

History of Buddhism in Myanmar: A Study of Ancient Sri Ksetra

Indasiha¹, V. M. Ravi Kumar²

¹Research Scholar, Department of History, Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Lucknow

²Professor, Department of History, Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Lucknow

Abstract

This study traces an intriguing history of urbanization focusing on the ancient Sri Ksetra city in Myanmar. The main purpose of this paper is to explore prehistoric and historical heritage in terms of art, Buddhist culture and literature focusing on the Sri Ksetra urban center which could be located in the first millennium CE. By so doing, the main focuses has been devoted to Buddhist cultural remains of Sri Ksetra which reflect core values of Buddhism.¹ The main formulation this paper develops is that Sri Ksetra² site has been an important archaeological source in Myanmar which provides fascinating details on the cultural and spiritual heritage. Sri Ksetra literally derived Sanskrit word that is to be divided into two Sri+ Ksetra it means Royal Place or full of auspicious.³ The site of Sri Ksetra, provides significant details about various aspects and the evolutionary trajectory of Buddhism in Myanmar. The main premise this paper puts forward is that Sri Ksetra urban center happens to be one of the important centers for Buddhist culture and demonstrates the relationship between political history and the history of Buddhism in Myanmar.

Keywords: Buddhism, Sri Ksetra, Myanmar, culture, history, and urban.

INTRODUCTION

Myanmar (officially called the Republic of the Union of Myanmar) is a country located in Southeast Asia. From an ethnic point of view, Myanmar is a land of great diversity. It is evident with the fact that a total of 135 tribal and ethnic communities have been living in Myanmar. It is apt to describe the location of Myanmar to grasp its geo-ecological diversity. Territorially, Myanmar covers an area of 677,000 square kilometers, or 261,228 square miles, ranging 936 kilometers (581 miles) from the east to west and 2051 kilometers (1275 miles) from north to south. It is a land of hills and valleys and is rimmed in the north, east and west by mountain ranges forming a giant horseshoe. Enclosed within the mountain barriers are the flat lands of Ayayawady, Chindwin and Sittaung River valleys where most of the country's agricultural land and population are concentrated. Myanmar consists of seven states and seven divisions.

So far as chronological history of Myanmar is concern, there are some disagreements among historians who study the history of Sri Ksetra (Pyu) and Bagan periods. Some sections of modern historians claim that the Konbaung dynasty is the beginning of history of modern

*Corresponding Author Email: indasiha@gmail.com

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Myanmar. It is widely believed by scholars that that Konbaung dynasty belongs to colonial history, while Pyu and Bagan refer to pre-colonial period in the history of Myanmar.⁴ According to historical records, the old city of Sri Ksetra is determined to be the ancient capital of Pyu. There were three famous capitals in Myanmar, Magwe in Vishnu (Beikthano), Shwe Bo in Hanlin and Twandin Gyin Pyay in Sriksetra. Sri Ksetra represents one of the most significant early urban centers in Southeast Asia, serving as the capital of the Pyu city-states that flourished in Myanmar. As the largest of the Pyu cities, it enclosed approximately 1,857 hectares within its monumental brick walls, with an extramural area of similar size, making it the most extensive city in Southeast Asia before the rise of Angkor seven centuries later. The Pyu cities, including Sri Ksetra, Halin, and Beikthano, were recognized for their outstanding universal and esthetic values when they were awarded UNESCO World Heritage status in 2014.⁵ These cities represent early and long-lasting examples of a distinctive form of urbanism linked with hydraulic development that characterized the dry zones of tropical Southeast Asia. The chronological framework of Sri Ksetra has traditionally relied on a combination of stylistic analysis of paleography, iconography, architecture, Chinese records, and Burmese traditional history.⁶

GEOGRAPHY OF MYANMAR

Myanmar (Burma) is the largest country in mainland South East Asia and the 40th largest in the world. It is bordered to the north-west by Chittagong Division of Bangladesh and Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh of India to the north-west. It shares its longest borders with Tibet to the north and Yunnan of China to the north-east for a total of 2,185 kilometers (1,358 mi). It is bounded by Laos and Thailand to the south-east. Burma has 1,930 kilometers (1,200 mi) of contiguous coastline along the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea to the south-west and the south, which forms one quarter of its total perimeter.⁷

In the north, the Hengduan shan mountains form the border with China. Hkakabo located in Kachin State at an elevation of 5,881 meters (19,295 ft.), is the highest point in Burma.⁸ Three mountain ranges, namely the Rakhine Yoma, the Bago Yoma, and the Shan Plateau, exist within Burma, all of which run north to south from the Himalaya.⁹ The mountain chains divide Burma's three river systems, which are the Ayeyarwaddy, Salween (Thanlwin), and the Sittaoung River.¹⁰ The Ayeyarwaddy River, Burma's longest river, nearly 2,170 kilometers (1,348 mi) long, flows into the Gulf of Martaban. Fertile plains exist in the valleys between the mountain chains. The majority of Burma's population lives in the Ayeyarwaddy Valley, which is situated between the Rakhine Yoma and the Shan Plateau. Much of the country lies between the Tropic of Cancer and the Equator. It lies in the monsoon region of Asia, with its coastal regions receiving over 5,000 mm (196.9 in) of rain annually. Annual rainfall in the delta region is approximately 2,500 mm (98.4 in), while average annual rainfall in the Dry Zone, which is located in central Burma, is less than 1,000 mm (39.4 in). Northern regions of the country are the coolest, with average temperatures of 21°C (70°F). Forests, including dense tropical growth and valuable teak in lower Burma, cover over 49% of the country.¹¹ On account of multiple geo-ecological zones, progress of Myanmar's society reflects a multilinear evolutionary model.

IMPORTANCE OF SRIKĀSETRA

The ancient Sri Ksetra city happens to be one of the important heritage centers of Myanmar. Etymologically the word Sri Kāsetra derived from Sanskrit word that can be divided into two *Sri+ Kāstra* which carries the meaning of *Royal Place or full of Auspicious and Prosperity*.¹² Metaphorically speaking, the earth is the history book and the antiques excavated are the pages of that book. In accordance with the excavation at Sri Ksetra, an ancient Pyu city, it is proof that the great traditional culture of Myanmar (then known as Burma) in Pyu–Myanmar (then known as Burma) literature, art, painting, architecture and Theravada Buddhism are able to continue to exist for thousands of years. Although majority of historians accepted the proliferation of Theravada Buddhism in Bagan era, the arrival of Theravada Buddhism to Sri Ksetra has been a contested theme. The Buddha Sasana means “the Buddha’s teaching” or the period in which the Buddha's teaching or Buddhism exists. Some scholars believe that Buddhism was introduced into Myanmar (then known as Burma) in the first century AD.¹³

Archaeological excavations have revealed that Buddhism flourished in Myanmar from the 3rd to 11th centuries AD, i.e., in the Pyu Period. Sri Ksetra, a city in the Pyu land, was the earliest locality in Myanmar where Buddhism flourished.¹⁴ Srikssetra, old Pyay, situated about 5 miles in the east of Pyay in Myanmar, was established by the guidance of Thera Gavampati at Buddha's Sasana Era 101 and this was the one that Duttapaung king firstly occupied the throne. In Srikssetra, there were reigns of the kings and it is seen that the city was ruined at the reign of King Supannanagarachinda in 16 the koja (Myanmar Era). Religious buildings in and around the ancient city of Srikssetra can still be seen. The arrival moment of Theravada Buddhism to Srikssetra and its historicity has been one of the important themes this paper deliberates upon.

DISCOVERY OF SRIKSETRA

A brief historical trajectory of political history leading to Sri Ksetra is useful to capture the conditions under which it was founded. Ancient Sri Ksetra (also known as Śrī Kāsetra) represents one of the most significant early urban centers in Southeast Asia, serving as the largest and most powerful of the Pyu city-states that flourished in Myanmar between approximately the 3rd century BCE and the 11th century CE.¹⁵ The political organization of Sri Ksetra can be typified by a monarchical system in which the ruler was supported by an advanced hierarchy of officials. The centralized administration of Sri Ksetra's governance system was able to oversee intricate water systems, plan massive construction projects, and control trade and commerce-related activities. With an administrative compound housing the royal palace at its heart, the city's structure itself mirrors this centralized planning, signifying the king's position as the cosmic center of the political and socio-cultural universe. This arrangement of spaces illustrates the physical manifestation of political power in the urban environment. Sri Ksetra most certainly had a bureaucratic structure in place to carry out governmental orders and oversee daily operations. Although there is no concrete proof of the administrative structure, archaeological discoveries point to hierarchical organization and function specialization. The presence of specialized authorities who oversaw these crucial economic operations is implied by the city's capacity to maintain enormous irrigation systems, coordinate craft production, and control trade. A scribal class that supported administrative

tasks is further evidenced by the existence of written seals and inscriptions in several languages (Pyu, Pali, and Sanskrit).¹⁶

Sri Ksetra's political structure demonstrated what academics have referred to as "extended urban format" a unique style of urbanization in Southeast Asia that is typified by enormous gated walls encircled by moats, with a system of roads and canals connecting the city's interior spaces to vast extramural development areas. This urban structure necessitated intricate administrative coordination and implies that Pyu emperors ruled over a sizable area outside the city walls, including agricultural hinterlands into their political and economic structure.¹⁷

Ancient Sri Khetra city is situated about 5 miles in the east of Pyay. It was founded by the guidance of Thera Gavampati at Buddha's Sasana Era 101. It was the city that King Duattapaung first occupied throne. According to the statement from the Glass Palace Chronicle, it was ruined during the reign of Supannanagarachinda in 16 ME. The Mon inscription, inscribed during the reign of King Kyancacsah in (1084-1113) AD,¹⁸ states that Sri Kshetra was created by Peikthano hermit together with Thera Gavampati, Sakka, King of celestial beings, Visukamma deva and Katakamma, Dragon King in the year when Buddha would pass away. On account of these records, it is prominent that this city was an ancient and prosperous one and it appeared in accord with the pronouncement of the Buddha as our forefathers believed consistently. In line with their belief, sightseeing around this city will help ones to confirm that Sri Kshetra was the most prosperous, ancient city. Moreover, many ancient historic stupas such as Baw Baw Gayi, Bhayah Gyi, Bhayahma and so on, are the evidence proving that Sri Kshetra is an ancient one. The city is shaped more or less like a circle. The whole city wall is eight miles and five furlongs long covered with bushes. Some of the remained city walls are 15 ft. in height and 17 feet in 60 breadths. The city area is an average of 5.5 square miles. It is wider than most other Pyu cities such as Hanlin and Beikthano. It is divided into two parts by Yangon-Pyay railway line. On the Southern part of this city have the palace site and many ancient buildings. The palace site is 1700 feet in length and 1125 feet in breadth. There are many rectangular mounds called 'Phy Thaik' around its surrounding. On the south are three big mounds and there is also a mound on the north near Phayahmar Pagoda. A rectangular city traditionally known as Beikthano city is on the north of the southern mounds.¹⁹

As a result of the Archaeological Survey in Sri Kshetra, 62 sites are not only the buildings on earth but also underground buildings excavated. It cannot be expected that all religious buildings were related exclusively with Buddhism in Sri Kshetra. In 1926-27,²⁰ a small Hindu building was excavated at a mound near Kalarkan village. It is, however, so ruined because of bad weather that its figure can hardly be seen nowadays. In view of this, it could be ascertained that most of the religious buildings belong to Buddhism. These religious buildings are divided into two sorts - stupa and temple. Baw Baw Gyi, Pha yar gyi and Pha yar mar are stupas and Ahshaye zaye, Bae Bae and Lay Myet Nhar are temples. Nyin Bar Hu and Settaing are stupas mixed with modern architecture. Baw Baw Gyi stupa, Phar yar gyi stupa and Pha yar mar stupa were massively built with brick.²¹

Sri Ksetra is the largest Pyu city, once the capital of unified sovereign of early Myanmar. The Etymological roots of words are a good source of history. The name Sri Kesetra might have been rooted in Sanskrit which means "*full of charm and Blessing place or Royal Place*" that

Sriksetra is derived from Indo-Āryan language (Sanskrit) and in Myanmar called as Thaye Khittya means **“Field of Glory” or “Auspicious Land”**. It is located about 180 miles northwest of Yangon. It is situated five miles east of recent modern city Pyay and stands north latitude 18° 50” and 95°20” east latitudes. As existing as the largest ancient city, Sri Ksetra owns numerous archaeological heritages of city plan and landscape, religious and ritual buildings. It is an ancient Myanmar city that flourished between the 3rd and 11th centuries AD. Historically, there are 27 dynasties that ruled Sri Ksetra. In connection with the establishment of the Sri Ksetra kingdom, the Shwezigon Pagoda inscription records the legend. The Lord Buddha smiled and Ananda asked the cause of this smile; and the lord spoke unto Ananda. ‘Ananda, hereafter a sage named Bishnu, great in supernatural power, great in glory, possessing the five transcendental faculties, together with my son Ganapati and King Indra and Bissukarmadevaput (putra) and Katakarmmanagaraja, shall build a city called Sisit Srikhetra! After the sage Bishnu has built the city of Sisit, he shall depart from thence (and) in the city of Arimaddanpur (Pagan) he shall become king of Sri Tribhuvanaditya Dharmaraja’.²²

The ancient name attributed to old Prome is Sriksetra, so often mentioned in the Mon records as Sikset or Srikset, and by the Chinese pilgrims as Si- li-cha-ta-lo; and Sri Ksetra is the holy land of Puri on the ancient Kalinga coast. The name Sri Ksetra given to old Prome may be apocryphal, but attribution itself is significant. Another characteristic form of Pyu architecture found at Hmawza (old Prome) is the type of building with an inner chamber surmounted by a tapering superstructure known in India as Sikhara, which also has its origin in the architecture of Orissa.²³ It is observed that the Sikaras of the monuments of Prome are remarkable in similarity with the temples at Bhubaneswar. The style and language of two gold plates bearing Pali inscription of 5th and 6th centuries A.D. discovered near Prome had similarity with inscription of Mathara and early Ganga kings of Kalinga.²⁴ It is believed that Burmese Mahayana and Tantric sect of Buddhism came from Orissa and Bengal.²⁵

BUDDHISM IN SRIKSETRA (ARCHAEOLOGY)

Besides archaeological evidence, we do have sources on Sri Ksetra from literature. After the Buddha passed away, the third Buddhist council was held at in India, called by Buddhist monks under the leadership of Ven. Ashin Moggaliputtatissa thera. On the other hand, Buddhism was weak in Sri Ksetra and did not endure there for a very long period. It seems clear that Sri Ksetra saw the introduction of Theravada Buddhism for the first time. Myanmar, or Burma as the nation has been known throughout history, is one of the major countries following Theravada Buddhism.

As per tradition, King *Duattabaung* built nine Buddhist stupas. One of these stupas housed the Buddha’s relic as well as the toenail. This stupa was built by King *Duattabaung* who had ruled Sri Kshetra, Rama, Isinagara township for seventy years. He additionally constructed pagodas revered with Buddha's relics. These pagodas are as follows; So Kramma Stupa, Nyee Nyee Stupa, Cee Cee Stupa, Baw Baw Gyi Stupa, Lyo Lyo Stupa, Mya Sitin Stupa, Buyah taung Stupa, Chutaung Pyae Stupa, Myin Bhahu Stupa and Pathotaw Gyi Stupa. Therefore, this stupa was one of the historic stupas, which King *Duattabaung* had built.²⁶

BUDDHISM IN SRIKSETRA (MONUMENTS)

Many accounts about Sri Ksetra were described in the traditional chronicles which briefly says the founders of Sri Ksetra were the descendants of Tagaung in the north, upper Ayeyarwaddy region. During the time of King Duttabaung (101st year of Buddhist Era, the city of Sri Ksetra was founded and a total of 25 kings are accounted with their reign for about 600 years. In the time of Sri Ksetra City the surrounding area are exploited naturally the forest resource, built stupas and viharas on the tops of hills, burial urn grave yards on the slopes, Pyutaiks in the lower ridge-plains and basically provided the rain-water from the hills fill up to the lakes, canals and moats. The city's interior areas of East, North and Northwest join the plain of Nawin River Valley. Today, the seasonal gardening and rice fields are covered in these areas, hence the landscape of Sri Ksetra is built up of agricultural lands outer and interior of city wall, spread of ancient water tank, pond, drainage and canal, traditional villages and backing ground with little high hill-range. Many ancient pagodas built by the Pyu people can still be seen in the south of the old city of Raya Cheetah. Some of the prominent Pyu period can see Bawbawgyi, Bebegyi Pagoda and laymyathana pagoda which the three Pagoda have been surround the city outside the city walls.²⁷

The old city of Sri Ksetra is circular rather than oval in shape. City wall with the moat religious buildings; Statues etc are found. The city wall is (8 miles and 8 furlongs) and has an area of 5.5 square miles. What is remarkable in the Sriketira (W) Magic Lace Museum is the Pali Burmese version of Phyu Sa Khin Ba Shwe Pechar. In addition, within the museum, the Pyu period gold and flower cloud, the skills and crafts of silver flower cloud, white beads, the architectural works and the bronze figures of the artists can't be bored if you take time to look at them. In fact, among the ancient Pyu cities on the World Heritage List, Sri Ksetra is the largest and longest.²⁸

BUDDHISM IN SRIKSETRA (SCRIPTURES)

The golden Pali text has been carefully analyzed by Lu Pe Win and Harry Falk, and dated, palaeographically to the period from the 4th-5th century CE.²⁹ This makes it the earliest source of Pali in the world, and is presented briefly here because it documents the historical significance of Pyu literacy in preserving one of the two great Indian traditions of Buddhism: the Pali-based tradition. Epigraphic evidence of the Pyu script, derived from Brahmi scripts such as the Ikshvaku, is known from the discovery of seals and sealings, inscribed stone slabs and urns, inscribed solid gold palm-leaf shaped manuscript plates, inscribed silver ritual objects such as a gilded silver reliquary casket and from Pyu numbers and letters on bricks and on the rim of some pottery.³⁰ As noted, during the 3rd to 11th century CE, the Pyus had adopted the Ikshvaku scripts of South India the traditional language, Amaravati period Nagajunakonda³¹ for their own use in transcribing Buddhist texts pāli and some words in their own language.³² *in the Khin Ba Mound*, chamber were twenty solid gold palm-leaf shaped manuscript plates whose inscriptions include eight compressed excerpts from all three main canonical texts, including the chain of causation, the praises of the Buddha, and qualities of Enlightenment. Other gold palm-leaf shaped manuscript plates have been found in the region of Sri Ksetra, all inscribed with extracts from the Pāli canon. Two were found in 1897 at Maungan Mound 11 km south of the city wall, each was inscribed with three lines of Pāli including the emblematic

Yedhamma stanza associated with conversion of one of the principal disciples of the Buddha and other sacred verses. A single gold plate was found in 1928 at the village of Kyundawzu, within the wall of Sri Ksetra, inscribed with two lines of Pāli containing the text from one of the dialogues of the Buddha, the same as one of the eight excerpts found on the 20 solid gold palm-leaf shaped manuscript plates within the Khin Ba Mound hoard discovered in 1926-27. This wealth of epigraphic findings in Sri Ksetra can be dated broadly between the 5th to 8th centuries CE which together with the other inscribed objects from Halin and Beikthano correlates well with the radiocarbon sequence described above and a chronology from at least the first century CE.³³

CONCLUSION

This paper presents history of Sri Ksetra by using diversified historical sources. All the sources pointed out certain common trends in spite of different and sometimes contradictory narratives. These common aspects as follows; Sri Ksetra was indeed a Buddhist heritage center as it exhibits several monuments and literary sources, the city of Sri Ksetra has remarkable Buddhist architecture evident in several monuments and thirdly, the city of Sri Ksetra exhibits a fascinating range of technological and administrative capacity of the state system in Myanmar to maintain such as complicated urban systems. The innovative Pyu script, which is descended from Brahmi, the religious buildings, and the wide range of sculpture found nearby all serve as tangible examples of the outcomes of this social collaboration and ecological awareness. According to the combined introduction of Buddhism and urbanization to the proto-urban sites of the Ayeyarwaddy Valley in Central Myanmar in the third and second centuries BC, these cultural relics have survived for a very long time. Since then, numerous structures and artifacts uncovered during archaeological digs have provided evidence that Pyu design of Buddhist stupas and Pyu alphabets, which are derived from Brahmi, are currently on par with that of Northwest and South Indian Buddhism. The ancient Pyu cities of Halin, Beikthano, and Maingmao in Lower Myanmar shared characteristics with coastal urban areas at the same period. The initial and most significant centers of Buddhism in Southeast Asia from the second century BC to the ninth century AD are known to be Sri Ksetra and modern-day Pyu cities, where the religion was practiced by all social groups. The conversion from older timber building techniques employed in ceremonial or funerary structures of mortuary practice and image halls to permanent material, brick, was permitted for the construction of religious buildings through royal and common sponsorship.

In conclusion, beyond the Buddhism-rooted country of India, the Buddhist cultural relics of Sri Ksetra played a key role in the advancement of Buddhist art and architecture in the first millennium AD. Over the course of the city's lengthy history, the monumental features functioned as defining stylistic, iconographic, and transformational phases. Finally, the city's interactions with many religious and ethnic groups gave rise to its cosmopolitan status. The city managed to exist with a variety of religious practices, including ancestor worship, Theravada, Mahayana Buddhism, and Brahmanism, as evidenced by the late period of structural and cultural activities. The city's decline may have begun in the ninth century AD, shortly after the transfer of political authority from Sri Ksetra to Bagan. With the success of elite support in the socio-economic sector to the ongoing residents of the ancient city of

Sriksetra, however, the city was not abandoned. In contrast, Sri Ksetra's cultural characteristics more or less aided in the establishment of Bagan as the new imperial capital and the later development of Myanmar and regional Southeast Asia.

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