not be fixed with reference to verifiable hard evidence, we wanted to determine whether the inscriptions could be of some help in critically reviewing the data found in local chronicles.

This essay on Arakan epigraphy is not an extensive analysis, but offers an overview and a summary introduction to the topic. It includes critical observations derived from recent research done by Arlo Griffiths on the Sanskrit inscriptions (Griffiths 2015). The task of collecting inscriptions and obtaining rubbings has been fraught with challenges of a practical and bureaucratic nature. Thanks to the help of local researchers and colleagues, our efforts have led to the compilation of an increasing list of inscriptions extending from one-line commemorative formulas copied from the pedestals of bronze statues to extensive stone inscriptions.<sup>4</sup> A general list of “A.” inscriptions covers at present 245 items and will be published in a forthcoming volume of the *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient*. Most of these (87%) are inscriptions on sandstone slabs. The two oldest inscriptions in the local language and script are a couple of extensive rock inscriptions. The remaining 13% consist of inscriptions on statues or pedestals as well as on various other support materials, a bowl, a terracotta plate, a votive tablet, a silver and a copper plate, a bronze lamp, a cannon, bells, and a medallion. The list also includes so-called magical squares which are checkerboards carved on stones of various size with generally 9 by 9 or 12 by 12 boxes of various dimensions, each box bearing a numerical figure. For those who made them, they were protective devices; for modern scholars, they are cultural artefacts to be mined for the information they can contribute to our investigations on Arakan's cultural practices.

## Languages and scripts

Two thirds (172) of the inscriptions are written in Arakanese, 54 are in Sanskrit and the rest include texts written in Pyu, Mon, Pāli, Persian and Arabic languages.

The Sanskrit inscriptions, all dating to the first millennium or at the latest the eleventh century, are written first in so-called Late Northern Brahmi script, subsequently in script types known to Indologists as Siddhamātrkā or Gauḍī, showing progressively greater resemblance to what would eventually become Bengali script. It is important to note that this very choice of script already forms an important distinction from the Mon-Myanmar (including later Arakan) writing traditions, which use forms or scripts that descend from Southern rather than Northern Brahmi. A recent survey (Griffiths 2015) has emphasized that this corpus of first-millennium Sanskrit inscriptions is really more properly viewed as part of the contemporary South Asian epigraphic tradition, than as an ancestor of subsequent Arakanese epigraphy; it has also emphasized the deplorable lack of absolute dates, and the dangers inherent in taking the genealogy of Candra kings in the aforementioned pillar of Anandacandra (A. 71) as a guide to early Arakan chronology.<sup>5</sup>

4. The authors would like to thank Ashin Pinyasara, U Maung Ba Thein and U Nyein Lwin for their tremendous help and support of the project. Thanks as well to Arlo Griffiths who kindly provided a paragraph on the Sanskrit inscriptions of Arakan sharing his new insights. Jacques Leider expresses his particular gratitude to Thibaut d'Hubert and Muzzaffar Alam who, in late 2012, agreed to spend time on the Persian inscription (A. 39) during his stay in Chicago, leading up to Thibaut's later edition of the text (d'Hubert 2015). He would also like to thank Claudine Haenni, an unfailing friend, whose hospitality in Yangon made quiet periods of revision of the original manuscript possible. Our shared thanks finally go to Daniel Perret and the reviewers of the present volume for their patience and guidance.

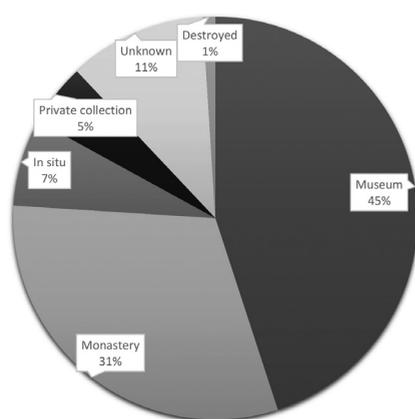
5. For earlier scholarship on Arakan's first millennium, see Gutman 1976 and, trailing her pioneering research, San Tha Aung 1974, 1975, 1979; Saw Htwee Shin 1995; Maung Pru 2006.

The Arakanese inscriptions are written in the script of Myanmar and call for stylistic comparisons with contemporary Myanmar epigraphy. Such a work has not been undertaken yet. Inscriptions dating from the first part of the fifteenth century show the transition from the earlier, squarish type of Myanmar letters to the rounder forms that are so typical of the modern Myanmar script. Early modern Arakan stone inscriptions have a rough appearance that characterizes both the stones and the script. Strikingly there are no extant Arakanese inscriptions for the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when Myanmar epigraphy flourished in Pagan. Aesthetically appealing inscriptions written on polished stones in a well-drawn script do not appear before the early eighteenth century in Arakan. These are best illustrated by the craftsmanship of the so-called Tejarāma inscriptions (A. 35, A. 36, A. 37, A. 181, and possibly A. 240) recording donations by King Candavijayarājā (1710–1731) (fig. 4).<sup>6</sup>

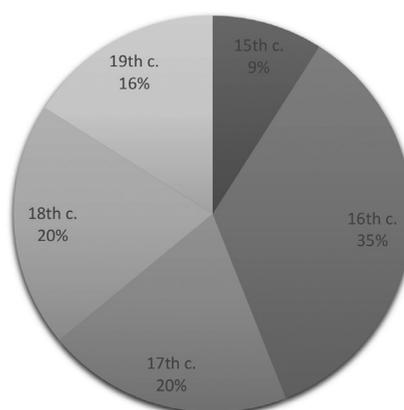
### Location of inscriptions

The general lack of contextual information on the finding, the location or the moving of inscriptions is a major impediment to the investigation of Arakan's epigraphic remains. Less than half of the Arakan inscriptions that can be listed at present are kept in museums, such as the Mrauk U Archaeology museum, the Mahamuni museum near Kyauktaw, the Rakhine state Cultural Museum in Sittway, or form part of smaller local collections, such as the Uritaung pagoda site museum. Together these may be the most easily accessible and the historically most significant inscriptions, yet no museum has kept a full register of its inscriptions. It is generally assumed that the inscriptions that are currently in museum collections were found in the surrounding areas (such as the old Mrauk U palace site and its environs, or the Mahamuni or Vesali excavation sites). Oral information about earlier locations is sketchy at best.

A third of the Arakan inscriptions are kept in village monasteries or in the vicinity of monasteries or on temple grounds. This is the case of most inscriptions traced on Ramree Island (fig. 3), in Sandoway (now Thandwe) or in the Minbya area (see for example Ni Min Shin & Rammawadi Pinyasara 2008). Few inscriptions are reportedly still *in situ*. A dozen items are in private collections. For 27 of the total 245 inscriptions listed up to 2016, the current location is not known and three are referred to as destroyed. Yet, as in the case of inscriptions noted by Forchhammer that can no longer be traced or are in a deteriorated condition, photos and transcriptions may exist in print form (Forchhammer 1891).



Arakanese inscriptions: locations



Early modern Arakanese inscriptions (147)

6. On the reign of these kings, see Candamālānkāra, 1931, II: 243–253.

## Chronological distribution

The gap between the occurrence of the Sanskrit-Pāli inscriptions (6th–11th c.) and the early modern Arakanese inscriptions (14th–19th c.) underscores the historical obscurity of the intermediate centuries, the as yet poorly known Lemro period (12th–14th c.) whose urban sites have never been systematically explored. The first properly Arakanese inscriptions are two huge rock inscriptions, the Launggrak Taung Maw inscription and the Mahathi Crocodile Rock inscription dated to the fourteenth century. The epigraphic record of the Arakanese inscriptions itself shows an uneven distribution from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries.

One third of the 147 inscriptions that can be attributed to the early modern period (15th–19th c.), dates from the sixteenth century (35%), the period during which the kingdom of Mrauk U evolved into a regional power. The seventeenth century, which is considered as the most brilliant epoch of the court of Arakan, shares the same proportion as the eighteenth century, reputedly a period of political decline (20%). Inscriptions bearing precise dates expressed in the common Myanmar *sakkarāj* era spread from 1422 to 1898. They number 50 items, half of which date from between 1504 and 1620. Approximately 40 epigraphic items cannot be attributed a precise date in the inventory, but relate to the early modern period. Most of these are either very short or in a severely damaged condition, or, like the magical squares, are not properly speaking inscriptions.

## Formation of an inventory

The inventory of the inscriptions described in this essay started with the compilation of handwritten lists, transcriptions and a limited number of photos of rubbings of Arakanese inscriptions made independently by three local collectors during the second half of the twentieth century (Oo Tha Tun n.d.; Oung Hla Thein 1976–1977, Oung Hla Thein n.d.; Rammawadi Pinyasara n.d.) as well as Forchhammer’s inscriptions (Forchhammer 1891). Oo Tha Tun’s list and transcriptions contain 67 inscriptions from Mrauk U and northern Rakhine state; Oung Hla Thein’s two compilations contain both transcriptions and photographic reproductions of rubbings that total 55 inscriptions of Mrauk U, Sittway and the Kaladan Valley, while Rammawadi Pinyasara’s collection comprises 58 items that includes a numbered list of 27 inscriptions originating from Sittway, Ramree and southern Rakhine state. The three manuscript lists have just 18 numbers in common. Rubbings of the inscriptions at the Archaeological Museum and other places allowed the present authors to start the critical examination of the earlier transcriptions and the interpretation of frequently barely readable dates.

In many cases, it was not possible to trace the present location of inscriptions that had been mentioned in the lists or in older publications. Annotated photos of rubbings rather than the untraceable original rubbings themselves have also sometimes remained the only evidence of inscriptions that the authors were not in a position to check or even locate. Even recent discoveries with photos posted on social media could not be verified with the necessary precision as for the present location of the inscriptions. The problem of untraceability also relates to the earliest inscriptions that were mentioned and transcribed during the early British colonial period.

The first mention of an inscription in Arakanese (“*Maga* language”), on a silver plate found in Chittagong, dates from the late eighteenth century (Shore 1790). The first transcriptions of inscriptions in Arakan were made by local British administrators following the annexation of Arakan after the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824–1826).<sup>7</sup> These early attempts were not followed

7. An inscription from Cheduba was copied by William Smith Barnard, an assistant commissioner, in the early 1830s (Indochinois 4, n.d., f°63–65), Wroughton transcribed a bell inscription (Wroughton & Ratna 1838) and

by a more systematic effort to record inscriptions before Emil Forchhammer's mission a few decades later. He was employed as a Pāli scholar by the British authorities and published and partly translated 24 inscriptions that he had photographed and transcribed during a trip to Arakan (Forchhammer 1891).

Johnston's translation of the Anandacandra inscription pioneered the study of Arakan's Sanskrit inscriptions (Johnston 1944). They became a key source of information for Pamela Gutman who investigated the early urban sites in the Kaladan valley (Gutman 1973, 1976).<sup>8</sup> In the middle of the 1950s, the Department of Archaeology nurtured the project of publishing a volume with Arakan inscriptions. Though such a monograph did not see the light of the day, various inscriptions appeared in the "Reports of the Director of the Archaeological Survey of Burma" covering the years between 1955 and 1965.<sup>9</sup> Nine Arakan inscriptions were reproduced in the fifth volume of the Archaeological Service's edition of ancient Burmese inscriptions (Archaeological Survey of Burma 1972–1987). From the 1960s onwards, local Rakhine authors contributed to a wider awareness of Arakan's inscriptions in magazines and publications addressing cultural topics.<sup>10</sup> Bibliographic references point to a particular fascination with the first millennium CE urban site of Vesali and early Buddhist remains such as the miniature pagodas.<sup>11</sup> Several papers have dealt with the formulaic *yedhamma* inscriptions.<sup>12</sup> State publications of the 1980s also acknowledged the historical relevance of the inscriptions in publications on Arakan state's Buddhist culture.<sup>13</sup> The study and the use of Arakanese language inscriptions in academic papers and for historical research purposes emerged only in the 1990s.<sup>14</sup>

### Inscriptions as historical sources

Inscriptions are often hailed as a primary source of unspoiled quality to reconstruct the past. Therefore, history based on inscriptions seems to bear a mark of irrefutable evidence. Yet the very existence, the absence or the relative rarity of inscriptions themselves, is rarely discussed. Most Arakanese stone inscriptions commemorate donations and reflect a motivation to perpetuate an act of making religious merit. They offer valuable, but nonetheless quite patchy evidence for the reconstruction of history as such. They are an ancillary source and supplement rather than form a foundation for historical reconstruction. As a potential source for the political history of the kingdom, they allow us to correct some errors in the chronicles. Interestingly, they provide information on titles, appellations and administrative functions that add to the knowledge gathered in other written local and translocal sources on the court establishment.

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a Ramree inscription is found in Walters 1834 (integrated in the list as A. 227). See also Fryer 1879.

8. For earlier work, see Sircar 1962, 1967. In later years, Gutman extended her work in Arakan to other fields of research. See Gutman 1999, 2001, and Gutman *et al.* 2007.

9. Archaeological Survey of Burma 1958, 1961, 1961a, 1965, 1966, 1967, 1971, n.d., n.d.(a).

10. Okkar Min Nyo 1961; Oo Tha Tun 1994c; Aung Tha Oo 1966; Cakkinda 2003; Kosalla 1997, 1997a, 1998; Maung Ba Thein 1987, 1994; Maung Dewa 2004; Maung Hman Aung 2002; Saw Tun Aung 1995, 1998; Panthu Okkar 1996; Shwe Tha Khaing 2000; Tak Twan Ni 1984–1985, 1995. [Ordre ???](#)

11. Oo Tha Tun 1994, 1994a, 1994b; Rakhine Thahaya Athin 2006; Pyan Hlwa 2005; Min Thein Zan 1997, 2003; Saw Tun Aung 1995, 1998. [Ordre ???](#)

12. Kyaw Minn Htin 1999, 2000, 2011; Ni Min Shin 2003.

13. Rakhine State People's Council 1984, 1988.

14. Leider 1991; Naing Win Zaw 1996; Candamuni 2004; Okkantha 1990; Kyaw Win Oo 1996, 2004, 2006; Aye Chan 1980.

They are largely unhelpful in reconstructing the chronology of temple building in Mrauk U. Dates that have been posted near Mrauk U temples to inform tourists are not based on any inscriptional evidence at all and are often guesswork. We may assume, based on the evidence of the chronicles, that the kings and members of the court made many more religious donations than those that were recorded on stone, even when we discount the fact that many inscriptions were lost or entirely worn off over time. We may also consider that while the majority of Arakan inscriptions commemorate several types of donations, not a single inscription can be related to one of the major temples or pagodas of Mrauk U. Within the current epigraphic archive, there is also no pattern recognizable in the distribution of inscriptions during the early modern period in terms of the elite authorship.

The value of the inscriptions for the study of Arakan's history and culture hinges on a careful assessment of each item, a task that is made difficult by the fact that we often lack the historical context and the linguistic reference tools to appreciate the contents of the inscriptions. The following presentation is focused on the relevance of several of the inscriptions though their exploration remains a challenge for contemporary and future scholars.

Donative inscriptions were generally issued by members of the elite who donated agricultural lands and people to work the fields (generally prisoners of war or people forcefully deported from Bengal). These people are described as *sankhyī*, a peculiar Arakanese term for bonded labour and social outcasts. Until the middle of the seventeenth century, a large part of the text of the inscriptions comprised curses consigning people to suffer in the hells if they opposed the will of the meritorious donors. While these donative inscriptions provide details on places that we would have problems to locate today, they also contain indications on the identity of the elite donors, information that historians of Arakan cannot trace in any other primary source.

The Maha-hti (Mahāthī:) Crocodile Rock inscription (A. 156), found south of the Mahāthī: pagoda in Mrauk U township is dated to 1356 and records donations made by “Kolita *charā*”. He was a monk likely acting as a royal teacher or chaplain as his donations were dedicated to the karmic well-being of an unnamed king. The inscription was recorded for the first time in the late nineteenth century by Forchhammer (Forchhammer 1891: 64, plate XXXII). This is also an interesting inscription because it contains the first written mention of the kings of Arakan (*rakhuin ta man[:]*) and the realm they ruled (*rakhuin ta nuiñnam*).<sup>15</sup>

Given the dearth of reliable manuscript sources and the absence of art historical and architectural research on the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, inscriptions from this early period of the Mrauk U kingdom call for attention.

The Kyauktaw Phaya inscriptions 1, 2 and 3 (A. 82, A. 83 and A. 84; Tak Twan Ni 2009) cover three faces of a square sand stone pillar from Kyauktaw (Upper Kaladan valley) measuring 39 × 39 cm with a height of 110 cm. They date respectively to 1422, 1504 and 1526 CE and record donations which were apparently made to the Mahamuni shrine, the most important sanctuary of the Mrauk U kingdom. For Arakan, the years between 1400 and 1430 were a troublesome period when the region was dominated by an ongoing rivalry between the rulers of Ava and Pegu to exert control over Arakan. In this competition, the rulers of Pegu seem to have had the upper hand over many years. Details of events and political conditions are poorly known and the

15. In pre-colonial times, the geographical term *Rakhuin* referred to the Kaladan and Lemro River valleys. Since the Burmese conquest of 1784, it was applied to the area covering the four provinces of Dhanyawadi (Kaladan and Lemro), Rammawadi (Ramree Island or Yanbye), Dwarawadi (Thandwe or Sandoway) and Meghawadi (Cheduba Island or Man Aung).

role of the Mon kingdom of Pegu along the eastern Bay of Bengal has barely entered Arakan's historical record.<sup>16</sup> After 1430, an independent Arakan rulership was established with its centre in Mrauk U, a city that, as chronicles agree, was founded by Mañ: Co Mwan (1430–1433). A. 82 does not reveal the identity of its donor, but his wish “*jambudipā klwyan thak mettamey araṇ tryā mañ phlac lat so le*” (l. 19–21; “Let me become a king of righteousness in the presence of [Ari] metteya on the island of Jambudīpa”) suggests that he was already a ruler himself. To identify the author of A. 82 with Mañ: Co Mwan is a matter of pure speculation, but the inscription adds to the complexity of the political situation in the region.

A. 4 (Parein Ahson Taung inscription, fig. 1) commemorates an acknowledgment of loyalty of the lord of Arakan (*rakhuin trā mañ gri*) to Rājadhiraḥ. Rājadhiraḥ is undoubtedly the famous Mon king who ruled at Pegu from 1385 to 1423. With a partly broken stone and the date being lost, we could only guess the identity of the lord of Arakan.<sup>17</sup> As the lord of Arakan refers to Rājadhiraḥ as *ac kuiw* [read: *a kui*], “elder brother”, there is an explicit recognition of the Pegu king's superior status. In our eyes, there is no other historical source that would more clearly establish the fact of a Mon hegemony over Arakan during the early fifteenth century. As this inscription also helps to expose, if only partly, the legend surrounding the rise of King Mañ: Co Mwan, its historical relevance as a primordial source is obvious (see the transcription and translation of A. 4 in the annex of the essay). The origins of the legend that the founder of Mrauk U in 1430 regained power in Arakan thanks to Muslim mercenaries recruited from Bengal to chase away governors appointed by the Myanmar king cannot be exactly dated. Yet the Parein Ahson Taung inscription subverts the general assumption of both an ongoing Myanmar hegemony during those troubled years and the absence of a local ruler.

In the context of the controversial discussion about the earliest Muslim presence in Mrauk U, the singular Persian inscription of 1495 CE (A. 39 Warittaung Phara inscription) sheds a bit of light on the presence of foreign traders during the late fifteenth century (admittedly another politically obscure period). The Arakan kingdom was likely not a vassal state of Bengal, as later historiographers and historians have implied; it thrived rather independently in the shadow of the powerful sultanate whose cultural influence on the court can be seen in the coinage and the adoption of Muslim titles. Thibaut d'Hubert's edition of the Persian text and its comprehensive contextualization illustrate both the profile of the fledgling Arakanese Buddhist monarchy and the impact of its powerful Muslim neighbour (d'Hubert 2015; for earlier research, Habibullah 1966).

Details contained in three sixteenth-century inscriptions (A. 17, A. 85, A. 143) provide reliable and overlapping information to attribute new dates to the reign of King Mañ: Co (Man Saw). In the chronicles, his dates have generally been given as matching with CE 1556–1564 (Candamālālaṅkāra, 1931, I: 78–79). But A. 85 (Taungphru Taung inscription of 11 December 1551) that records a royal donation to five Brahmins proves that he was already ruling in 1551.

16. It is not the Mon hegemony, but the legend of the exile of the founder of Mrauk U in Bengal that has become the most prominent feature of this epoch in popular historical writing on Rakhine state (Leider & Kyaw Minn Htin 2015). Arakanese sources are divided on the name of a king (some chronicles use the title Nara mit lha [Narameikhla] when referring to his early reign) who commenced to rule in 1406, was evicted from his throne in 1408 and took back power in Loṅ krak (Launggrak) around 1428 under the name of Mañ: Co Mwan, before allegedly founding Mrauk U in 1430.

17. The mainstream version of Arakanese history (derived from Nga Mi's chronicle that was expressly written in the early 1840s for the British commissioner of Arakan, Arthur P. Phayre) does not acknowledge an “official” king during the extended period (approximately 1406–1428) ascribed to Nara Mit Hla *aka* Mañ: Co Mwan's exile in the “West” (traditionally and somewhat generously interpreted as the sultan's court in Bengal).

A. 17 (Dukkan Kyaung inscription of 12 August 1553, fig. 2) confirms his rule in 1553 as it calls him “Mañ Jo who has the royal title of Sirisūriyadhammarāja”. This means that the dates of the short reign of his father and predecessor Mañ: Tikkhā (traditionally given as 1553–1556) must be pushed back by at least two years. This amendment of the dynastic chronology is relevant for the architectural history of Mrauk U as Mañ: Tikkhā is considered the founder of the impressive Kothaung temple complex, liberated from the jungle only in the 1990s. Inevitably the long rule of Tikkhā’s famous father, King Mañ: Pā or Mañ: Pañ, Arakan’s first warrior king (r. 1531–?), must have been slightly shorter and would have ended a few years before 1550, the “traditional” date of his demise.

Inscription A. 18 records a donation made in 1585 by Mañ: krī: Rhve ñui, the middle son of Mañ: Tikkhā. It states that eleven kings had ruled in Mrauk U from Mañ: Co Mwan down to Mañ: Pā and notes the conquest of the countries of the *Sak* and the *Mrum* by the unnamed middle son of Mañ: Pā. This refers to the wars of the Arakanese in the second half of the sixteenth century against the ethnic Chakma (*Sak*) in the hinterland of Chittagong and against Tripura (*Mrum*), northeast of Chittagong. The statement that there were eleven reigns between 1430 and approximately 1531 is important as Ven. Candamālālaṅkāra’s *Rakhuin: rājāvañ sac*, the standard compilation of Arakanese chronicle traditions, postulates the reign of a king called Mañ: Khoñ Rājā between 1521 and 1531 (Candamālālaṅkāra 1931, II: 42). This is clearly a myth, yet the exact dates of Arakanese reigns during the early sixteenth century as found in the chronicles continue to raise problems. Inscription A. 143 (Utu Khin Saing of 1524 CE recording a donation by King Gajāpati) is a useful reference as it gives a clear date for this king who is otherwise poorly known (“traditional” dates to be revised: 1513–1515 CE).

Queen Rhañ Thwī:’s Alayzedi phara inscription (A. 28) is another richly informative inscription and a representative seventeenth-century item from a palaeographic point of view. With 48 lines on a stone measuring 146 × 81 cm, it is one of the longest Arakanese sandstone inscriptions. Dated the 13th day of the waxing moon of *tabodwe* 1002 (23 January 1641 CE), it commemorates the construction of the Alayzedi pagoda and the donation of agricultural lands and gardens in various places together with *sañkhyī* labourers to the Buddhaghosa monastery located in the vicinity of the new pagoda. The high-ranking status of the queen is emphasized by the enumeration of her close connections to no less than four kings of Arakan. Queen Rhañ Thwī: (Shan Htwee) lived at the time when Arakan’s military power had reached its zenith in the northern Bay of Bengal. She introduces herself as “queen of Mrauk U”, “consort of Varadhammarājā, lord of the white and red elephants, mother of Mahāsīrisudhammarājā, lord of the white and red elephants, sister of Mañ krī: cwā, lord of the white and red elephants and mother-in-law of Narapati krī:”. Varadhammarājā is the title of King Mañ: Khamoñ: who ruled from 1612 to 1622 while his son Sīrisudhammarājā reigned from 1622 to 1638. Mañ krī: cvā is most likely an appellation of King Mañ: Rājā krī: (1593–1612). Narapati is the title adopted by the king who usurped the power in 1638 and ruled until 1645. Earlier he had been a royal courtier named Ña Kusala and a governor of Laung Krak in the reign of Sīrisudhammarājā. According to Dutch sources, Sīrisudhammarājā died on the 31st of May 1638 and his son Mañ: Cane ascended the throne on the 16th of June. Ten days later, he was dead, allegedly killed by some kind of black magic. The Arakanese chronicle tradition attributes the responsibility for this chain of events and the regicide to Ña Kusala who had masterminded a coup with the help of Sīrisudhammarājā’s queen, Nat Rhañ Mè, with whom he allegedly had an intimate relationship (Leider 2004: 265–277). In the equally bloody coup, Narapati eliminated the faction at the court that had opposed his rise. Interesting information can be gathered from the family network of the

queen. While the queen was Mañ: Khamoñ:’s consort, she was apparently also his aunt, being the sister of her husband’s father, a fact that directs our attention to the intricately narrow dynastic family relations. It seems as if the queen was also the mother of Nat Rhañ Mè, as, following the chronicles, Narapati married Sīrisudhammarājā’s widow on the 3rd of July 1638. This means that Nat Rhañ Mè would have been Sīrisudhammarājā’s sister or half-sister, which is not unlikely as the Arakanese kings could marry their sisters. The untimely death of Mañ: Cane is attributed by the Dutch sources to a spell of his father, but by the Arakanese chroniclers to his mother herself, accused of having given her son a poison to increase his fever. If we may believe the chronicle’s account, Nat Rhañ Mè was banished to a palace north of the capital after Narapati became king (Leider 2004: 278). The dynastic break of 1638 shook the foundations of the monarchy to the ground, but the captivating person of Queen Rhañ Thwī: appears as a singular bond between Mañ: Pā’s dynasty, which had built Arakan into a regional power house, and coup-maker Narapati’s descendants who briefly enjoyed the fruits of the conquest before they saw a rapid decline after 1666. Typically for this period, two thirds of the Alayzedi phara inscription consist of curses against miscreants who would not respect the donations made by the queen.

The Mrak Rit Kywan: Phara inscription of 1619 (A. 26) is one of several inscriptions that contain titles or names of high-ranking members of the ruling elite. It lists donors such as the *amat tō ku-lā atwañ cac-khyī* [the royal minister in charge of military affairs in the Chittagong (?) area], *amat tō rhwe cun-tat krī* Mujundā [the royal minister Mujundā, the great golden chief of the navy] (Leider 2004: 381), *Adoñ myā, le tat mū* [the chief of the archers], *kā tuīw*,<sup>18</sup> *Ma cin thoñ cā* [the governor of Ma-cin-thoñ], *mo lit* Chinghati [the eunuch Chinghati] appointed by “the lord of the golden palace, master of the white elephants, master of the red elephants, lord of life Varadhammarājā”, i.e. King Mañ Khamoñ: (1612–122). Unfortunately, no details are available on the nature of the donation itself due to the fragmentary condition of the stone.

The most powerful of Arakan’s warrior kings was King Mañ: Rājā krī: (1593–1612). He fought wars in Southeast Bengal and Lower Myanmar where he concluded an alliance with the prince of Taungngu to lay siege to Pegu. After Pegu fell, the king installed a Portuguese captain, Felipe de Brito, in the port of Syriam. De Brito made himself independent while giving allegiance to Goa to make himself respectable in Portuguese eyes but his rule ended in 1613 when a Burmese army re-conquered Syriam (presently spelled Thanlyin). While Mañ: Rājā krī: and his successors proved unable to consolidate their rule over the land they conquered, they still saw themselves as overlords of de Brito, patrolled the waterways along the coast from Southeast Bengal down to Tenasserim and claimed tributes. The Suranara inscription (A. 25; 18 September 1609 CE) lists donations of King Mañ: Rājā krī:, the heir apparent (*uparājā*) and a royal minister. The king is referred to as “*chañ phrū rhañ mañ ta rā:*”, lord of the white elephant [and] just king (*dhammarāja*). The territorial claims of the Arakanese kings in the early seventeenth century are reflected in an elaborate expression describing the anonymous minister referred to as the “minister of Narādhipati, who rules over all the countries of all of Macchimā and all the lords that rule over the great countries of Haṃsa[*vatī*] and Sarekhyattarā [*sic*], lord of the golden palace, lord of the red elephants, lord of life”. Macchimā must be read Majjhimadesa, the India of Buddhist canonical texts, a term which in the Arakanese political context is commonly decoded as a reference to Bengal, and particularly the part of East Bengal controlled or threatened by the Arakanese navy. The waterways of Bengal’s Sunderbans were constantly under the menace of Arakanese invasions in the early seventeenth century. Haṃsavatī is the classical name of Pegu

18. The term mostly likely refers to the officer in charge of taxes and tributes due to the king’s treasury.

and denotes the areas that belonged to the old Mon kingdom in Lower Myanmar. Sarekhattarā, i.e. Sirikhettarā is the classic name of Prañ (or Pyay in conventional transcription), formerly a Pyu urban site and, throughout history, an important provincial town in the Irrawaddy valley that marked the limit of Arakanese territorial expansion at that time (for a Pyu inscription from Rakhine state, see Saw Tun Aung 2006).

Following the rapid decline of Arakan's regional power after the fall of Chittagong in 1666, the kings were, as the chronicles state, puppets manipulated by royal guards. Nonetheless, during the first part of the eighteenth century, King Candavijayarājā revived the prestige of Arakan's Buddhist kingship. Predatory attacks against Southeast Bengal confirmed Arakan's regional reputation as a piracy state in Muslim eyes. Compelling material evidence of these raids is limited. A. 44 (a cannon inscription dated 1741) relates the victory of King Madarāj Rājā during a naval battle in Chittagong. It may be related to an attack against Bengal in 1745 referred to in the chronicles and whose date is not otherwise ascertained.<sup>19</sup>

The conquest of Arakan by the Burmese crown prince in 1784 put an end to the independent kingdom of Arakan (Leider 2013). The efforts of King Badon (*aka* Bodawphaya, 1782–1819) to integrate Arakan into the Burmese kingdom had mixed results. The revered Mahamuni statue was taken to Amarapura, the Arakanese king, his court and all the *punnas* (court Brahmins) deported to the capital's neighbourhood. When, over ten years after the conquest, Arakanese were forcibly taken to work on royal construction projects in Upper Myanmar, many thousands left their country and fled to Bengal where they were resettled by the English East India Company. The religious integration of Arakan was more successful. A. 227 records the arrival of Burmese monks in Ramree in 1786 and the consecration of a *sima* hall in 1787. The succinct overview of past monastic history in the inscription provides a valuable historical background to understand the spirit of the reform movement under King Badon. While the original stone may be lost, its transcription by Walters is a precious document on the sending of royal monastic missions to Arakan to re-ordain Arakanese monks and introduce officially sanctioned copies of the canonical writings (Walters 1834).

A systematic study of Arakanese epigraphy and palaeography has yet to be commenced. The present essay offers an overview that may provide hints and suggestions for further exploration of this important archive of historical sources. Demonstrating the relevance of the inscriptions to update, revise and enlarge our knowledge of Arakanese history, at the same time it reflects the breach between the limited research on Arakan's epigraphy and the considerable body of epigraphic research done for over a century in Pakistan/Bangladesh and Myanmar, the region's neighbours. As Myanmar engages on a track of greater openness to the world, one is hopeful that the increased interest in its historically distinctive periphery will result in support for more in-depth studies and reduce the academic marginalization of Arakan/Rakhine studies.

19. Candamālāṅkāra, 1931, II: 259–260, 313–315. The reign of this king is dated 1737–1743 by most Arakanese chronicles with the exception of the *Dhaññāvatī are:tōpuṃ* which indicates 1742–1745 (*Dhaññāvatī* 2005).

**Annex: Parein Ahson Taung inscription (A. 4)****Face 1 (on top of the stone)**

- (1.1) ----- na su [ma] -----  
 (1.2) rā rhañ<sup>20</sup> rakhuiñ trā mañ kri se mray mram eva s[o] ka ti ku[iv] [ . ] -  
 (1.3) sa[t]e // thuiν nā chuiν ap s[?o] saccā cakā ka: nā a sak ta khyo[n] --  
 (1.4) a syañ a sak ta khyoñ hi sa rhiv nā ac kuiv Rājādhira[c] -  
 (1.5) rviy sī kroñ nā ma krañm pyak kroñ nā -----

**Face 2 (front of the stone)**

- (2.1) ta pā pa: sā pre dhoñ mañ tuiv se -----  
 (2.2) Rājādhira[c] kuiv sī kroñ krañm pāphi pyak kroñ krañ pā ph[i] -----  
 (2.3) tuik tvañ sā ca kā chuiν lhā so le ma nā tan chuiν ca ga ---  
 (2.4) mrañ tuiñ a krvañ a kyan mè.y nā pran añm pre tèt u pa[t] --  
 (2.5) –c ma pèt kū ruim kra añm mre cvañ mre nā a ni a k[v]ap ni sā [ . ]  
 (2.6) ci cac ruy lhvat kra añm ī suiv nā pan lak ruy khyvat yvañ se --  
 (2.7) ta pā pa: [m]hya ma khyvat ci ma yvañ ci a kèt ruy khyvat yvañ se  
 (2.8) pvak p[v]a kat ruy sī luiv i mī krī myuiv ruy si luiv [i] --  
 (2.9) ----- i [ru]y si luiv i toñ phvi sañ ruy si lui[v] --  
 (2.10) ----- ta kā khyvat ruy ma kyvat [ra] --  
 (2.11) ----- [t] lyañ [ ---- ] [? sa] kuiv [ . ] --

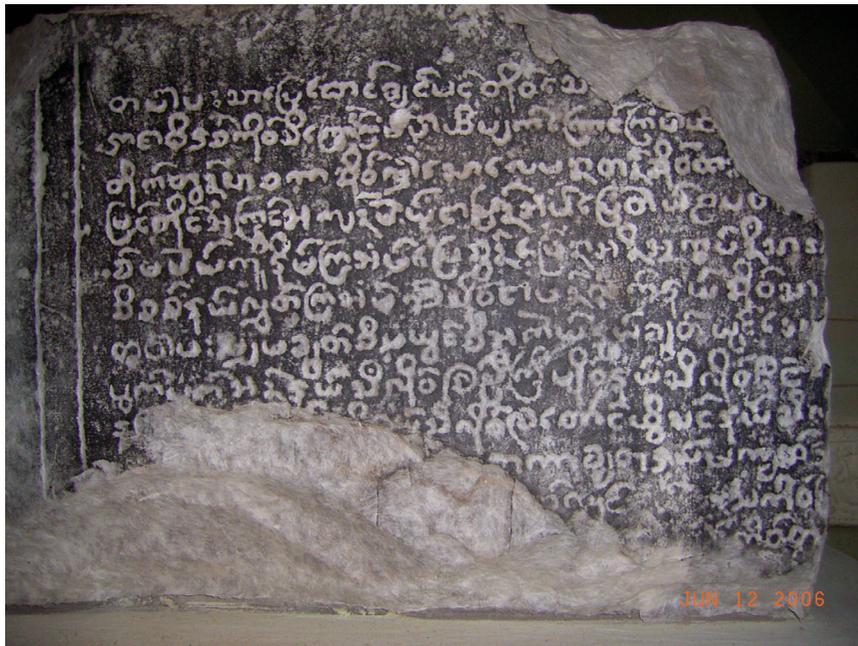
**Face 1**

.... the noble lord, I, the great just ruler of Arakan, firmly make this oath  
 these true words that I pronounce, as long as I am alive  
 As long as [my] lord is alive, my elder brother Rājādhira[c]  
 I will not plan his death, I [will not plan] his destruction

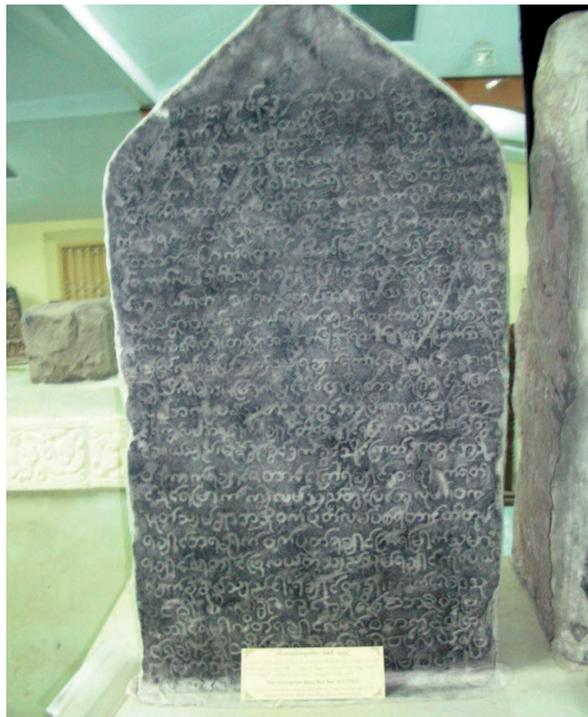
**Face 2**

Kings of various countries...  
 To plan the death of Rājādhira[c], to plan his destruction ...  
 coming to speak words to push [for such planning], it is useless to listen  
 each time I see [it], without fail, I will reply. Misfortune inside the country...  
 not give (?), helping (...?) , those who stay in the farthest land, the nearest land,  
 nearby and at the border...  
 send [them] to check (?), I reverentially speak like this ...  
 for each and everything, let me not be wrong, [if] truly [I am] wrong...  
 [I] want to die by vomiting. I want to die being swallowed by the earth.  
 .... I want to die by.... I want to die being crushed by a mountain  
 ... may [I] not be liberated as the [Buddha] has liberated...

20. [bhu] rā: rhañ.



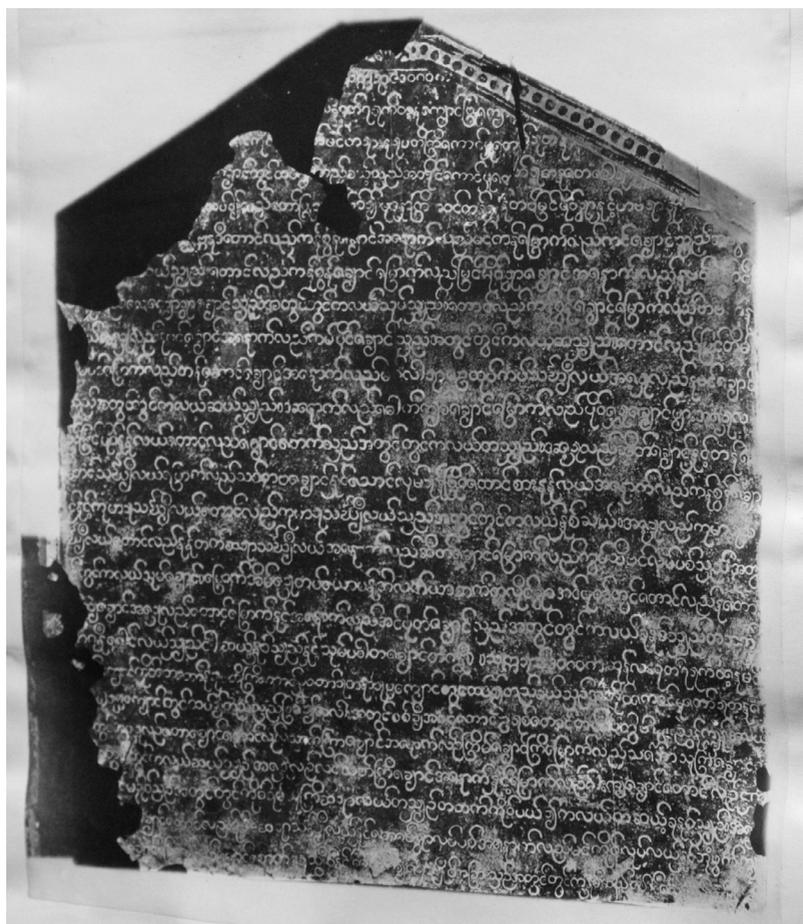
**Figure 1.** — Parein Ahson Taung inscription, early 15th c. CE.  
Mrauk U Archaeological Museum, 85 × 46 × 19 cm, 2nd face, © Nyein Lwin.



**Figure 2.** — Dukkan Kyaung inscription, 5th day, waxing moon of *tōsalañ*, *sakkarāj* 915 (CE 12 August 1553). Mrauk U Archaeological Museum, 52 × 97 × 22 cm, © Kyaw Minn Htin.



**Figure 3.** — Lakpanpran Inscription, *sakkarāj* 990 (CE 1628).  
Rabadan village, Ramree, 35 × 12.5 × 9 cm, 3rd face, © Kyaw Minn Htin.



**Figure 4.** — Tejarāma Inscription, 7th day, waning moon of *kacun*, *sakkarāj* 1080 (CE 20 May 1718).  
Mrauk U Museum. 91 × 94 × 15 cm, rubbing (source: Forchhammer 1891, pl. XXI).