





Map 2. Post-Anyathian and Bronze Age sites. (Map by Jane Eckelman)

## Editorial



### RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF MYANMA PYAY (BURMA): AN INTRODUCTION

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WE ARE PLEASED TO WELCOME readers to this special issue of *Asian Perspectives* that focuses on the archaeology of Myanma Pyay (Burma).<sup>1</sup> Six papers present findings from archaeological research on different aspects of Burma's history and prehistory. They draw from recent field research, collections analysis, technical studies, and reports circulated within the country's boundaries. In addition, two of the leading archaeologists of mainland Southeast Asia, Professor Charles Higham and Professor Ian Glover, have graciously agreed to comment on these papers and to share their perspectives on the archaeology of Burma. The time has come for a reckoning of our knowledge of Burma's archaeology and to establish a foundation for the growing number of research projects that have been launched, and will begin in the near future. In these introductory comments, we first explain the origins of, and justification for, a special issue devoted to a single country's archaeology. We then tack between general concerns in the archaeology of Burma and issues that the following papers raise.

One afternoon in April 1999, as a group of us walked toward the anthropology department on the campus of the University of Hawai'i to hear Bob Hudson give a lecture on his doctoral research in Burma, we decided that the time was right to produce a special issue on Burma's archaeology. From a research perspective, Burma's location makes it a key player in cultural developments that occurred in mainland Southeast Asia (as well as in eastern India and southwestern China), and we discuss this point later in our introduction. From a topical perspective, Burma has begun to welcome foreign archaeologists to undertake work within its borders. Currently, Burmese archaeology forms the focus of postgraduate research for several students in Australia, the United States, and Singapore. In July 1998, several Burmese scholars attended the 16<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Indo-Pacific Prehistory Association conference in Melaka, Malaysia; they presented reports on a possible Bronze Age site in Burma to a standing-room only audience. In April 1999, one of us (MAT) organized a successful session on Burma called "Burma Studies: The Next Generation" for the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies that included two reports on archaeological research in the country.

One reason for this increased interest stems from Burma's academic leadership, which is genuinely interested in its archaeological heritage. In January 1999, Burmese archaeologists hosted a conference on prehistory that was inspired by excavations at a new Bronze Age site called Nyaung-gan (described in this issue by Moore and Pauk Pauk). The country has also recently opened up to tourism and certain fields of scholarship, including (and surprisingly) political science. A new national museum was constructed in the 1990s, which now displays prehistoric artifacts once stored in dusty boxes in an obscure archaeological department. Even the national archives have now been opened for research, boasting a digitized index of holdings, scanners and printers, and computers for those using the archives. A new manuscript archive was opened in the year 2000 with similar electronic equipment meant for public use. And, what had once been an onerous ordeal at the airport now had been largely alleviated by the use of FECs (Foreign Exchange Coupons) that give market rates for visitors' dollars, used as such or exchanged for kyats at market rates almost everywhere.

Thus it seemed to us on that spring afternoon that the time had come to publish work on the archaeology of Burma for both academic and infrastructural reasons. Yet, in 1999 one could also count the number of Burma prehistorians on one hand. For various reasons, most of them are out of touch with new techniques and methods and sorely in need of modern equipment and adequate funding. If our group, which was genuinely interested in disseminating information on Burma's prehistory to the rest of the field—with access to funding, to modern equipment and techniques, and a solid grounding on conceptual issues—did not do something, who would? Once we got involved in other projects, the enthusiasm of the moment would subside, and it would be a much more difficult task to accomplish. And if it never got off the ground now, chances are, it might not at all during our lifetimes. Those were the kinds of thoughts that drove us to prepare this special issue.

When we arrived at the lecture room, we asked the then editor of *Asian Perspectives*, Michael Graves, if he might be interested in a special Burma volume; he was. Subsequently, one of us (MTS) became a co-editor of this issue, and a co-editor of *Asian Perspectives*, which facilitated the process considerably. After that, it became a matter of hounding potential contributors to produce what we wanted and to do it more or less "on time" in the peer-review process that *Asian Perspectives* follows. Not only did most of the scholars we contacted agree to come on board, we also managed to persuade two of Southeast Asia's most prominent prehistorians to comment on the others' essays. The collected papers in this issue reflect the fruits of our labors.

But why Burma? One might reasonably ask why we decided to devote an entire issue of this journal to a country whose archaeological record remains so poorly known, when other Southeast Asian countries—notably Viet Nam, Thailand, and Indonesia—have a deep and rich history of archaeological research. Burma's archaeological record has fascinated and mystified Southeast Asian archaeologists for decades. Burma's borders with Thailand, India, and China make it a geographic and cultural bridge between what is generally considered South Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia. Understanding the archaeology of Burma is thus essential for explaining a series of developments in Southeast Asia, from the earliest hominids in Asia's middle Pleistocene to the rise of complex societies during the late Holocene. Archaeologists with geographic specialties elsewhere in

mainland Southeast Asia may also wish to compare their own findings with those now emerging from Burmese archaeological fieldwork and to “locate” Burma in a larger framework of mainland Southeast Asia.

This issue is loosely structured and widely varied in content. We made little attempt to fit contributors’ essays into a single theme, since our goals are mainly to showcase recent research and to let the data speak for themselves. We frame the issue by beginning with this introduction, followed by Michael Aung-Thwin’s review of the history of archaeological research in Burma. His essay summarizes archaeological research in Burma by various kinds of specialists over a half-century of sporadic work. It is followed by Elizabeth Moore and Pauk Pauk’s paper on a newly discovered Bronze Age site called Nyaung-gan, and the possible links to the subsequent “Pyu” culture that appeared. The latter, in turn, we know was the foundation for the Pagan kingdom, so this paper provides us with some evidence for the continuity of human habitation in the Dry Zone, where Burma scholars now think the origins of civilization in Burma may be (in Paul Wheatley’s sense of urban society and its significance). However, the reader will notice that precise dating is a very tricky exercise, explained technically but clearly in the essays by Barbetti and Grave who provide a most important discussion of the subject in terms of the city wall at Pagan, fortification and palace site.

Eager as we are to present some empirical data produced through archaeological research, Burma’s prehistory has been shackled for nearly a century by certain prejudices about the unreliability of later Burmese chronicles; the baby has often been thrown out with the bath water. It is in this realm that we must see a close relationship between archaeological and historical research, in which archaeological data must be used in conjunction with documentary data. Without the overriding chronological and historical framework (and in certain cases, specific detail) that these chronicles provide, we would not have had a clue where to look, what to look for, or what it all means. The discovery of Binnaka town is a very good example: without the chronicles’ account of it, archaeologists would not have known where to look or what to look for. It would have probably remained just another mound near an obscure village, rather than a major “Pyu” site with an important role in the earliest urban culture of Burma.

We also would have no basis on which to evaluate whether the carbon dates on Pagan being presented in this volume (for the first time) had any significance. It is only because, for instance, the chronicles attribute the founding of the city of Pagan to A.D. 849 that we have a reference point with which to begin an analysis and ask certain questions regarding the significance of the radiocarbon dates for the foundations, fortifications, palace, as well as for the nearby “pottery mound” that Bob Hudson’s article discusses. It does not mean the chronicles have been proved correct, but their claims allow us to raise the kinds of questions that would not have been raised otherwise.

While our goals for the issue included a desire to publish new data and pose new questions for the interested scholar, we also sought to emphasize the need to train another generation of archaeologists from Burma. The majority of contributors to this volume are not Burmese, although several contributors have worked collaboratively with their Burmese counterparts. Hence, we are pleased to publish John Miksic’s article, which focuses on long-term training for indigenous archaeologists. Without an on-the-ground program, Burma’s prehistory might well re-

main mired in the same (external) mold for another generation or more. And, lest we neglect the coasts—even if the bulk of Burma's prehistoric and historic data are found in the interior—Pamela Gutman's essay on Martaban trade provides an additional, although not necessarily alternative, perspective. Since most of the research on Burma's prehistory (and history) has been conducted in the interior, the lack of data on the coastal areas may be simply a result of not conducting enough research there.

Each article in this issue contains new findings that will affect how we interpret Burma's ancient past, and we are grateful to our contributors for their time and expertise on these papers. It is our greatest hope that this volume stimulates others to examine or reexamine important aspects of Burma's prehistory, and that it provides a baseline for future research. Even more important is the possibility that this issue may inspire another generation of young prehistorians to look at Burma as a wide-open field of study, where a student of the past can literally carve out for himself or herself a chunk of virgin territory as opposed to devoting research to someone else's footnote.

Our knowledge of the archaeology of mainland Southeast Asia has grown immensely in the four decades since Wilhelm Solheim (founder of this journal) and his students launched their research projects in northeast Thailand, finally putting Southeast Asia on the map. Throughout these four decades, generations of archaeologists have labored over sites from northern Viet Nam to Irian Jaya, and we have learned much about how populations adopted technological and cultural innovations through time. Yet our knowledge of mainland Southeast Asia remains patchy, and Burma is one of the areas about whose archaeological record we know the least. It is already a truism that Burma's location makes its study essential for understanding key developments that swept across much of the Asian continent: questions concerning Pleistocene hominids and Holocene innovations such as the origins of agriculture; the adoption of metallurgy (both bronze and iron); and the emergence of complex polities in the early first millennium A.D. Several of these topics—perhaps most notably middle Pleistocene hominids and first millennium A.D. complex polities—remain poorly known throughout mainland Southeast Asia; ongoing and future archaeological work in Burma on these topics may require us to revise our frameworks significantly.

Until recently, the paucity of archaeological research in Burma has limited our ability to explain pan-regional patterning through time across mainland Southeast Asia. As articles in this issue demonstrate, findings from recent archaeological projects have already begun to change our perspectives on Burma's historic and prehistoric sequence. We hope that the next few decades hold even more archaeological insights from new and innovative research projects, and that the next chapter of research on the archaeology of Burma will enrich our interpretations of the general region at different points in the archaeological past.

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## NOTE

1. The editors have decided to allow each author to use either term—Burma or Myanmar, Pagan or Bagan—in their respective papers. It should be noted, however, that the word “Myanmar,” an adjective for the name of the country, people, or language, has been in use since about the thirteenth century as such. Even during the height of the colonial period it was still the term used in indigenous speech to indicate the country, people, and language. “Burma,” on the other hand, is an English rendition of the Burmese word *bama*, the colloquial equivalent of the more formal *myanma*, meaning the same thing. We therefore use the term “Myanma Pyay” (country of the Myanma) for the title of this special issue to follow indigenous usage.

Moreover, we use the term “Burmese” for the national group composed of the various ethnic groups who are citizens of the country, and “Burman,” for the ethnolinguistic group itself. Both are English terms but still preferable to even more awkward terms such as “Myanmarese.”

As there are at least three different legitimate systems of Burmese romanization, we have decided to let authors employ their respective spellings for most place names. We have also omitted the “U” and “Daw” of Burmese personal names (Mr. and Mrs., respectively) unless they were included as such in the original publication being cited. And since there are no first or last names in Burmese, as in Indonesian, the proper sequence of the Burmese name is retained, rather than artificially creating a “last name” to be consistent with Westernized names.