

Architecture of Sriksetra as the Prototype of Myanmar Architecture

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Abstract

Myanmar's three Pyu ancient cities are now included in the World Heritage List. Three Pyu cities are Vishnu (Beikthano), Sriksetra (Thaye-Khittayar) and Hanlin. The archaeological excavations in Thaye-Khittayar had been started since 1882-1883 by D. E. Forchhammer. The intermittent excavations of ancient monuments in Thaye-Khittayar have been conducted since 1907. The excavated evidences are sources for linkages of developments of Pyu City-State flourishing in Myanmar and relationship with other Asian countries. Pyu period was influenced by both Buddhism and Hinduism.

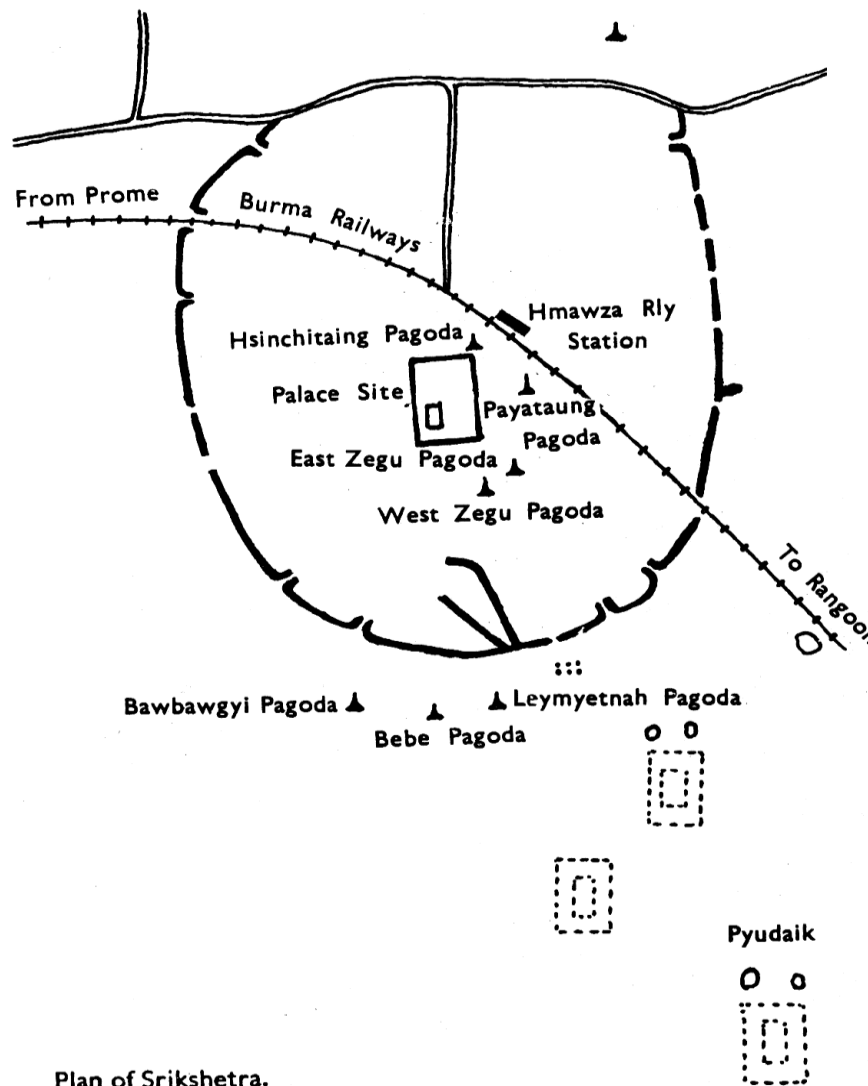
Introduction

Pyu formed one branch of the Tibeto-Burmans. Perhaps they were already in Myanmar by the 3rd century A.D. They occupied Ayeyarwady Valley from Shwebo district to Pyay district. The Chinese called them Piao. Pyus called themselves Tu-Lo-Chu. Mons called them Tircul. Taking the Indian script of the 4th Century A.D, Pyus invented a form of writing of their own. They were essentially agricultural people. Their main crops would be paddy. Their criminal law was very humane. Trials before an image of the Buddha were common. They burned their death and stored the ashes in urns.

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Sriksetra lies five miles south-east of Pyay on the left bank of the Ayeyarwaddy. The founding of the city is popularly attributed to the reign of Duttabaung as early as the 101 year of religion, that is, some two thousand four hundred years ago. Local chronicles related the legend that the city was built for Duttabaung by sakra, Lord of the devas, with the help of Gavampati, Naga, Garuda, Candi and Parameswar.

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Plan of Srikshetra.

Source : Aung Thaw, *Historical Sites in Burma*, 20

The main city wall is massive and much larger in area than that of Bagan or Mandalay. It is roughly circular, of large brick. There are traces of moats internal and external, still most impressive.

The urban enclave at Sriksetra described an irregular oval or squamish area with rounded corners. Most of the enclave was defined by a multiple alignment of great walls with great moats between them. The traces of these defining features are visible on the aerial photographs. The walls and moats of Sriksetra have suffered severe damage in the period of more than one thousand years since the destruction of the Pyu kingdom. There are breaks in the walls today and also structure where only two walls survive. From the aerial all perspective, however, the traces of former structures are much clearer than on the ground. In this way, it can be seen clearly traces of three walls on the Southeast, the Southwest and West.

Broad moats were sunk between each row of walls with an additional moat encircling the site on the inner edge of the walls, making for a total of three moats.

The eastern side of Sriksetra was protected by only one wall much lower and narrower than the others, and following a notably different alignment. Efforts have been made in the past, but without success to find the traces on the eastern side of the counterparts to the multiple rows of great walls so visible on the other sides. Here again, the cropmarks visible in the aerial photographs provide as with a fresh insight into the problem of what type of fortifications originally enclosed Sriksetra on the East.

The traces of the triple walls at the Southeast and Northeast corners can be seen leading towards an area darkly shadowed on the aerial photographs. The shadowed area indicated the former presence of a large water tank which has been abandoned long ago and whose bed is now occupied by fields and a swamp.

The former great eastern tank at Sriksetra served a system of distributary canals threading through the low-lying land to the East of the city. Janice Stargardt, Director, Cambridge Project on Ancient Civilization in Southeast Asia, suggest that Sriksetra was originally defended on the East by this tank but that at some time in the history of the city, desiccation led to a shrinking of the body of water which it held. It was, then, decided to fortify the city on this side with a wall and, to avoid the down-slope towards the tank bed, it was necessary to construct the East wall on quite a different alignment from the other walls.

The length of the city wall from South to North measures about two and a half mile and the breadth from east to west measures about two miles. Some part of the city was defended by three rows of massive walls. The city wall has many gates. In the centre, there is a mound generally assumed to be the remains of a palatial building inside the rectangular enclosure. This rectangular palace wall as oriented north-west to south-east instead of north-south direction. The length of the palace mound measures 56 yards and the breadth is about 170 yards. At the southern side of the city lies an longate rectangular mound called "Beikthano myo". The grave yard of queen Beikthano is situated between "Rathe-myo" and Sriksetra.

As in Visnu City each gateway has rounded corners where the fort wall turns inwards to form long barri cade on either side the entrance passage. The northern half of the city a low plain dominated by rice fields where as the southern half is comparatively high, rising gradually beyond the fort wall towards the hill range to the south.

Most of the ancient ruins lie in the southern sector of the city and also outside the fort walls while burial mounds are to be found scattered throughout the location.

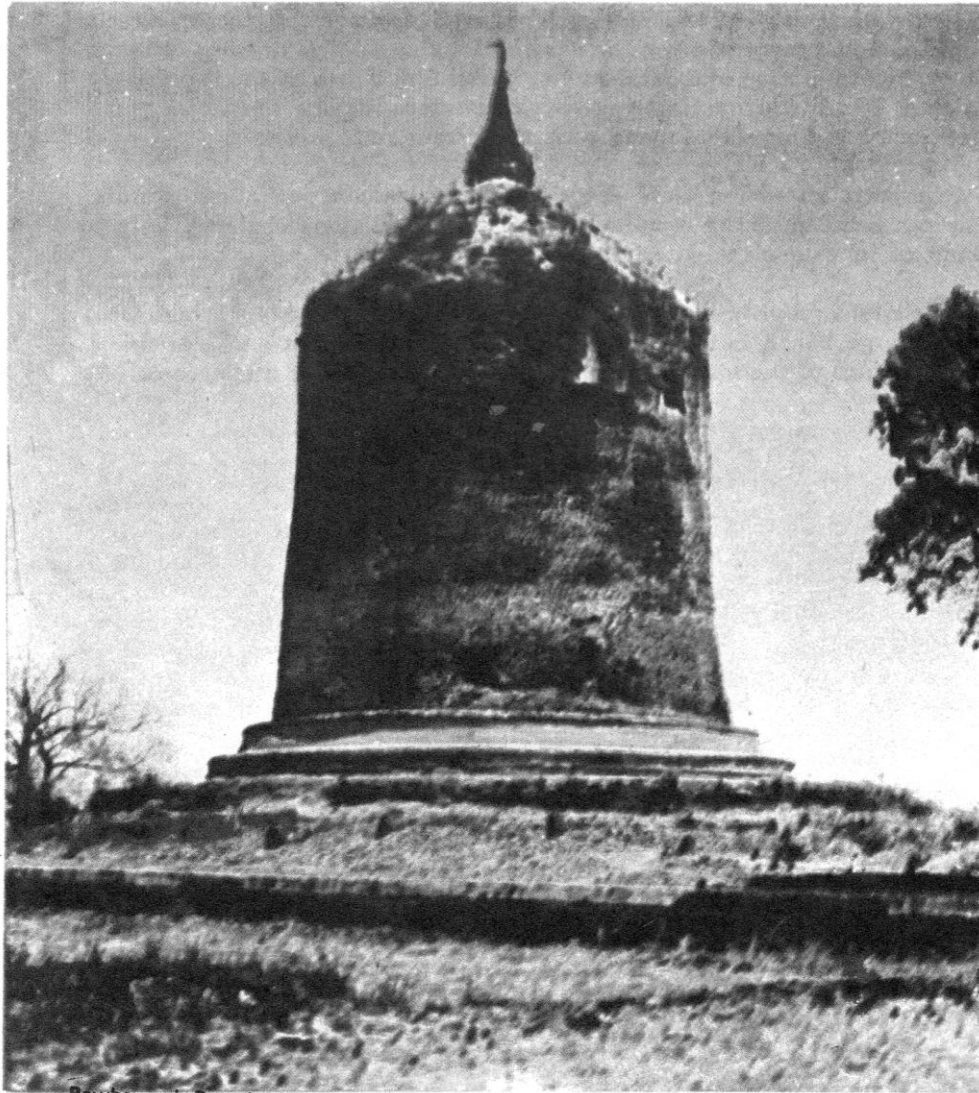
Sriksetra shows its close association and contact with South India. This can be seen in the monuments, mainly of religious character, which dominate this ancient site.

There exist many stupas and pagodas in Sriksetra. The ground, plan of the palace is not yet known although there are structural remains at the palace site. Large sized bricks measuring twenty inches in length were used.

Just outside the old walls of Hmawza are three stupas, the Payama, Paya-gyi and Bawbawgyi, in shape markedly archaic.

The Bawbawgyi, 153 feet high, assumes a cylindrical shape above five low circular terraces of which two are buried under the debris. It has a conical top surmounted by a modern hti (umbrella). This types is apparently evolved from the hemispherical stupas like the Sanchi and Amaravati tapes of India. An intermediary

between the semi-circular dome and the elongated mass appears on the sculptured stone slab which was used as a cover of the square relic chamber in Khin Ba mound.



Bawbawgyi Pagoda, Srikshehtra.

Source : Aung Thaw, *Historical Sites in Burma*, 18

The Bawbawgyi, however, it not entirely solid as might be suggested by its exterior View. The cylindrical body is hollow up to about two-thirds of height and has an opening at the base and another aperture high up in opposite wall.

The Payagyi and the Payama are much alike in having high conical domes. The absence of mouldings and elaborate architectural motifs denote the antiquity of these Pyu stupas.



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Payagi Pagoda, Srikshetra.

Source : Aung Thaw, *Historical Sites in Burma*, 17

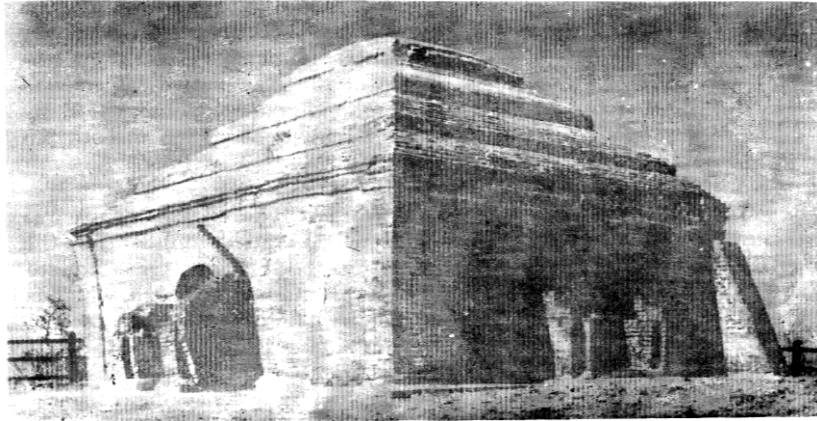
Exceptions are, however, discovered of stupas with receding terraces and tapered moulding as in the modern pagodas but there are comparatively diminutive dimension. On the evidences of the clay votive tablets and epigraphic finds recovered, the Bawbawgyi may be assigned to 6th-7th century.

A variant type of solid stupa was found in Gwebindet mound. Here the cylindrical body stands on a square base, seven half feet high, which is reached by a flight of steps on each of the four sides. The walls of the base are decorated with clay plaques each bearing a figure of a man on horseback.

Bebe temple,
Srikshetra.

Source : Aung Thaw, *Historical Sites in Burma*, 21

Among the hollow types of pagodas the Be Be, the Leymyetna and the East Zegu posses notable architectural features though not of great height. The Be Be has a small square sanctum with a porch facing east. This hollow cubicle rise three receding terraces on which stands a plain cylindrical pinnacle with rounded top. A sculptured stone slab bearing a seated Buddha flanked by disciple on either side rests against the west wall. This side have pilasters and false arched doors on the exterior and arched niches inside. This structure is a prototypes of the early Bagan temples.



Lemyethna temple,
Srikshetra.

Source : Aung Thaw, *Historical Sites in Burma*, 19

The East Zegu temple is a little bigger than the Be Be, the ground plan being 27 feet by 24 feet. Facing east, it has prominent projections on all sides decorated with pilasters and arches. The Leymyetna with four entrances is also a small square temple. It has a central square mass against each side of which was originally placed a stone slab bearing a seated Buddha image. It has a terraced roof but the pinnacle has disappeared.

A narrow cave like structure known as the Yahanda gu has a valuted roof and three entrances, one at each end and a third on the east side.

At Subokkon is a small temple with only one entrance similar to the Be Be. The west Zegu, from the remains of its basement, appears to be a square temple with two entrances on the east leading directly to the square sanctum which is surrounded on the other three sides by a corridor. On the outer walls of the north and south sides of the corridor are small niches of irregular size.

The remains of a temple at Shwenyaungbinkon exhibit the prototype of the temple architecture at Bagan. Here the structure consists of a porch an anteroom and the main hall. The porch and the anteroom occupy a single compartment divided only by a stone threshold one foot wide. The most significant architectural feature is the provision of niches in the walls which are decorated with arch pediments similar to those at Bagan temples. The plaster over moulded bricks have entirely flaked off but the bare outlines of the decorative arch testify the high artistic achievement in Pyu architecture.

Recent excavations have exposed at a mound near the Shwedagon gate in the north-west sector of the city wall the basement of a large structure which has a

quadrangular hall and a vestibule facing east. The hall measures 105 feet by 77 feet, while vestibule is made of three diminishing projections having an overall length of 60 feet. It stands on an earthen plinth lined with a thin brick wall up to 6 feet, from which height rises the external walls having considerable thickness.

The superstructure was apparently constructed of wood as evidenced by the recovery of numerous iron nails. The debris revealed two subsequent reconstruction at the same site though on a smaller scale than the preceding structure. A similar huge building was also unearthed near the Payma pagoda. Here the vestibule has two projections.

Conclusion

Pyu people settled in Visnu, Halin and Sriksetra since 1st century A.D. Buddhist Culture was spread from South India to Myanmar. Visnu was built first. Sriksetra and Halin were probably built simultaneously. After the fall of Visnu in 4th century A.D. Buddhism gradually developed and flourished in Sriksetra. Sriksetra existed till 8th century A.D. Archaeological discoveries indicate that this city attained its height of prosperity between the fifth and ninth centuries.

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