The Pyū Millennium

The people and culture that inhabited “Burma” during the pre-Pagān millennium have conventionally been called the Pyū, a designation begun in the early twentieth century, probably by C. O. Blagden. For the sake of convenience, he used the term to represent the fourth (and at that time unknown) language found on the quad-lingual so-called Myazedi Inscriptions of ca. 1112 AD, which he was in the process of deciphering, an enormous, daunting, and pioneering task. From that focused purpose, the term Pyū has come to represent today the people, culture, and period that spanned the time between the second century BC and the early ninth century AD and laid the foundations for the kingdom of Pagān.

A different and genuinely indigenous scheme for periodizing Burma’s history could have been adopted, similar to the one used by the late Burmese chronicles. They had organized Burma’s history on the basis of what they considered the most important criterion, namely, Buddha-prophesied cities and their dynasties, and hence, the Śrī Ksetra Dynasty, the Pagān Dynasty, the Inwa (Ava) Dynasty, and so on. This would have avoided the use of reified ethnicity as the basis for the analysis and organization of Burma’s history—a hallmark of colonial scholarship—so that the current chapter might have been named “The Pre-Pagān Millennium” or the “Early Urban Period” instead, more neutral categories of chronology and periodization.

Yet if the Mon Paradigm is to be dismantled thoroughly and convincingly, its own criterion for analyzing the evidence—reified ethnicity—within its own organizing principles of history must be addressed and not simply dismissed or ignored, so that the issue does not become merely a case of unsupported assertion or denial. My use of the Mon Paradigm’s methodology of reified ethnicity does not constitute an endorsement or acceptance; it is only a method to dissect the Mon Paradigm on its own terms. Therefore, I have retained and used reified ethnicity as a category of analysis and a periodization scheme, but only when discussing the Mon
Paradigm’s own perspective, to show that even using this system, the millennium of cultural development that laid the foundations for the genesis at Pagán was still not based on the Mon but on the Pyū. In other words, whether defined as a reified ethnic group or a culture, the Mon had little or nothing to do with the rise and development of Pagán.

**Identifying the Pyū**

Let us begin with the word “Pyū.” Where did it come from and whom did it represent? The English orthographic rendering comes from the Cantonese pronunciation of the Chinese character romanized as P’iao, which meant “rebel” in early Tsin Dynasty texts (265–420 AD) and “cavalry” in later T’ang and subsequent texts. In about the ninth century the Chinese used the word P’iao to refer to a culture and people thought to have been living in what is now Burma.

Yet according to other Chinese sources, the P’iao did not refer to themselves as such, but as t’u-lo-chu, while the Javanese were also said (by the same Chinese sources) to have used the same ethnonym, calling them t’u-li-ch’u. The term seems to have been the same as that found in contemporary Arabic accounts (one dated to 880 AD) regarding the people apparently of that area whom they called T.rsul. This word was finally anglicized in the twentieth century by modern scholars as Tircul, and is now understood as the name by which we think the Pyū referred to themselves.

But in truth there have been no serious or scholarly attempts to decipher the term Tircul either. Chen Yi-Sein, a Burma scholar of Chinese descent, mentioned in passing that it might be a reference to the Telugu people of Southeast India, but provided little explanation, analysis, or evidence for that assertion. Certainly, the gaze towards South India is understandable, for much of the material and epigraphic evidence found in Burma during the earlier part of the Pyū period shows important influences stemming from that region, especially before the seventh century AD. Those from Nagarjunakonda are most obvious in the early architecture and iconography of the Pyū, while that of Vanavasi in present day Goa on the west coast of South India is recognizable in the writing system. However, what Chen apparently did not consider was that Tircul (or t’u-lo-chu) was an ethnonym. If the word were a reference to the Telegu people, it could not have been a reference to the P’iao people also, for the latter were, all scholars feel, Tibeto-Burman, not Dravidian speakers. Besides, without linguistic evidence, no necessary connection can be established between a particular group of people and cultural remains, even if found in the same area inhabited by that group. Telegu influence on the art and architecture of Burma at that time does not mean that its general popula-
tion, or even the people who produced these remains, must have been Telegu speakers also.

What is even more puzzling is that neither the Pyū themselves (in eleven centuries of civilization and approximately 25 of their inscriptions), nor their closest cousins, the Burmese speakers (in twenty-one centuries and over 1160 of their inscriptions) ever used this alleged ethnonym Tircul. The Chinese texts mentioned above and an Old Mon inscription of King Kyanzittha of Pagān assigned to 1102 are the only occasions that I know of when the word thought to be Tircul is mentioned.10 As for the word Pyū, it does not appear in Old Burmese until the early thirteenth century, although there is no unequivocal linguistic evidence (let alone analysis) to prove that it was a reference to the word P’iao of the Chinese.11 Thus, while the word Tircul (or its original Chinese, t’u-lo-chu) seems to have been the name used by the people the Chinese called the P’iao, there is no necessary link between the thirteenth-century Old Burmese word Pyū and the ninth-century P’iao of the Chinese. Although reasonable to assume, it is conjecture nevertheless, based on a thirteenth-century phonetic resemblance. The connection between the two, in short, is based on modern assumptions of what the ancient pronunciations of both the Cantonese and Old Burmese words might have been. All this leaves open the door for future research on the etymology of the word and the identity of the P’iao and/or Pyū people in Burma.

Since what they were called by others is not the focus of this study and cannot be resolved here in any case, I shall reluctantly perpetuate the convention (again, like Blagden, for the sake of convenience) and refer to these people of the pre-Pagān millennium also as Pyū, or when applicable as Tircul. Regardless of the name we give them, a Tibeto-Burman-speaking people inhabited the same areas that were almost immediately thereafter occupied by Burmese speakers, adopted Indic culture during the first millennium AD, and laid the foundations for the kingdom of Pagān in innumerable ways.

Origins and Development of the Pyū Polity

For the past century Burma scholars have been conducting research on the Pyū people and culture. Most of the questions have focused on the probable origins of these people, the language they spoke, the important features of their culture, and the chronology, size, structure, and scale of their polity. Most scholars knowledgeable about this culture agree more or less that they were of “northern” origins, that they spoke a Tibeto-Burman language, that their dominant belief system at the height of their cultural growth was Theravāda Buddhism with other Indic elements incorporated
in it, that they already lived in large, urbanized settlements in the plains of the Irrawaddy valley as early as the second century BC, and that they lasted, at least as a polity or various polities and as a culture, until the mid- to late ninth century AD. There are, however, references to the Pyū as individuals in late Pagan and early Ava inscriptions, to be documented below.¹²

Most of the information on the Pyū language, certain aspects of their conceptual system, external glimpses of their kingdom, and particulars about their art and architecture had been gathered prior to the Second World War. However, much of the important, detailed analyses and concrete evidence concerning their physical environment, iconography, writing system, cities, and the general time frame in which they inhabited the country (which in part has been based on radiocarbon results) has emerged since the War. Indeed, it has only been about two years of this writing that some of the most important radiocarbon dates and other data concerning “their” material remains have appeared. Our current knowledge of the Pyū, then, is the result of a relatively long and irregular process of investigation—as the citations in this chapter will reveal.¹³ What follows is a synthesis of approximately a century of research and scholarship on this culture, whatever name it is given, particularly as it pertains to the focus of this book.

We can assert with practically no equivocation that between the second century BC and the late ninth century AD, much of the country known currently as Myanmar was dominated, or at least occupied, by people conventionally known as the Pyū. Its heartland was the plains areas carved out by the confluence of the Irrawaddy and Chindwin rivers, a Y-shaped configuration located in the Dry Zone of Upper Burma that has been inhabited since the Paleolithic Age. At the height of Pyū culture, this nucleus where most of the culture’s material and human resources lay was bounded on the south by Śrī Kṣetra (Old Prome), on the north by Halin, and on the east by the Kyaukse valley. Its periphery extended to parts of coastal Lower Burma and Arakan as well. Thus the Pyū culture seems to have occupied an area that was, by and large, virtually the same as that controlled by the precolonial Burmese state, and in certain cases it extended into the territory claimed by colonial and modern Burma.¹⁴

As we can tell at a glance by examining Figure 2, conspicuously missing is a Mon polity or kingdom or even a recognizable community of Mon speakers in any part of the territory during that same millennium, especially one contiguous to the Pyū state or kingdom, as claimed by the Mon Paradigm.¹⁵ That is not to say that no Mon speakers were living here and there in Lower Burma, but rather that the only archaeological, epigraphic, and historical evidence we have of a state, polity, or kingdom, in both
Figure 2: Pyū Period Urban Sites
Upper and Lower Burma during the first millennium AD is the one belonging to the Tibeto-Burman speaking culture we now call the Pyū.

The archaeological evidence we currently possess shows that the Pyū lived not only in much of the same general geographical space that their immediate successors, the Burmese speakers, later occupied but even in some of the same towns and cities. These walled cities of the Pyū—at least five large ones and numerous smaller ones—at one time or another were located adjacent to and seemed to have controlled the three most important irrigated regions of precolonial Burma: the Mu valley north of the confluence of the Chindwin and Irrawaddy, the Kyauksé plains on its southeast, and the Minbu region south and west of the former two. All three regions are endowed with rich soil and watered by perennial rivers and streams. What provided the economic mainstay of the kingdom of Pagán was the same productive agricultural area inhabited by the Pyū and later by Burmese speakers. Evidence of Pyū culture, like that of Pagán, extends beyond this core region to the coasts of Lower Burma and Arakan, where one of its inscriptions and two of its coins have been found. Their artifacts reached as far east as Oc-eo around present day Ho Chih Minh city. Indeed, Taw Sein Ko, without providing the source, stated that the Arakanese continued to use the term Pyū for “Burma” until the twelfth century.

Arguably the most important feature found in the Pyū period that may not have been present previously in the same area was urbanization, and hence, according to some of the best scholars on this issue, also state formation. The oldest urban site so far discovered and scientifically excavated is called Beikthano Myo by modern scholars, the Burmese rendering of “Viśnū City.” Probably the first capital of a culturally and perhaps even politically uniform kingdom in “Burma,” it is a large settlement measuring approximately nine square kilometers (nearly 300 hectares) which has been radiocarbon dated, after calibration, to a period between 180 BC and 610 AD. It lies on the east bank of one of the Dry Zone’s three most productive irrigated regions, Minbu, with direct land access to the well-watered Kyauksé plains to its northeast, where two other apparently contemporaneous Pyū cities have also been found.

These are Mongmao (or Maingmaw) and Binnaka, virtually identical in numerous ways, located in or near the Kyauksé valley, which later (if not earlier) was the major rice-producing area of Burma until Lower Burma was developed by the British in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At Binnaka, in addition to many brick structures whose floor plans are the same as those found at Beikthano and other Pyū sites, many artifacts have been recovered that are recognizable as being part of Pyū culture. This includes what are probably pre-Buddhist funerary practices of secondary burial, where remains of ash and bone are deposited in urns.
Artifacts of gold, such as necklaces, precious stone images of elephants, turtles, and lions (or perhaps they are tigers), distinctive Pyū pottery, terracotta tablets with writing that strongly resembles the Pyū script, and various kinds of acid-etched onyx beads identical to those found at Beikthano, along with others made of amber and jade, have been recovered. Apparently Binnaka continued to be occupied until about the nineteenth century, for artifacts of that period as well as the intervening periods have been found there. There is even a palm-leaf *sittan* (record) of Binnaka that survives, suggesting that the city was part of the last precolonial monarchy’s administrative domain.

Mongmao, unearthed in 1979, is also located in the Kyauksé plains. The city is circular in shape, similar to Beikthano and another later, more famous Pyū city, Śrī Kṣetra. At one and a half miles in diameter, enclosing 222 hectares, Mongmao is one of the largest ancient cities on the entire Kyauksé plains. It has two inner enclosure walls, the outer of which is square while the inner one is circular. The plan of a circle within a square suggests a *zata*, a zodiac sign which represents a view of the heavens from the perspective of the sun, the manner in which nineteenth-century Mandalay was also conceptualized. At almost dead center, Mongmao also has what is thought to be a nineteenth-century temple called the Nandawya Paya (royal palace pagoda), which was probably built upon the ruins of an ancient one. The city is bisected by a canal, thought to be contemporary to the city, although no scientific dating has yet confirmed that.

Mongmao has been tentatively dated to the first millennium BC, based on its Pyū artifacts. It has also yielded distinctive silver coins identical to those found at Beikthano and Binnaka, stone molds for casting silver and gold ornamental flowers, a gold armlet in association with a silver bowl that had Pyū writing on it, pottery with rouletted patterns common to this period, along with acid-etched onyx elephant-shaped beads, the former found inside funerary urns virtually identical to those found at Beikthano and Binnaka. If the funerary urns at Beikthano represent a pre-Buddhist period, as Stargardt has argued, then both Binnaka and Mongmao may have been contemporary with the former, as indeed other Burmese archaeologists have suggested.

The next or perhaps contemporaneous “capital” or preeminent center of the general period was most likely Halin, not Śrī Kṣetra, as claimed by the Mon Paradigm for reasons that bolstered its claim to an early Mon kingdom in Lower Burma. Misreading the ninth-century narrative of the *Man Shu*, which he himself translated, Luce identified two *kingdoms* mentioned in it as Pyū centers, placing one, Mi-no, in central Burma. Mi-no he identified as Halin, and the other, Mi-ch’ên, as either Pegu or a site near it, which he said was inhabited by Mon people. This identification “proved”
to Luce that a Mon center existed in Lower Burma in the ninth century, for it was made to be contemporary with Mi-no (alias Halin).

Yet the *Man Shu* never said that Mi-no and Mi-ch’ên were P’iao cities or that they were necessarily located in what is now Burma. The relevant chapter in the *Man Shu* states only that they bordered “on the Southern Man;”33 that is, the people of the Nanchao kingdom in western Yunnan. Thus the cities could have been anywhere in Mainland Southeast Asia. Since the paragraph regarding Mi-no and Mi-ch’ên immediately precedes that on the P’iao kingdom, it is possible that they were contiguous to the latter, but that is about all we can speculate.

The *Man Shu* does mention a raid in 835 AD of these two kingdoms (not cities!) by the Man forces. The text describes their location as “both . . . bordering on the sea,” thus clearly removing Halin from the picture (contrary to Luce’s identification of it), for Halin is located in the heart of the Dry Zone, approximately a dozen miles southeast of Shwebo, in the Mu valley. The *Man Shu* also states that they call their princes and chiefs Shou, . . .” perhaps a reference to the word chao, used as an honorific by T’ai speakers, whose habitat, significantly, stretched into today’s Assam. The *Man Shu* then records that “the kingdoms have no cities with inner or outer walls, . . .” which virtually precludes the Pyű of Burma as candidates, for they lived behind walled cities. As for “the Mi-ch’ên king [he] lives in a wooden stockade on the margin of the sea, in the water. The four feet of the house consist of stone lions. . . . The common people live in ’lofts.’ . . . At each end of their ’lofts’ they set drums. After drinking liquor they beat the drums. . . .” This description reminds one of many communities in Southeast Asia that used “frog drums” and lived in long houses well off the ground.

The *Man Shu* goes on to state that the kingdoms “are 60 day-stages southwest of Yung-ch’ang city of the Man,” which might place Mi-ch’ên somewhere on the western coasts of Burma, perhaps in what is now Arakan, where evidence of two kingdoms contemporary with the Pyű exist in their centers, Vesali and Dhanyawaddy. However, they were both walled cities. Then, “in the ninth year of Ta-ho (835 AD) (the Man) destroyed their kingdoms and looted their gold and silver. . . . They captured two or three thousand of their clansmen, and banished them to wash the gold of the Li-shui.”34 In short, whoever these people were and wherever their kingdoms might have been located, none of the above information even remotely resembles the archaeological evidence we have on the Pyű people and their culture.

In the very next paragraph of the *Man Shu*, in a separate section labeled “P’iao kingdom” that is distinctly marked off from those labeled “Mi-no kingdom and Mi-ch’ên kingdom” is indeed the narrative about the P’iao. Clearly, then, the information about the kingdom of the P’iao is entirely
different from the other two, textually as well as historically. Apparently Luce had confused the entry regarding Mi-no and Mi-ch’ên with that on the P’iao that followed immediately after.

The section on the “P’iao kingdom” begins by stating that it is 75 day-stages south of Yung-ch’ang city of the Man (not “60 day-stages southwest” of it, as noted for Mi-no and Mi-ch’ên), placing it 15 days-march farther south, perhaps around Śrī Kṣetra. It also states that “the people of the kingdom use a silver coinage. They use green bricks to make the walls surrounding their city. It is one day-stage to walk around it. . . . The common people all live within the city wall. There are twelve gates. In front of the gate of the palace where the king of (this) kingdom dwells, there is a great image seated in the open air, over a hundred feet high, and white as snow. . . . They reverence the Law of the Buddha. . . . In the 6th year of Ta-ho (832 AD), Man rebels looted and plundered P’iao kingdom. They took prisoner over three thousand of their people. They banished them into servitude . . . and told them to fend for themselves.”

Not only are the dates different (832 and 835), none of the Mi-no and Mi-ch’ên information in the Man Shu fits that on the Pyū. Moreover, the data on the P’iao accord with much of the archaeological evidence we have on the Pyū, down to their silver coinage, Buddhist beliefs, size of the city walls, and even (in the case of Śrī Kṣetra and perhaps Halin as well) the twelve gates. But since the last sentences used for the P’iao and the Mi-no/Mi’chen kingdoms are nearly identical—they speak of their looting, of taking “three thousand” of their people, and their banishment into servitude—Luce must have thought that these two narratives were referring to the same event and people.

Yet the translation of the Man Shu is Luce’s own after all, so he should have known in detail what was in it. It appears, therefore, that he was more concerned with making sure that Mi-no was Halin and Mi-ch’ên was in Lower Burma than he was in accurately representing what the text actually had to say. Identifying Mi-no as Halin had little or nothing to do with the information in the Chinese text or the archaeological evidence. Rather, its purpose was to place the other kingdom mentioned with it, Mi-ch’ên, in the same chronological and historical context in order to sustain the Mon Paradigm that the Mon were in Lower Burma in the ninth century.

Both the archaeological and epigraphic evidence suggest that Halin actually emerged earlier, overlapped in time with, and may have lasted longer (as a Pyū city) than Śrī Kṣetra. (As cities under the domination of Burmese speakers, of course, both lasted well into the precolonial period.) The published radiocarbon analysis of what were once Halin’s wooden gates yield an early date of 70 AD, demonstrating that it preceded Śrī Kṣetra by nearly six centuries. These early dates for Halin also suggest that
the city was contemporary with Otein Taung, (pottery hill), a settlement located in the urban complex of Pagán near the Sulamani temple, where recent radiocarbon dating reveals a period of occupation between 650 and 980 AD. The early radiocarbon dates for Halin are also supported by the recovery of an earlier version of the Brāhma script (Mauryan and Guptan) than that found at Śrī Kṣetra, whose inscriptions show a later version of that same script.

Moreover, a set of unpublished radiocarbon dates recently re-discovered by Bob Hudson in the files of the New Zealand laboratory where the original analysis on Halin’s organic remains was conducted, extends its period of activity to approximately 870 AD. That is over three decades beyond the conventional date given for its demise, wrongly dated to 835 AD in any case. Indeed, if Halin’s occupation was continuous, it may have lasted for eight centuries. These and the earlier radiocarbon dates show that Halin also overlapped in time with Beikthano, the oldest city so far discovered, and therefore presumably with Binnaka and Mongmao as well, since they were likely contemporaries of Beikthano. The data show continuous urban settlement in the most important centers of the Dry Zone of Burma between the second century BC (Beikthano) and the founding of Pagán.

Halin is also located in the Dry Zone of Upper Burma about a dozen miles southeast of present day Shwebo; it is the largest, northermmost city of this culture so far discovered. Importantly, it is also close to bronze sites that have been recently discovered. The city appears to be the farthest inland among the major cities of this period, located north of the confluence of the Irrawaddy and the Chindwin rivers, where it controlled the vast, rich agricultural area drained by the perennial Mu River and myriad other streams. Subsequently, if not during Pyū times, it became the largest irrigated region of precolonial Upper Burma. The Halin area is also known for its salt production, a highly prized commodity in the ninth century.

The selection of Halin’s location was obviously designed to control these natural economic resources, a strategy that also explains the locations of Binnaka and Mongmao, both of which lay adjacent to or in the fertile Kyauksé plains. Beikthano, which lay across the Irrawaddy from Minbu, the third richest agricultural area in the Dry Zone, also had direct access to Kyauksé. Contrary to the claim made by the Mon Paradigm that the Kyauksé valley was first inhabited by the Mon, a topic to be addressed in Chapter Ten, the best evidence we have today shows that it and the other productive areas had already been occupied by the Pyū for nearly a millen-nia before dominance by Burmese speakers, and well before Mon speakers first appeared in the epigraphic record of Upper Burma.
The excavated city of Halin is rectangular but with curved corners, its walls approximately two miles long on the north-south axis and one mile on the east-west.\footnote{41} It is nearly twice the size of Beikthano, at 664 hectares.\footnote{45} It has four main gates at the cardinal points, presumably with two intermediate ones on either side of each main one, again totaling twelve, the same as recounted by the Chinese for one of the Pyū cities. This number and configuration has symbolic Hindu-Buddhist cosmological implications, a feature also found in subsequent major Burmese capitals such as Pagan and even nineteenth-century Mandalay.\footnote{46}

Like the entrances of Beikthano and perhaps Śrī Kṣetra, Halin’s curve inward, as if to enhance the movement of fast-wheeled vehicles in and out. The southeastern gateway yielded forty human skeletal remains, perhaps signs of a non-Buddhist practice that may have preceded Buddhism (later known as myosade), where live humans were allegedly crushed underneath the gates at the time of construction to produce a “green spirit” (the nat sein of modern times) to protect the entrance from supernatural forces beyond the power of human sentries.\footnote{47} This practice was probably eliminated by the time Buddhism appeared at Halin, so that the skeletons may represent “old” Halin on which was built the current excavated Buddhist city.

Traces of a moat exist on all sides except the south, where it was probably not needed, as land was dammed there to create reservoirs. As the land slopes north to south, water from the north must have flowed into the moat, filling it first, then into the walled area to irrigate the fields, finally exiting on the south and replenishing the reservoir. It is a pattern also found at Mongmao and Beikthano and at two ancient cities in Burma in what is now Arakan (Dhannyawaddy and Vesali),\footnote{48} not to mention old Sukhodaya in Thailand that emerged a millennium and a half later.\footnote{49}

The brick structures found at Halin were square or rectangular with interior spaces and projections on one side in some cases, characteristic of the predominant style of gu (hollow temples) built at Pagan later, a topic to be discussed in Chapter Nine. Earthen funerary urns were also found buried within and outside these structures. Another structure, dubbed the “assembly hall,” is similar to one at Beikthano that once had eighty-four wooden pillars to support a superstructure. The one excavated at Halin has post holes in four parallel rows, with signs that the posts had all burned down.

Halin yielded many characteristically Pyū artifacts, including a small stone slab inscribed in what has been called the Pyū language. Each of the two Pyū lines is followed by a few characters in the old Brāhmī script, a tradition later called nissaya that continued with Burmese and Pali. The purpose of the inscription was to record the death of one “Honorable Ru-ba.”
Another inscription, with eight lines of Pyū but no interlinear Brāhmī, was discovered in the early twentieth century. It records the name of a high personage, possibly a queen or princess, by the name of Śrī Jatrajiku.

The excavations at Halin also produced silver coins with the usual distinctive Pyū designs of *sriwatsa* (an auspicious symbol), *bhadrāpitha* (throne), rising sun, conch, and *trisula* (trident) in various combinations on each side; gold, onyx, and terracotta beads; stucco and terracotta objects with designs identical or similar to those at other sites; clay burial urns such as those found at Beikthano; iron swords, spearheads, axe heads, arrow heads, sockets for doors, and caltrops, again identical or similar to those found at Beikthano; and three bronze mirrors with long tenons for handles. There were also fine gold objects, such as rings, beads, and pendants. A stone (agate) seal, probably used as an inset to a ring, was also found inscribed with the word *daya danam* in "South Indian characters" of the fifth century. That another such piece and a Pyū coin were found at Oc-eo in Vietnam, with the identical name in Pali, suggests that this was either a Halin product with wider distribution, or it was a rather common fashion found elsewhere in Southeast Asia and brought to Halin. Either way, it shows contact between India, Upper Burma, and Lower Vietnam during this time. Also found at Halin and other major Pyū sites, including some on the coasts were well-burned, large, distinctively "fingermarked" bricks of mostly uniform size used to build religious and secular structures.

By the seventh or eighth century Śrī Kṣetra had probably superseded Halin as capital or paramount city of the Pyū kingdom. It is dated to the early part of the eighth century by the Burmese chronicles, and to between the fifth and ninth centuries by archaeology, epigraphy, paleography, and art history. The beginning portions of perhaps the earliest extant Burmese chronicle, the *Zatatawpon Yazawin*, gives the following information about Śrī Kṣetra: "... in *Sakrāj* 101 [739 AD], on the 11th waxing day of the month of *Tagu*, replete with the seven requisites beginning with the moat, having established the golden city of Śrī Kṣetra together with the golden palace, Thagya [Sakrā] lifted Dwattaubung and placed him on the throne." An eighth-century date for Śrī Kṣetra is a bit later than some of the archaeological, epigraphic, and art historical evidence suggests, so there may have been more than one period when it was present and/or dominant. Much like the First and Second Ava periods in Burmese history, where the same site served two successive dynasties, hundreds of years apart, what little we have on Śrī Kṣetra seems to suggest that there were at least a "first" and "second" Śrī Kṣetra period and dynasty, if not a third. Archaeologists have noticed several levels of habitation at Śrī Kṣetra, and the earliest Burmese chronicles recall certain dates and people forgotten by later ones, while epigraphy mentions other "dynasties" forgotten by both. The reli-
gious art also suggests several distinct occupations, with earlier influences stemming from Southeast India sites such as Nagarjunakonda and Amaravati and later influences from southwest India, such as Vanavasi, while ninth-century influences include those from the kingdom of Nanchao. Thus the totality of the evidence does not support a single occupational period for Śrī Kṣetra, with its size, wealth, influence, power, and so on, remaining unchanged throughout, and its development linear and continuously progressive. Rather, the pattern appears to have been more a “punctuated equilibrium.”

In any case, Śrī Kṣetra has yielded the most extensive remains of Theravāda, or Pali, Buddhism and is the largest of the urbanized areas, with a circumference of about 8½ miles, or about 1,400 hectares of occupied area. Also, as shown above, the ninth-century Man Shu stated that a city that is presumably Śrī Kṣetra “is one day-stage to walk round it.” It is circular in shape, with twelve gates and a pagoda at each of the four corners. It also has inward curving gateways, such as those found at Halin and Beikthano. In the center of the city was what most scholars think represented the rectangular palace site, 1,700 by 1,125 feet, symbolizing both a mandala, and a zata (horoscope), reminiscent of Mongmao.

The Man Shu states that the walls of the Pyū capital in the ninth century (either Halin or Śrī Kṣetra), were covered with green, probably glazed bricks. Such bricks have been found in some of the oldest stupaś in Pagán, such as the tenth-century Ngakywènadaung, and also in the exterior decoration of Pagán temples such as the thirteenth-century Sulamani and the interior floors of others, such as the twelfth-century Dhammayangyi.

We should realize that even these well-known sites, except perhaps for Beikthano, have not been excavated with the degree of thoroughness that most archaeologists normally desire. This means that some of the important Pyū cities, especially Mongmao and Binnaka could yield much more data than they have so far, enhancing the current picture of a fairly uniform culture widely dispersed over the length and much of the breadth of the country during the first millennium AD. Indeed, there are many smaller sites in the Dry Zone which have not seen extensive or any excavation in which Pyū artifacts have been discovered. Such sites have, until recently, rarely appeared in the published literature of the field. They include Wati (an urban area west of Mongmao), Ayadawkye Ywa in the Mu valley, west of Halin, south of a recently discovered bronze site called Nyaunggan, and several others in Myin Mu township, which controls the mouth of the Mu River on the Irrawaddy.

This Pyū domain was more or less elliptically shaped, comprised of the flat plains that surround the confluence of the Irrawaddy and Chindwin river valleys. It was longer than it was wide, stretching from Śrī Kṣetra in the
south to Halin in the north, Binnaka and Mongmao to the east, and probably Ayadawkye Ywa to the west. Indeed, the Chiu-t’ang-shu, an account not given to exaggeration when discussing Southeast Asian “barbarians,” states that the P’iao kingdom extended 3,000 里 from east to west and 3,500 里 from north to south, approximately 1,000 and 1,250 miles respectively. The Hsin-t’ang-shu has it even bigger. Both texts contend that to the east of the P’iao kingdom was Chen-la kingdom (Cambodia), to the west Eastern India, on the south the ocean, and to the north So-lo city, a Nanchao fort. Southwest [southeast?] is To-ho-lo (Dvāravatī), and northeast was Yang-chū-mieh, capital of Nanchao.64 (As we can see, nothing is mentioned on the south of the P’iao but the ocean, where Mon Rāmaṇandesas is claimed to have been!) The Chiu-t’ang shu also states that there are nine dependencies of the P’iao: the Hsin-t’ang-shu actually names them. The Chinese sources also list the tribes bordering on the P’iao and eighteen “dependent kingdoms” by name, including Java and Champa, and mentions 32 out of 298 districts of the P’iao kingdom.65

As urban dwellers foreshadowing the rise of the “classical” states, the Pyū were not alone in Southeast Asia. They were contemporaries of those living in Funan and (perhaps) Champa in what is now Cambodia and Vietnam, Dvāravatī in modern-day Thailand, Tambralinga and Takuapa on the Malay Peninsula near the Isthmus of Kra, and Śrī Vijaya, which was probably centered at Palembang in southeast Sumatra.66 There were also several polities in central and east Java that were contemporaries or near-contemporaries of the Pyū that mentioned them by their ethnonym, t’u-li-ch’u, as shown above. Thus, throughout Southeast Asia, as in Burma, foundations were being laid during this period for the rise of Southeast Asia’s “classical” states, the “golden age” of at least Mainland Southeast Asian history and arguably the most important in Burma’s premodern (and some would say modern) sociopolitical and cultural history. As a consequence of this particular role in Burma’s history, in an earlier work I called this Pyū period “the formative age” in Burma’s history.67 It was this earlier Pyū culture of Burma, not the much later-arriving Mon in the country, that provided the crucial political, ideological, economic, and cultural foundations of the rise of Pagān.

The Material Foundations of the Pyū

To the Pyū—as to their successors, the Burmese speakers centered at Pagān—whereas wet-rice agriculture was vital, trade was only important. A T’ang Dynasty source described it thus: “the land is suitable for pulse, rice, and the millet-like grains. Sugarcane grows as thick as a man’s shin. There is no hemp or wheat.”68 Rice, perhaps of the Japonica variety, which in Burma
has been found earlier than Indica, was apparently the mainstay of the Pyu state. Not surprisingly, therefore, evidence of irrigation tanks and canals abounds at Pyu urban sites. It has even been argued that the techniques of building dams, canals, and weirs found in nineteenth-century Upper Burma can be attributed to the Pyu of Beikthano. However, some of the canal-building techniques may have been created at a later age, perhaps during the Pagan period, when they became the prevailing and preferred method of irrigation. And although not demonstrated unequivocally with scientific evidence, some of the irrigation techniques found at the Pyu sites, such as bunding, could well have been contemporaneous to the sites, for the irrigation works were deliberately built in close conjunction with the design and placement of Pyu cities relative to the landform and water resources. Also, as shown above, some of the oldest and most important Pyu sites, such as Mongmao and Binnaka, were located right in what later became the heart of Pagan’s irrigated agriculture system—the well-watered Kyaukse plain—so it is unlikely that the Pyu placed their cities there without any intention of utilizing these bounties of nature. Indeed, the Pyu may well have been responsible for first irrigating Kyaukse.

As the Pyu heartland was in Upper Burma where most of its population, material resources, and largest cities lay, it was, for many centuries, the Pyu who began one of the most important and dominant themes in Burma’s history, what I have elsewhere called “Dry Zone paramountcy.” Virtually all the centers of power, culture, and resources, both human and material, in Burma’s urban history of approximately 2,100 years were centered in the Dry Zone of Upper Burma. There were only two brief exceptions, totaling approximately 218 nonconsecutive years, when the country’s political center moved to the coast. Yet, these short exceptions have been made to appear as the rule by some, well out of proportion to what the evidence actually shows.

This Pyu pattern of Dry Zone Paramountcy was subsequently perpetuated by the Burmese speakers. As noted above, one important fact we often forget is that the area occupied by the Pyu was not only the same general Dry Zone area in which the Burmese speakers later settled, but the Burmese speakers settled in some of the same valleys, and even in some of the same towns and cities. Of course, the Dry Zone is also the same general region where the stone and metal cultures of Burma’s prehistory are found. Following the Pyu decline in the late ninth century, Halin and Sri Ksetra remained important political, economic, and demographic centers for virtually all subsequent kingdoms. Even when the focus of power shifted to Pegu, once in the mid-sixteenth century and again in the early eighteenth, Sri Ksetra, locally called Prañ by then, continued to be a strategic prize, for it controlled the land passes to Arakan and its resources. As a
whole, then, the Dry Zone of Upper Burma was very much the nucleus for the kingdom of Pagán and nearly all subsequent Burmese dynasties for approximately 2,000 years, hence the term the “heartland of Burma.”

But Dry Zone Paramountcy created its own problems, illustrated by a concept geographers call “constancy of place.” It provides societies with certain advantages as well as disadvantages. The Dry Zone nourished its human inhabitants with the best soils of Burma, watered by perennial rivers that flowed from higher and wetter areas, along with seasonal floods. This resulted in predictable and regular yields that helped shape the stable nature of the social and political systems. At the same time, however, constancy of place also creates certain problems that beset these societies time and again. And because they are invariably addressed in similar ways, it produces oscillations of long duration from which it was difficult to break free. The Burmese speakers shared with the Pyū perspectives on the world shaped by the same physical environment.

In addition to agriculture, the Pyū may also have participated in the regional and international trade of Southeast Asia, in part suggested by a distinctive coinage presumably used in commerce and not simply created for symbolic reasons as earlier scholars have assumed. In most Pyū cities as well as in many of the small villages with Pyū artifacts, distinctive Pyū silver coins have been discovered. A copper coin with devanāgarī writing, thought to have been prevalent in Nepal and denoting a five-pice denomination, was found at Binnaka. In 1971 a hoard of some 500 of these “Pyū coins” were found at an ancient city called Kyaikkatha on the Lower Burma coasts on the Gulf of Martaban, while others have been found at Tavoy. Another hoard of about 36 coins was found in the area that later became Pegu. The Hsin-t'ang-shu, a Chinese text of the time, stated that the P'iao “take gold and silver to make it into coin. It is like a half moon in appearance, called dengchietue [dinga, an Indic term] and zudantuo.” This is perhaps the first evidence of commercial coinage in the country, but after the Pyū period indigenous coins for whatever purpose disappear until the nineteenth century with King Mindon’s attempts at modernization.

Such numismatic evidence has often been construed as evidence for the presence of an early Mon state in Lower Burma. Robert Wicks attributes one particular type to be of Pegu provenance, dated stylistically to the fifth century AD. And although he wrote that the coin was of “Pegu provenance,” not “Mon provenance,” nevertheless, the section where this is discussed appears under the subheading “The Mon of Thaton and Pegu.” It suggests, then, that these alleged fifth-century Pegu coins belonged to the Mon, with the inference that some kind of Mon state or society there at the time had minted them.

Even if these coins are correctly assigned to the fifth century on stylis-
tic grounds, their mere presence at a place that did not become the city of Pegu until 800 years later, and only subsequent to that was proved to be inhabited by Mon speakers, need not in any way suggest their presence there also during the fifth century. Pegu, itself, does not appear as a place name until 1266 AD in an Old Burmese inscription, a topic to be fully discussed in Chapter Three. Moreover, no Old Mon language is inscribed on these coins so no link between Mon culture and the artifact has been established. Like most scholars of Southeast Asia, Wicks assigned Lower Burma finds, particularly those from “traditional Mon centers” such as Pegu and Thatôn to the Mon, thereby creating an unsubstantiated link between geography, chronology, ethnicity, and the artifact. To be sure, when Wicks was writing, no one had yet challenged the Mon Paradigm, so it was not an issue that he needed to address.

That some trade with far-off places occurred is evident as early as Beikthano. What resembles Red Polished Ware, supposedly a hallmark of northwest India has been found there, along with carnelian and onyx beads similar to those of Hastinapura and Brahmapuri of second century AD India and other parts of Southeast Asia, such as the Tambon Caves in the Philippines. Many sprinkler vessels reminiscent of Roman ware, perhaps produced in South India at Arikamedu, have also been unearthed. And what appears to be a kind of rouletted blackware found in western Java and other parts of Southeast Asia has also been discovered at Beikthano and the other Pyū cities.

Like most others in Southeast Asia at the time, the Pyū culture also conducted trade and diplomatic relations with China. In 800 and 801–802 AD, Śrī Kṣetra sent a formal embassy, along with a group of about thirty-five musicians, to the T’ang capital, where their instruments and songs, all on Buddhist themes, were recorded in fairly good detail. These musicians were said to have been wearing “K’un-lun dress,” which Luce summarily concluded was Mon. Yet most modern scholars, particularly Wheatley, do not identify K’un-lun with the Mon but with people of various ethnic backgrounds who lived in Island and Coastal Southeast Asia. The Hsin-t’ang-shu goes on to state that the embassy itself came from “the city of Sri” but it did not say that the musicians accompanying them were P’iao, so any group of musicians living or working at Śrī Kṣetra could have been part of the troupe. Indeed, the Chinese source adds that the P’iao music was all in the fan (Sanskrit) dialect. Although no original evidence has yet been found of musical instruments attributed to Śrī Kṣetra itself, five bronze figurines of musicians that belonged to the Śrī Kṣetra period were discovered just outside the city walls during the excavation season of 1966–1967, near the Payamā stupa. That they were culturally Pyū, of course, is impossible to tell, especially as their dress resembles that of South India or Ceylon, and
they are playing instruments clearly recognizable as belonging to that region of South Asia.\textsuperscript{89}

This kind of cultural and economic relationship with other regions of Asia was obviously facilitated by towns and cities located on the Lower Burma coasts on the Gulf of Muttama, such as Winga, Hsindat-Myindat, Sanpannagon, and Mudon,\textsuperscript{90} that possessed Pyū artifacts. Although there is insufficient evidence to state unequivocally that the Pyū kingdom also had military and administrative control over these coastal cities and towns, their distinctive cultural artifacts, particularly “fingermarked” bricks, and others with Buddhist and Brahmanic symbols, are found all over the country.\textsuperscript{91}

**Indic Influences and Pyū Culture**

It was upon these indigenous material and physical environmental foundations that were laid the intellectual influences from outside, most notably India. Important aspects of Buddhist, Brahmanic, and Hindu doctrines, themes, motifs, and principles represented in religious structures, iconography, and written texts have been found among Pyū remains. Most of these have been discovered at seventh-century AD Śrī Kṣetri, the city that yielded perhaps the most evidence in terms of Indic culture. According to Stargardt, however, evidence of Buddhism among the Pyū may have appeared even earlier, at Beikthano, probably around the early part of the fourth century AD.\textsuperscript{92} If correct, I would contend, it did so at Halin, Mongmao, and Binnaka also, as they were probably contemporaries of the former.

By the Beikthano period, the Pyū were placing the remains of their cremated dead in pottery and stone urns and burying them in or near certain isolated stupas, a practice that is consistent with early Buddhist practices of interning the remains of holy personages in stupas. Stargardt thinks that this practice at Beikthano may have been the result of an “interaction” between the pre-Buddhist Pyū funerary practices and a later age, when Buddhist influences became part of the Pyū conceptual system.\textsuperscript{93} Although Pyū culture exhibited signs of a pre-Indic, pan-Southeast Asian megalithic culture and belief system—especially in its funerary rituals and other rites dealing with fertility, the sun, seasons, and monsoons\textsuperscript{94}—by about the fourth century AD, Buddhism, and the Brahmanic context in which it was created and carried, had already become the dominant conceptual system of the Pyū.

At Beikthano also, what appears to be a Buddhist monastery, a large stupa, and a smaller shrine have been excavated. They probably date post fourth century.\textsuperscript{95} The distinctive design and floor plans of the monastery\textsuperscript{96} is in many important respects reproduced at Pagán in the thirteenth-cen-
Some evidence of Ceylonese contact with the Pyū can also be discerned this early, particularly in the Anurādhapura style “moonstones” (half-circle, carved stone thresholds on monastery and temple doorways) discovered at both Beikthano and Halin. However, such architectural features also point to links with Nagarjunakonda in South India. At Mongmao, a brick structure nearly identical to another thought to be a large stupa at Beikthano was also excavated. These architectural styles, ground plans, even the brick size and construction techniques of these buildings point to South India’s Andhradesa, particularly Amarāvati and Nagarjunakonda.

By perhaps the seventh century, at Śrī Kṣetra, tall cylindrical stupas were built—the Bawbawgyi, Payagyi, and Payamā—whose prototypes point to the (conjectured) great stupas at Beikthano and Mongmao, where unfortunately only the foundations remain. Śrī Kṣetra also produced hollow temples, such as the Bëbë, Lëmyethna, and the East Zegu, that were, along with several others, prototypes for the later hollow temples (gu) of Pagān. The Yahanda Gu at Śrī Kṣetra has a vaulted roof, characteristic of hundreds of gu built at Pagān. If this vaulted roof at Śrī Kṣetra was contemporary to the building and not a later repair, then the Pyū may have been the ones who passed on that very important engineering technique to the Burmese speakers at Pagān, a topic to be discussed more fully in Chapter Nine.

The solid stupas of Śrī Kṣetra were, in turn, the prototypes for Pagān’s, such as the Shwézigôn, Shwēhsandaw, and Mingalazedi, and ultimately, the Shwédagôn in modern Yangôn. Indeed, the earliest reliably dated solid stupas in Burma are found first in the interior of Upper Burma among the Pyū—in the Bawbawgyi, Payagyi, and Payamā—and only eight centuries later in Lower Burma. Even the Shwédagôn Pagoda, whose legend takes it back to the Lord Buddha’s time, cannot be proved by epigraphy to be earlier than the fourteenth or fifteenth century AD when its inscriptions were erected. This important issue will be discussed in Chapter Three.

In terms of iconography, Buddha statues with bhumiṣpasa mudra (earth-touching posture) were very much a part of Śrī Kṣetra’s art, a favorite pose that continues to be portrayed even today. Along with Theravāda Buddhist iconography, what is thought to be Mahayanist statuary was also discovered. A four-armed bronze Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara was found near the Bawbawgyi stupa, identified, of course, by the Mahayanist Buddha Amitābha on his elaborate headdress. Pyū iconography also revealed evidence of tantric and other forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Avalokiteśvara, Tārā, Mānuṣi, Jambhala, Lokanātha, and Hayagriva, all prominent in Mahāyāna Buddhism, were very much part of the Pyū, and later the Pagān scene. Brahmanism was also well represented in iconography at Śrī Kṣetra. The standing figures of Viṣṇu and his consort, Lakṣmī, are found together
in bold relief on a sandstone slab. Other manifestations of Viṣṇu were found, one with four arms, standing on his vehicle, Garuḍa, while another has him reclining on the serpent Ananta, a motif also found at eleventh-century Pagan in the Nat-hlaung-gyaung. On three lotus flowers that emerge from the navel of this reclining Viṣṇu are members of the Hindu Trinity: Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva.103

In Lower Burma as well, archaeologists have uncovered “two reliefs of the four-armed Vishnu sleeping on the Ananta serpent, with the Hindu Trinity, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva growing from his navel. Also...the great...four-armed Shiva, with his vehicle the bull Nandi, crushing the buffalo-demon, his spouse Parvati seated against his thigh.”104 These came from the Thaton area, and there are, or were, a good many other Brahmanic sculptures found elsewhere in Lower Burma. In the Kawgun Cave, some thirty miles above Moulmein, “low down on the west wall,” is another such figure of Vishnu with a partially read inscription in South Indian script, saying Śri Paramesvara-pāda. It has been dated paleographically to the sixth or seventh-century AD.105

This reverence for Viṣṇu106 continued into at least eleventh-century King Kyanzittha’s reign at Pagan, where he traced his mythical genealogy not only to historical Śrī Kṣetra but also to Viṣṇu. Indeed, King Kyanzittha’s first inscription regarding this theme was erected at Śrī Kṣetra, at the time still a prominent city under the Pagan kingdom.107 The Brahminism of the Pyū period, particularly at Śrī Kṣetra, was said to be of the Vengi-Pallava tradition, to which Pyū sculpture has been linked, stylistically dated to the first half of the fifth century AD. Other “Hindu” or Brahmanic images also point to the Andhra region.108

At a particular time in its history, or perhaps together with Brahmanism, Theravāda Buddhism made its impact on the ideology among the Pyū. Pali inscriptions bearing the Theravāda Canon have been discovered among Pyū ruins, one inscription taken from the Abhidhamma and others from the Maṅgala Sutta, Ratna Sutta, and the Mora Sutta.109 In 1926, in a relic chamber of a ruined pagoda at or near Śrī Kṣetra, a gold manuscript consisting of twenty thin gold plates incised in Pyū script110 of the fifth century (seventh century according to Charles Duroiselle)111 but expressed in the Pali language was found. It revealed eight extracts from a wide range of Pali texts, including the Abhidhamma and the Vinaya.112 That alone should confirm the presence of Theravāda Buddhism there at that time. The “ye dhamma hetuprabhava” formula (he who sees the dharma, sees me; he who sees me, sees the dharma), said to be distinctly Theravāda Buddhist, is also found on dozens of votive tablets of the same period, another two gold plates, and other stone inscriptions.113

But note the kind of reasoning given by the Mon Paradigm to ration-
alize its assumptions that these early Pali influences were “more or less concurrent influences in the Mon country from an early period.” This is best illustrated by a direct quote from Duroiselle: “As Prome is on the Irrawaddy, the presumption is that the Pali Canon was introduced there by way of the river route, not by some difficult overland track; and consequently that it was known in the Mon region round the mouths of the river before it reached Prome.”114 Of course, a river route from Lower Burma to Prome does not necessarily imply an earlier Mon connection; this is a self-fulfilling argument indeed.

Another Pali inscription, said to be in South Indian characters of the seventh to the eighth centuries, has also been found about forty miles northeast of what later became Pegu. It contains part of an excerpt from the Vinaya Mahāvagga, very similar to the gold leaf Pali manuscript noted above,115 and suggests the scope of this prevailing religious and literary influence over the Lower Burma region as well. In Tadagale, a few miles north of modern Yangon, a bronze standing Buddha was found, said to be in Gupta style and dated to the fifth century AD.116 At the same place a clay votive tablet was discovered inscribed with what some scholars call a “Pyū/Pali” script, said to be of the seventh century AD,117 and another votive tablet with a fragmentary Pali inscription in tenth-century writing.118 At the Botataung Pagoda, also in Yangon, a Pali inscription with a Buddhist formula, thought to be of the seventh century AD, was found in the relic chamber exposed as a result of bombing during World War II.119

Much of this Theravāda Buddhism was probably derived from the Andhra region, where it thrived during the fifth and sixth centuries AD, when perhaps Halin, then Śrī Kṣetra, or perhaps both simultaneously, were the exemplary centers in Burma. Such a model, in which one center lay in the agrarian interior and one on, or with easy access to, the commercial coast, was, of course, typical of the ancient world. This South Indian school of Theravāda Buddhism has been associated with Buddhaghosa, in contrast to the Ceylonese Theravāda, which is associated with Śrīm and Utara and the North Indian Sanskrit school with Upagupta.120 The issue is more complicated in practice, but the point I am trying to make here is that two of the three traditions, those of Buddhaghosa and Upagupta, can be found in Pyu culture prior to the mid-eleventh century presumed Mon-Burman contact.121

A Hinayāna sect appeared to have been present at Śrī Kṣetra also, the Sarvāstivāda. This group wrote the Buddhist Canon in Sanskrit rather than in Pali, and one of their strongholds lies in northeastern India in the Magadha region.122 They differed little with the Theravāda as both belonged to the broader Hinayāna and followed the same Vinaya. One important belief found in the Sarvāstivāda is the ideology of Maitreya, the
future Buddha, who will descend to earth after the allotted 5,000 years have elapsed to preach the ultimate sermon so that all humans hearing it will attain nirvana. Among other pieces of evidence, Maitreya is found in Pyū culture by a bronze statuette with an inscription identifying him. The concept of Maitreya was central to Burmese Buddhism as well as its political ideology for millennia, and was known at least during the Śrī Kṣetra period. And long after Śrī Kṣetra had declined as the premier center of the Pyū, a terracotta votive tablet with a Pyū inscription was found in the relic chamber of the eleventh-century Shwéhsandaw at Pagán. The prayer was precisely for that boon—to be reborn when Maitreya returns to earth to preach the ultimate sermon. At Pagán, of course, nearly every donation ended with that same request; indeed it is still the main wish of devotees today.

During the early twentieth century, a silver cylindrical reliquary was discovered at Śrī Kṣetra on which was embossed the names and figures of the last four Theravāda Buddhas of this present kalpa (age). Each Buddha, seated in bhūmispaśa mudrā is identified by name in both Pali and Pyū. From the center of the reliquary rises a banyan tree, today often regarded as a symbol of the yet-to-arrive Maitreya. This kind of reliquary was clearly a miniature of their larger counterparts, the hollow gu (temple), in which were placed the same four Buddhas in the same cardinal directions, with the unopened lotus bud on top, representing the future Buddha. Such symbolism became ubiquitous subsequently, at Pagán especially.

In other words, various forms of Buddhism existed in Upper and Lower Burma, including what was considered “orthodox,” long before the Mons allegedly brought orthodoxy to the Burmese speakers after Aniruddha’s conquest of Thatôn in 1057 AD and certainly before the first presumed Burman-Mon contact, for that did not occur until the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries. Indeed, not a single, dated, original Old Mon language inscription has been found on a single piece of art historical and archaeological material from Lower Burma during the Pyū period prior to the rise of Pagán.

The only belief system about which we have little or no record this early in contemporary sources is nat worship, an indigenous supernaturalism centered on and perhaps incorporated by the Cult of the 37 Nats. Although many aspects of this latter cult actually reside within the conceptual framework of the Brahmanic, Hindu, and particularly Buddhist contexts, it has also been assumed to have been an earlier, distinct Mon contribution, particularly by H. L. Shorto, the late, distinguished scholar of Mon. Yet all the sources he cited for that argument are fifteenth century and later. Indeed, the cult itself may be fairly late, as no original evidence for it as such exists in the Pagán inscriptions.
In addition to religious beliefs per se, the conceptions of state and king during the Buddhist period of the Pyu seemed to have been centered on Indic ideologies as well. They instituted a monarchy based on royal families that used the Indic names of Varman and Vikrama. Their major cities were created to symbolize heaven on earth, revealing Hindu-Buddhist cosmological concerns of time and space that were expressed in the twelve gates found in several Pyu cities. Each of the twelve gates represented a sign of the zodiac, suggesting that the city was sacred space and time on earth. Typically, this heaven on earth was Tāvatiṃsa, the favorite of several Buddhist heavens throughout Burma’s history, ruled by the high Brahmanic deity Indra and his thirty-two lords, a motif and design that is most clearly illustrated by the nineteenth-century royal palace at Mandalay. The belief that Indra (Sakrā in the Pali tradition and Thagya in the Burmese) oversaw the creation of Śrī Kṣetra can be found in an eleventh-century Pagan inscription as well as the Burmese chronicles. In the latter, Sakrā, standing at the center of the future city, envisioned a circle drawn by a rope dragged around by a Nāga.

The Burmese dating system of what Buddhist scholars call the Lesser Era (Cūlaśakarāj), that starts on Friday, 20 March 638 AD when the month of Vesakha begins, is apparently derived from the North Indian, not the Ceylonese or South Indian traditions. The Pyu had been using this era several hundred years prior to the first appearance of the Burmese speakers and their subsequent contact with the Mon. Indeed, in Burma Studies, it is called the “Pyu Era.”

And finally, Indic culture can be found in the Pyu writing system, whose connections to the Pagan script, in which Old Burmese, Old Mon, Arakanese, and much later, Shan, were written, will be more fully discussed in Chapters Seven and Eight. Suffice to say here that, as is true virtually everywhere else in Hindu-Buddhist Southeast Asia during this period except Sinicized Vietnam, the Pyu writing system was also borrowed from India. Brāhmī scripts of both North and South India—the former, of the period of Aśoka’s edicts, and the latter, of the Tamil Sangam literature, both dated approximately to the third and second centuries BC—as well as later northeastern Indian scripts of the Gupta era and South Indian Kannada of the same era are found at Pyu sites. The script which ultimately became Pyu itself seemed to have developed during the early Halin period and is thought by some, although not others, to be most closely related to South-west India’s Kadamba, a topic to be fully discussed in Chapter Seven.

The fact that inscriptions at Halin and Śrī Kṣetra included interlinear Brāhmī of the South Indian variety suggests that although the Pyu were beginning to experiment with their own script, they were still not confident enough with their language to leave out Brāhmī entirely from the writing
system, whereas earlier, at Beikthano, Brāhmī stood alone. By the time the royal funerary urn inscriptions of Śrī Kṣetra were written perhaps in the seventh and early eighth centuries AD, the Pyū language was being written in the Pyū script without any interlinear Brāhmī. And by the time the two gold plates from Maung Kan’s field, the silver casket, and the gold-leafed manuscript mentioned above were written, the Pyū script was willing to tackle even the Pāli language. This, indeed, is indicative of a turning point in the development of the Pyū script, for it had finally gained the confidence and ability to write Pāli, the status language, the language of the Buddha, the language most capable at the time of the highest forms of expression. The names of each of the four Buddhas of this kalpa (age) represented on the silver reliquary—Gotama, Koṇāgamana, Kakusandha, and Kassapa—are written not in Pāli but the Pyū language, as are each of the Buddha’s four disciples, while at the bottom are the names, probably of the donors, Śrī Brabhuvarman and Śrī Prabhudevi.

Thus, the best evidence available suggests that sometime between the second and the sixth centuries AD, the Pyū had been experimenting with a script, and although linguists seem to agree that all scripts of India ultimately stem from Brāhmī, Pyū’s immediate precursor appears to have been western South India’s Kadamba alphabet of Vanavasi, a script also used during the fifth to sixth centuries AD in North Kannada, near Goa. The dates of the latter script as well as the place from where it came correspond well with the chronology of and source of influence for Beikthano and Halin. By the Pagan period, and probably earlier, the Pyū people had already addressed some of the problems of adapting Tibeto-Burman tones to an Indo-European alphabet and vowel system that did not need to mark tones. The Pyū face of the Myazedi Inscriptions shows a wide range of these tones being used, possibly eight, a process very likely adopted by the writers of Old Burmese, as we shall see in Chapter Seven.

The Decline of Pyū Civilization

After approximately a millennium of existence and influence by the Pyū and their culture in the areas now considered the heartland of precolonial Burma, the Man Shū stated that the kingdom of Nanchao “looted and plundered the P’iao kingdom. They took prisoner over three thousand of their people . . . [and] banished them into servitude at Chê-tung, and told them to fend for themselves. At present their children and grandchildren are still there, subsisting on fish, insects, etc. . . . Such is the end of their people.” The same account preserved in the T’ang History is somewhat different, its translator, Parker, writing that “in the year 832 the Nan-chao monarch kidnapped 3,000 Burmans and colonised his newly acquired east-
ern dominions with them” [my emphasis].\textsuperscript{152} This suggests, of course, that the Burmese speakers were already present in Pyū society, although one wonders whether the term “Burmans” was actually in the original.\textsuperscript{153}

Whatever the case may be, a political vacuum had been created as a result of the raid, and into it moved the Burmese speakers. They were either already present in Pyū society or, as one scholar contends, were part of the Nanchao forces who galloped down the passes but chose to remain in Burma for reasons bordering on modern sentiments regarding political “freedom.”\textsuperscript{154} However, archaeological, epigraphic, and early chronicle evidence suggests, instead, an indigenous, historical continuity between Pyū and the Burmese speakers irrespective of the Nanchao raid. Certainly there is nothing in the narrative of the \textit{Man Shu} to suggest that the Pyū kingdom as a whole was destroyed—it was only “looted and plundered”—or that the Pyū people and culture disappeared totally because 3,000 of them may have been taken away as labor. The size of the Pyū kingdom and its many walled cities throughout the land not only indicates a population many times the number said to have been taken, but one that was not concentrated in any single city in a single locality. There is also radiocarbon evidence, noted above, from nearly four decades after the Nanchao raid of 832: at Pagān in the reliquary of Aniruddha’s Shwéhsandaw Pagoda and therefore thought to be mid-eleventh century, another near the front (east) gate of Pagān with an unknown date, the third, of course, the famous fourth face of the so-called Myazedi Inscriptions of 1112 AD, and the fourth in Lower Burma.\textsuperscript{155} Indeed, several Pyū-language inscriptions were discovered centuries after the Nanchao raid of 832: one at Pagān in the reliquary of Aniruddha’s Shwéhsandaw Pagoda and therefore thought to be mid-eleventh century, another near the front (east) gate of Pagān with an unknown date, the third, of course, the famous fourth face of the so-called Myazedi Inscriptions of 1112 AD, and the fourth in Lower Burma.\textsuperscript{156} The Pyū as a people also continued to be mentioned in several Old Burmese inscriptions of the early thirteenth and the second half of the fourteenth centuries. In the inscriptions of Pagān and Ava, a Pyū concubine, a Pyū carpenter, a Pyū village, Pyū rice lands totaling some 234 acres, Pyū toddy palms, a Pyū mound, a Pyū “female husband” (spouse?), and a Pyū firewood dealer are mentioned.\textsuperscript{157}

This suggests that the Nanchao raid may have affected only one Pyū city, perhaps the capital, and not the kingdom or polity as a whole. Thus, although the Nanchao raiders may have precipitated a change in the political situation by weakening the established leadership, thereby providing the Burmese speakers an opportunity to take charge, the Pyū people or their culture did not disappear entirely. Indeed, Pyū culture was preserved in Pagān institutions and culture. Virtually the entire Indic culture of
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Pagán—the writing system, the measurement of time, the most important religious beliefs, the best of its engineering techniques for building temples, its conceptions of statecraft, the most enduring symbols relating to the capital city; and even some of the underlying principles found in dance and music—is recognizable in the parent culture of the Pyū.

And because this Indic culture can be documented among the Burmese speakers only after they had settled in the plains of the Irrawaddy River valley—certainly there is no evidence of Indic culture among the proto-Burmese speakers (the Lolo) when they still lived where most scholars think was their original western Yunnan homeland—over one and a half centuries before their first assumed contact with the Mon in the late eleventh century AD at the earliest, it is most likely that the Burmese speakers derived it from the Pyū, not from the Mon or the proto-Burmese.

Following the Nanchao raid, sometime between the mid-ninth and early eleventh-centuries, the walled city of Pagán was built. This is dated in a horoscope of the city to precisely 849 AD by one of the earliest Burmese chronicles, while the most recent radiocarbon results taken from a charred teak fragment of the palace within the walled city provides a calibrated date (with 95.4 percent probability), at the earliest end of the spectrum, of 980 AD. The foundations of the main wall, which we might expect to have been built earlier instead of later than the palace, yielded a calibrated date of 1020 AD at its earliest spectrum. But fill from what is thought to have been an abandoned latrine between the walled area and the moat produced a calibrated radiocarbon date, again at earliest, of 990 AD.

It is true, of course, that these radiocarbon dates include a late spectrum as well, so that the plateau between early and late dates is a large one, even though the 95.4 percent probability of the calibrated dates is very close in most cases to the uncalibrated ones dated “BP” (before present, that is, 1950). But there is ample epigraphic evidence for the later years at Pagán and the late end of the spectrum of the carbon dates, that is, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. My focus, therefore, is on the less well-known early period, to see if there is any scientific basis for some of the earliest traditional accounts regarding the origins of the Pagán Dynasty as exemplified by its fortified capital and palace.

Clearly there is, and it deserves serious consideration. The dates given for the palace and latrine are close to those recorded in the Zatataupon Yazawin and belong to the decade during which an epigraphically confirmed king of Pagán reigned and a late copy of a royal inscription in Burmese dated to 984 AD exists. The inscription was presumably erected during the reign of Aniruddha’s grandfather (Saw Rahan, 956–1001), who was followed by his father (Kyaung Phyu, 1001–1021), then by Aniruddha.
himself, who ascended the throne in 1044 AD. Thus, even the 1020 AD radiocarbon date for the foundations of the city walls falls within the reigns of these three historical individuals, when a monarchy of Burmese-speaking kings had already been established at Pagan, and shortly after Pyu dominance had waned in the Dry Zone.

The scientific evidence, therefore, tends to support chronicle and other traditional accounts, not only that Pyu and Burman cultures were contemporaneous or nearly so, but that Pyu culture immediately preceded and overlapped in time and space with Burman culture in the kingdom of Pagan. It suggests that the Burmese speakers had absorbed whatever population and culture remained of the Pyu after the Nanchao raid. And because the city of Pagan became the capital of a kingdom under the leadership of Burmese speakers almost immediately after Pyu domination ceased, it means the Burmese speakers followed right on the heels of the Pyu, leaving no occasion for a putative “Mon period” to have preceded the “rise” of the kingdom of Pagan, as implied by the Mon Paradigm. The Pyu were clearly the immediate predecessors of the Burmese speakers—historically, socially, economically, politically, geographically, infrastructurally, and artistically. It was they who gave their culture to the Burmese speakers, not the Mon, who did not even appear on the scene until two hundred years later.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the Burmese chronicles recalled the Pyu to have been the founders of the Pagan dynasty. This sentiment is reflected in the tradition of Pyuminhti (Umbrella of the Pyu King), probably an etymon, the linguistic form from which another form is historically derived whereby the essential meaning of a word is seen in its origins. Even more telling, the first several kings of the Pagan Dynasty, as recorded in Burmese chronicles, follow the patronymic system found in the culture of Nanchao and other Tibeto-Burman speakers such as the Pyu, where the last portion of the predecessor’s name was used as the first portion of his successor’s. Most significant, this connection made between the Burmese speakers and the Pyu by the Burmese chronicles occurred well before modern, twentieth-century research pointed in the same direction, which suggests that such traditions of an earlier relationship may have been well founded.

All the above evidence suggests that a fairly widespread, relatively uniform (or at least similar) culture existed over much of the country before and during most of the first millennium. It displayed characteristic Upper Burma (Pyu) cultural features, none of which can be identified as having belonged to Dvaravati, the only known Mon cultural center thought to have existed during the same period of time. And even if one can show that some Mon artifacts may have come from Dvaravati into the Pyu region, it can hardly be considered evidence to support the kinds of claims made by
the Mon Paradigm. Such evidence should come as no surprise in any case, since the Pyū were actively linked by trade and diplomacy to a wider region of Southeast Asia.

**Conclusion**

Despite this rather clear continuity that exists between the Pyū and Burman environment, culture, and history, the Mon Paradigm nevertheless claimed that the reason for the growth and development of the kingdom of Pagán was a Lower Burma Mon contribution to virtually every aspect of the culture of the Burmese speakers at Pagán. This notion implies at least a *tabula rasa* between the “end” of the Pyū and the “beginning” of the Burmese speakers, a conclusion also not supported by the evidence.

At the same time, however, although there is continuity between Pyū and Burman culture, it does not mean that the kingdom of Pagán cannot, or should not, be regarded as an apt marker for important qualitative and quantitative change. Change itself is not at issue, but whether that change was a movement from Mon to Burman or from Pyū to Burman culture. In terms of the cultural group who was now in the leadership position of the central plains, and in terms of the more evolved structure of state and society—in short, in terms of the composition of leadership, the scale of the kingdom, and the structure of state and society—Pagán was indeed a changed entity.

Certainly the size of the exemplary center had changed. Pagán was a relatively small (approximately 140 hectares) walled city compared with the much larger (664–1,400 hectares), cities of the Pyū. The large size of the earlier cities suggests that much of the population resided within the walls, as corroborated by the *Man Shu*. It is there that the remains of their important secular and religious structures (palaces, temples, mausoleums), as well as their sources of food (irrigated fields) can be found. In contrast, in the kingdom of Pagán, the majority of the population could not have lived inside the small area enclosed by the capital’s walls. Instead, the evidence shows that the vast majority of its people—the crown service groups (*kywan-tō*), the *purā kywan* attached to the *saṅgha*, and the nonattached *asaṅi*—lived outside the city walls, and by Pagán’s zenith in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, as far away as 100 miles from the capital city itself. Indeed, the bulk of the kingdom’s most vital agricultural resources where most of these people were located—the irrigated regions of Kyauksé, Minbu, and the Mu Valley—were not protected, as in Pyū times, behind the capital’s defensive walls. It is true that Pagán had regional fortifications, but nevertheless these were situated quite a distance from the center.

This new configuration suggests, among other things, that both quan-
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titative and qualitative changes had taken place following the Pyū period. Economic growth meant concomitant demographic growth (or vice versa), perhaps ultimately triggered by the ability to harvest three crops annually of the new, greater-yielding padi of the Indica variety. This would have been enhanced by the building of new or the refurbishing of old irrigation works, along with an influx of much-needed labor from surrounding areas attracted by this growth. Thus, Pagān seemed to have been a much wealthier, more hierarchic, administratively larger, more powerful, more stable, more centralized, and more secure state than the Pyū state had been. Otherwise, the Pyū configuration of the state, with the majority of the population and rice lands located inside the walls of much bigger, well-defended cities rather than spread far outside them, would most likely have remained intact.

The new state was wealthy and stable enough to patronize the Buddhist church, provide scholarships for students, pay artisans and architects to build nearly 3,000 religious edifices, including hundreds of monasteries, dozens of libraries, and other infrastructural projects such as dams, canals, reservoirs, and wells, on a scale that was not evident before. The majority of the religious buildings were also located outside the city walls. The state and society were further able to provide economic and other incentives for international visiting scholars to this exemplary center, and to maintain these programs with endowments of productive rice lands and hereditary labor or service of that labor for hundreds of years.

The kingdom of Pagān was also strong enough to expand its territory to nearly the country’s modern size and enjoyed a stature within the “international Buddhist community” in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries of being the foremost center of Theravāda Buddhism in the region, one which pilgrims, monks, and scholars from distant lands eagerly visited.

In light of the above, then, the following question needs to be asked. To what extent was this qualitative and quantitative change a result of Mon influence, as claimed? The answer is, not much, if any. By the time the conquest of Lower Burma had occurred, between 1055 and 1057, the genesis of Burmese rule was already nearly a century old, the walled fortifications of their exemplary center had already been built for a quarter century, and Aniruddha, thought to be the one who initiated first contact with the Mon of Lower Burma, had already been on the throne for thirteen years. He had already consolidated the northern, eastern, and western flanks of the country, leaving the southern portion, Lower Burma, for last.

It is during this final phase of unification that Burmese speakers first came in contact with Mon speakers, as the earliest evidence of Mon culture in Pagān appears only in the King Kyanzittha’s reign (1084–1112). By then, state and society at Pagān already possessed much, if not most, of its impor-
tant institutions: a hierarchic, predominantly agrarian society ruled by a central, hereditary monarchy that probably controlled the kingdom by means of a widespread administrative structure and certainly by a conceptual system based on Buddhist ideas of kingship and state. Mon culture appeared in Upper Burma only much later and therefore could not have played the kind of role in the development of the kingdom of Pagán that the Mon Paradigm claims.

Indeed, it was just the reverse: the culture of Pagán provided the most important Indic and non-Indic factors in the development of the Lower Burma Mon state, which emerged for the first time in the country only in the very late thirteenth century, as will be demonstrated in subsequent chapters. It was Pagán that provided the wherewithal for the origins and development of a much later Thatôn and Rāmāṇadesa, having already acquired—from at least two centuries of integration with the Pyū—the necessary political, economic, religious, literary, social, and artistic ingredients to do so.

Yet the Mon Paradigm dies hard. When Winga, a Lower Burma site, was discovered in the 1980s near Thatôn, it was automatically assumed to have been Mon since it was in Lower Burma and close to Thatôn, despite the fact that the two artifacts from Winga submitted to TL dating produced very late dates of 1499 and 1662 A.D. Despite such scientific evidence contradicting the Mon Paradigm, Winga became yet another brick in the house laid by the Mon Paradigm, and is considered by Burma scholars today to have been part of the legendary Suvaṇṇabhūmi of Buddhist literature, an ancient Eldorado claimed by fifteenth century King Dhammazedi to have been the “realm of the Rmañ” since the early Christian era.