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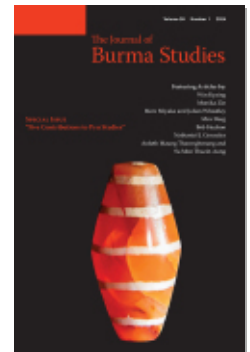
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Five Contributions to Pyu Studies: Introduction

Arlo Griffiths and Julian Wheatley

In 1898, a set of gold plates was found at the site of Śrīkṣetra, “Field of Prosperity,” in Myanmar, bearing an inscription in the Pali language written in an archaic type of South Indian script (Tun Nyein 1898–1899). This was the first of several discoveries of Pali “citation inscriptions” (Skilling 1999) at Śrīkṣetra itself and at other sites belonging to the same cultural complex, which extended from high up the Irrawaddy River (north of Mandalay) down to the delta. They are marked by impressive Buddhist architecture (e.g., brick *stūpas*) and sculpture, mainly at Śrīkṣetra itself, and equally impressive feats of civil engineering, including large brick fortifications at that same site as well as at several others. Recent archaeological research has provided persuasive radio-carbon datings that situate the beginning of the construction of the walls of Śrīkṣetra in the first century CE. Various aspects of the building techniques indicate cultural exchange with early urban sites in South Asia.

Within these monumental structures have been found—besides Buddhist sculptures, Buddhist monuments, and Buddhist inscriptions in Pali—a substantial number of inscriptions in a little studied and poorly understood language that belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family and was presumably once the local language. This language, and by extension, the culture that has produced all the vestiges mentioned so far, is called

“Pyu” in the scholarly literature (Luce 1937). The inscriptions in this language are written in a special script that is also clearly of the Indian type but is notably different from the script that was used for Pali inscriptions. The latter type (which we here simply call “Pali script”) is also found at early Dvāravatī sites in Thailand, there too used for writing Pali, and farther afield, where it is the medium for Pali, Prakrit, and Sanskrit inscriptions both in Southeast Asia and in South India (including the items studied in Skilling 1991 and Falk 1997). As for the Pyu script itself, it is remarkable for the very elongated shapes of its characters. The most likely source of its inspiration is the epigraphic corpus of the site of Nagarjunakonda, situated on the banks of the river Krishna in Guntur district, Andhra Pradesh, India.

First discovered in 1926, this very important Buddhist site has had a remarkable history. Repeated archaeological investigations culminated in the largest salvage excavation ever carried out in India before the site was submerged by the artificial lake created by the construction of the gigantic Nagarjunsagar dam, inaugurated in 1967 (Singh 2010). In the forty years between the site’s discovery and its submersion, a great number of inscriptions were recovered, studied, and published. The script used at this site is a distinct form of Southern Brahmi, with the same elongated aspect as the Pyu script. The language in most cases is Prakrit, more rarely Sanskrit. These inscriptions speak of the site as Vijayapurī, “City of Victory,” and record predominantly Buddhist foundations made under the reign of the Ikṣvāku Dynasty, corresponding roughly to the third century CE and the first half of the fourth (Stone 1994). Besides the discoveries at Nagarjunakonda itself, which are unsurpassed in quantity, an important number of inscriptions associated with the same ruling house have been discovered at

other Buddhist sites that have subsequently come to light in the coastal districts of Andhra Pradesh. This corpus of inscriptions from Vijayapurī constitutes a rich source for the investigation of Buddhist religious life along the east coast of India in the period when it is believed that Buddhism started to be disseminated overseas into Southeast Asia (Luce 1974; Skilling 1997; Frasch 1998).

The apparent synchronism of the rise of epigraphical culture in Myanmar and its decline at Vijayapurī, coupled with the striking similarities between the Pyu script in the Śrīkṣetra corpus and the form of Brahmi that is characteristic of the Ikṣvāku corpus, as well as between the forms of “Pali script” used in both, has led some scholars to the hypothesis that the earliest forms of Buddhism practiced on Myanmar soil had descended from the Buddhism that was practiced in eastern India in about the third century, through the emigration of monks from monasteries in what is today Andhra Pradesh (Falk 1997; Stargardt 2000).

It is this hypothesis that was scrutinized by a team of scholars who collaborated over the years 2015–2017 in the project “From Vijayapurī to Śrīkṣetra? The beginnings of Buddhist exchange across the Bay of Bengal as witnessed by inscriptions from Andhra Pradesh and Myanmar.” This was an international, interdisciplinary project centered around epigraphic evidence, funded as a Collaborative Research Fellowship in the Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Program in Buddhist Studies, administered by the American Council of Learned Societies. The institutional beneficiary of the grant for the Collaborative Research Fellowship was the École française d’Extrême-Orient (EFEO). Our team of collaborative fellows was, in addition to ourselves, made up of Stefan Baums (of the University of

Munich and the Bavarian Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Germany), Ingo Strauch (of the University of Lausanne, Switzerland), and Vincent Tournier (then of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, United Kingdom, subsequently at the EFEO, and now at the University of Munich). The project's central research questions were the following:

Is it likely that there were direct connections between the Buddhist community under the Ikṣvākus in Āndhra and that in the Pyu-speaking areas of ancient Burma?

If so, what was the nature of those connections?

The project has spawned two major digital epigraphic corpora, called the *Early Inscriptions of Āndhradeśa* and the *Corpus of Pyu Inscriptions*.¹ The two of us made up the team focusing on Pyu inscriptions, and we joined forces with Marc Miyake, a linguist who was during the same years employed by the European Research Council (ERC)-funded project *Beyond Boundaries: Religion, Region, Language and the State*, and tasked precisely with an attempt to decipher the Pyu language.² For the fieldwork aspects of our research on Pyu inscriptions, we also collaborated with Bob Hudson. During our years of collaboration with Marc Miyake and Bob Hudson, we were

1 Provisionally housed at <http://hisoma.huma-num.fr/exist/apps/EIAD/index2.html> (Accessed: 2 February 2024) and <http://hisoma.huma-num.fr/exist/apps/pyu/index2.html> (Accessed: 2 February 2024), the two corpora are planned eventually to be incorporated in the overarching body of South and Southeast Asian epigraphy being prepared by the ERC-funded DHARMA project (<https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/809994>; Accessed: 2 February 2024).

2 <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/609823> (Accessed: 2 February 2024).

able to deliver a major first installment of what was intended to become a series of contributions to Pyu epigraphy.³

The present issue of *The Journal of Burma Studies* is another product of the project, assembling five papers first presented at the project conference that we organized in 2017 at the Research Center of the EFEO in Pondicherry, South India. The aim of the conference was to overcome the limitations imposed by the necessary focus of our Collaborative Research Fellowship on epigraphic sources. Besides these, other types of source material that we hoped might be capable of elucidating our research questions included the (non-inscriptional) archaeological record, Burmese chronicles, Chinese pilgrims' accounts, and other Chinese records, as well as the evidence of style in Buddhist art and architecture. For this reason, we invited specialists in various fields adjacent to our own to shed light on the various external connections of the Buddhist communities on both sides of the Bay of Bengal and to make use of the primary data that we had made available online by 2017.

At the Pondicherry conference, papers were presented both on Indian and Burmese materials. We were then envisioning an edited volume of studies that would incorporate our own conclusions based on our epigraphical research as well as perspectives from other disciplines such as linguistics, art history, and archaeology. But on the whole, it has transpired from our years of research and from the papers presented at the

3 Arlo Griffiths, Bob Hudson, Marc Miyake, and Julian K. Wheatley, "Studies in Pyu Epigraphy, I: State of the Field, Edition and Analysis of the Kan Wet Khaung Mound Inscription, and Inventory of the Corpus," *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 103 (2017): 43–205. doi: [10.3406/befeo.2017.6247](https://doi.org/10.3406/befeo.2017.6247).

conference that sources capable of casting light on Buddhist connections between India and Burma around the middle of the first millennium CE are few and far between. The negative outcome of our Collaborative Research Fellowship is that we are unable to bring the Pyu and Ikṣvāku epigraphic corpora into a dialogue as we had hoped to do and hence remain unable to confirm the existence of direct Buddhist connections between Āndhra and the Pyu civilization. But there are plenty of positive results from our research and from the conference pertaining to early Buddhism and epigraphic cultures in Āndhra and Burma as autonomous fields of study. For this reason, we have decided to work toward two separate publications: one on India and one on Burma.

The Burma-related articles assembled here open with Win Kyaing's survey of "Recent Archaeological Research at Śrīkṣetra." His article was written before the dual crises of the Covid pandemic and the military coup, but the attention to archeological training and modern methodology that he describes does give hope that archeological work can survive or perhaps even flourish after this period of political instability and civil strife. Win Kyaing's article is followed by Monika Zin's "Stūpa Shapes from the Āndhra Country to Śrīkṣetra," which engages more specifically with the hypothesis of connections between early Buddhism in Burma and the Āndhra region of India—but with inconclusive results. The third article, by Julian Wheatley and Marc Miyake, constitutes the second of our team's studies in Pyu epigraphy. It focuses on a specific set of Pyu inscriptions, namely texts inscribed on Buddhist sealings ("votive tablets"), whose meaning it was hypothesized might be partially inferred through comparison with inscriptions on similar artifacts in better-known languages.

Here too, we must admit that the empirical evidence proves more resistant to scholarly hypotheses than we had hoped. The fourth article, by Max Deeg, entitled “Chinese Reports about Buddhism in Early Burma,” is based on the Burma-related portion of his earlier Pondicherry presentation, “Chinese reports about Buddhism in early Andhra and early Myanmar.” And finally, the last article of the set, Bob Hudson’s “Funerary Practices at Pyu Sites in Myanmar and the Appearance of Buddhist Artifacts from the Fifth to Sixth Century CE Period,” addresses the dating of the spread of Buddhism in Pyu culture. The author gives evidence that calls into question the widespread assumption that this process would have taken place as early as the first half of the first millennium CE.

Some Burma-related papers presented at the conference could unfortunately not be brought to completion for the present issue. These are Arlo Griffiths and Christian Lammerts’ “Pali Inscriptions from Early Burma” (intended as the third of our team’s “Studies in Pyu Epigraphy”), Alexei Kirichenko’s “Burmese Sources about the Pyu Period,” and Peter Skilling’s “Ānanda Ācariya and Kalasapura.” As we close this phase of our engagement with early Buddhism in Burma and with the study of Pyu epigraphy, we express the hope that the articles included here will help to move the field forward and that at least some of those not included can be brought to publication before the coming of Maitreya.

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