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Burmese and Thai esoterica: From the golden pagoda of Shwedagon to the sacred sites of Nakhon Si Thammarat

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Burmese and Thai esoterica: From the golden pagoda of Shwedagon to the sacred sites of Nakhon Si Thammarat

Abstract

Extract:

There are few cities in the world whose skyline is still dominated by religious architecture rather than brash skyscrapers. Yangon, formerly known as Rangoon, Myanmar's capital, is one such city. The Shwedagon Pagoda rises high above Yangon with a splendour that Rudyard Kipling described as "a beautiful winking wonder that blazed in the sun" and W. Somerset Maugham compared to "a sudden hope in the dark night of the soul".

Keywords

Shwedagon Pagoda, Rangoon, Buddha, Southern Thailand

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CENTRE FEATURE: -

Burmese and Thai Esoterica: From the Golden Pagoda of Shwedagon to the Sacred Sites of Nakhon Si Thammarat

Shwedagon Pagoda, Yangon

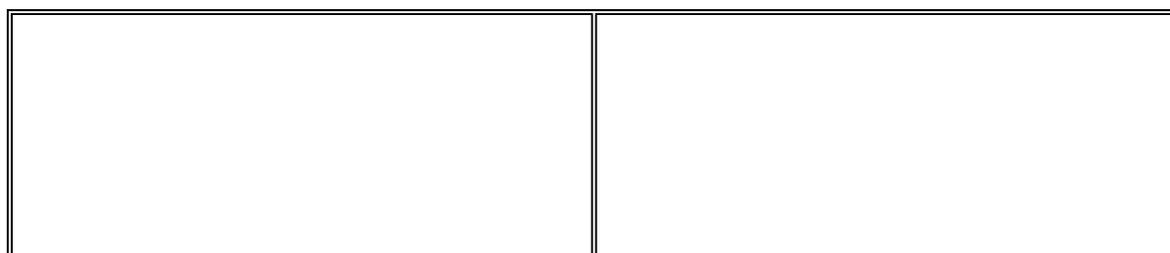
There are few cities in the world whose skyline is still dominated by religious architecture rather than brash skyscrapers. Yangon, formerly known as Rangoon, Myanmar's capital, is one such city. The Shwedagon Pagoda rises high above Yangon with a splendour that Rudyard Kipling described as "a beautiful winking wonder that blazed in the sun" and W. Somerset Maugham compared to "a sudden hope in the dark night of the soul"(1).

The Shwedagon Pagoda - "Shwe" means gold, "Dagon" was an old name for Yangon - is a mandala (cosmogram) design containing 78 smaller pagodas at the base, rising 100 steps, via temples and pavillions, to the central pagoda at the top. The 10 parts of the Shwedagon Pagoda are: the diamond bud (*Sein-phoo*), the vane, the crown (*Htee*), the plantain bud-shaped bulbous spire (*Hnet-pyaw-phu*), the ornamental lotus flower (*Kyar-lan*), the embossed bands (*Bang-yit*), the inverted bowl (*Thabeik*), the bell (*Khaung-laung-pon*), the three terraces (Pichayas), and the base.(2)

Not a great deal is known about it prior to the 14th century. Believed to have been built some 2,500 years ago to enshrine eight hairs of the head of the Gautama Buddha, the Shwedagon has been extended and maintained by successive monarchs of Myanmar. The Pagoda reached its present height of 99 metres under Sinbyushin, King of Ava in 1774, and survived eight earthquakes since 1564 and the great fire of 1931.(3)

Today, as in the past, it remains an important site for pilgrims, comparable to Cambodia's Angkor Wat and Indonesia's Borobodur. It is also a major tourist attraction, not only for its obvious splendour but its artistic and cultural attributes. Included in the cultural points of interest is Buddhism's accommodation of pre-Buddhist beliefs: smaller shrines are dedicated to local spirits called Nats, as well as a wish-granting stone.(4)

The trees, too, are of significance. The Bodhi- or Bo-tree ('tree of wisdom'), under which Gautama Buddha gained enlightenment in Buddha-Gaya (modern Bihar, India), has become a sacred tree to Buddhists. In the upper terrace of Shwedagon, there is one with a shrine dedicated to the Buddha. It is said that this tree is a descendant from a seedling from the original Bo-tree. Another variety of tree is the zagar, associated with spirit worship in Myanmar. Thought to be part of the design of a magical mandala, four zagar trees grow near the NW corner of the Shinsawpu Pagoda, named after Myanmar's only Queen and one who did much to develop the Shwedagon Pagoda. Four monks with occult power are reputed to have created the image in the shrine.(5) The occult tradition of Myanmar derives from Tantric Buddhism, introduced from India, and particularly prevalent in the early Bagan period until it was overtaken by Theravada Buddhism in the 11th century.(6)





Shwedagon Pagoda



Shrine under Bodhi Tree

Indeed, the Shwedagon Pagoda is "generally believed to be a favourite haunt of Weikzars [mystic wizards], hermits endowed with magical powers and similar beings who have come to do obeisance to it in order to gain eternal merit for their well-being in future lives."(7)

Nakhon Si Thammarat(8)

Tantra, which refers to both texts and practices, is not only practised by Buddhists but also Hindus. This is understandable in view of Buddhism having its origins in Hinduism. In Hinduism, tantra is often associated with Shiva and his Shakti (divine energy). In Buddhism it features Vajrayana (the reality of emptiness) and associated meditative practices. Tantric beliefs and practices were popular throughout Southeast Asia. The kingdom of Tambralinga, for example, on the Thai peninsula was a major seat of Shivaism from the 6th - 11th centuries, and hence its tantric esoteric dimensions.(9) Tambralinga's capital city of Ligor became Nagara Sri Dhammaraja when Buddhist monks from Sri Lanka built a monastery there. In Thai, it was rendered Nakhon Si Thammarat, meaning City of the Sacred Dharma King. Today, the city has a population of 73,600. It has the biggest temple or *wat* in southern Thailand, the historic Wat Phra Mahathat, originally built over a thousand years ago and reconstructed in the mid-13th century. It is also known as Wat Phramahathat Woramahawiharn and is revered for housing Buddha relics.



Above: *Wat Phra Mahathat, the most historic site of Nakhon Si Thammarat.*

Right: *Bronze statues of Queen Hem Chala and her brother. Queen Hem Chala is reputed to have founded Wat Phra Mahathat one thousand years ago.*



Nakon Si Thammarat became a commercial centre between India and China as well as a cultural centre for the peninsula, of which it acted as a 'core state' in a mandala system of governance. According to Thai historian Preecha Noonsuk:

In the establishment of the state of Tambralinga under the influence of Shivaism, the God-King of Tambralinga . . . established a system of mandala. The mandala is based upon the cosmology of the Shivaism and arose in the state with a group of sacred mandalas distributed throughout the area. Each mandala is combined with a ceremonial center that is located in important cities and religious sites throughout the region that was known as tiratha. These ceremonial sites were also community centres. The system of mandala shows the prosperity of the state by maintaining the condition of the region's sacred features such as mountains, rivers, and natural resources that would allow for the development of economy, society and politics.(10)

Elsewhere, Preecha Noonsuk observes that while Shivaism (or Shaivism - one of the three main devotional forms of Hinduism) declined in Tambralinga around the 12th century, thereafter "Brahmanism and Buddhism had mixed to form a great influence in the development of the states". (11) The mandala system of which Nakhon Si Thammarat was the centre was made up of Kedah, Pahang and Kelantan in today's Malaysia as well as nine communities from Southern Thailand - Sai Buri, Pattani, Phatthlung, Ban Taisamor, Chumphon, Kra Buri, Saulao Kanchanadit, Trano, and Takua Pa.(12)



Museum Director Ms Tassanee Bhikul (right) identifies ancient Hindu sites to Culture Mandala researcher, Dr Rosita Dellios.



A Shivalinga base at Nakhon Si Thammarat National Museum.

According to the Director of Nakhon Si Thammarat National Museum, Ms Tassanee Bhikul, stone inscriptions describing Hindu beliefs and religious rituals dated from the late 5th Century AD have been found in Nakhon Si Thammarat. Three of these are the Hup Koi Inscription in the Chong Koi valley; the Wat Maheyong Inscription, found at Wat Maheyong; and the Wat Phra Mahathat Woramaha Wihan Inscription, found in the Wat Phra Mahathat. She points out that these three inscriptions demonstrate Nakhon Si Thammarat's Indic influences. "At that time it was not only Indian traders who travelled to Nakhon Si Thammarat, but also priests, Buddhist monks, Brahmins [the highest, priestly caste of Hindus], and common worshippers. Archaeological studies show that Nakhon Si Thammarat had the largest Brahmin population in Thailand from 5th-6th Centuries AD. In the 7th-9th Centuries AD Brahmin groups in Nakhon Si Thammarat expanded and became politically powerful.

Hindu sites still remain from the old Tambralinga period. Mokklan is one such site built in the Tha Sala district. It consists of the remains of decorated columns, thresholds, doorframes, Siva lingas and Siva linga bases. It had been a religious site for Brahmans of the Shaivite sect from the 7th - 11th centuries. The site is today surrounded by a school, Buddhist temple and cemetery. Its caretaker and local school teacher, Kitti Aleae, is compiling a history of Mokklan. He is a Muslim in a community that is made up of both Buddhists and Muslims, conscious of their Hindu heritage. Mokklan offers a salutary lesson in the politics of cultural harmony at this time of centre-periphery discord between Bangkok and the Muslim South.

Endnotes

1. Jeffrey A. McNeely and Paul Spencer Sochaczewski, *Soul of the Tiger: Searching for Nature's Answers in Southeast Asia*, 3rd edn, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1991, pp. 101-2.
2. 'Shwe Dagon Pagoda', *Myanmar's Net Inc.* www.myanmars.net/travel/shwedagon.htm
3. Ibid.; and 'Shwedagon Pagoda', *Places of Peace and Power*, www.sacredsites.com/asia/burma/Rangoon

4. *Places of Peace and Power*, *ibid.*
5. 'The Shwedagon Pagoda', *Myanmar Digest*, www.myanmardigest.com/culture/shwedagon_pagoda.htm
6. The kingdom of Bagan (Pagan) was founded around AD 849. Sources on Myanmar's occult traditions may be found at the Universities Central Library that house the Black Papabaik Manuscripts. These manuscripts are discussed in Daw Kyawt Kyawt, 'The Observances of Myanmar Traditional Occult Sciences', conference paper, *Traditions of Knowledge in Southeast Asia*, Universities Historical Research Centre in cooperation with SEAMEO Regional Centre for History & Tradition, Yangon, Myanmar, 17-19 December 2003.
7. 'The Shwedagon Pagoda', *Myanmar Digest*, www.myanmardigest.com/culture/shwedagon_pagoda.htm
8. Thanks are expressed by the *Culture Mandala* editorial team for assistance in obtaining research documents to: the Director of Nakhon Si Thammarat National Museum, Ms Tassanee Bhikul; Walailak University Librarian, Ms Jongdu Thongkam; and to Walailak University Visiting Researchers Program Coordinator, Dr Patrick Jory, who provided office space and also organized the Mokklan site visit.
9. On Shaiva/Shakta ascetics as tantric practitioners, see Ronald M. Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Movement*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2002, especially Chapter 5; and a review of that book, Hiram Woodward, 'Esoteric Buddhism in Southeast Asia in the Light of Recent Scholarship', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 2, June 2004.
10. Preecha Noonsuk, 'Mandala of Khao Luang: One in the Economic Base of the State of Tambralinga', *Muang Boran*, Vol. 29, No. 1, January-March 2003, p. 39. See also Stuart Munro-Hay, *Nakhon Sri Thammarat: The Archeology, History and Legends of a Southern Thai Town*, White Lotus, Bangkok, 2001.
11. Preecha Noonsuk, 'The History of Nakhon Si Thammarat: The Development of States on the Thai Peninsula from the Sixth to the Fourteenth Centuries AD', PhD Thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 2001 (ISBN 974-03-0345-5).
12. *Ibid.*, Diagram, p. 550.

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