

မြင်းသည်နှလက်ဖက်သုတ်
MEN ON HORSES AND TEA-EATING
 အလိဘောက်မး
 ELIZABETH MOORE
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'If you want to talk about the Pyu, carry a big stick.'



Figures 1-4

Horses (with tail down and up): Pyawbwe, Mandalay Division; Contemporary painting; Dian, Kunming; and Maingmaw (left to right)

New data and early records

As the above saying recalls, questions about the Pyu and Bamar had been debated by Myanmar scholars for many years. However, when new data is introduced, interpretation begins anew. In this process, earlier hypotheses made in the context of less or different information may prove more applicable than had been imagined.

This has proven to be the case in research on pre-Bagan Myanmar, where new interpretations are emerging from recent data on Bronze and Iron cultures *circa* 1500 BC - 300 AD). In understanding this new data, useful records and models are found in many places such as Royal Chronicles, Chinese accounts and the work of previous scholars.

Yunnan and the Pyu

In some of these, it is noted that 9th century AD emissaries from the Chinese court recognized the Pyu capital in relation to its city wall. However, after Nanchao raids in 832 and 835 AD, the capital is said to have fallen

The captured Pyu were transported to Nanchao supposedly signalling their demise, the arrival of the Bamar into Upper Myanmar and the rise of Bagan. However, Pyu writing is seen 300 years later in the Myazeidi inscription (1113 AD). With the gold plates from Sriksetra dated to the 5th century AD, remains of Pyu writing thus span some 800 years. Long before Pyu writing emerged, however, many Tibeto-Burman travellers, farmers and armies moved back and forth between Upper Myanmar and Yunnan.

Men on horses

The early Bamar moving into Upper Myanmar have traditionally been depicted as horse-riding nomads from the north who displaced the Mons of Kyaukse. Familiar with the dry

conditions of the high plateaus, the arid plains of Upper Myanmar provided new territory with a known ecology. New dams or improvements to existing ones at Kyaukse, may have derived from earlier weir traditions in Kansu province. With these were established the economic foundation from which Bagan was to rise.

But did these men on horses arrive only in the late first millennium AD? They may have moved south much earlier, suggested by two bronze horses, one from Pyawbwe and one Yunnan dated to about 300 BC to 200 AD. The Pyawbwe horse stands with tail down, as often shown before troops march off to battle (Figure 1).

Similar horses can be seen in contemporary paintings, where the women of the village honour the soldiers with gifts before they depart (Figure 2). The Yunnan horse stands with tail erect and bears a gilded figure of a warrior. However, like the contemporary painting of the Bagan soldier, the Yunnan warrior wears his hair in a bun on the top of the head (Figure 3). A horse with tail erect is also seen on a terracotta plaque from မိုင်းမောမြို့ဟောင်း (Maingmaw, Pinle) (Figure 4).

Pyawbwe and the Samon Bronze-iron culture

The Pyawbwe horse is part of the Samon culture, a rich bronze-iron tradition stretching from the Samon area south of Mandalay to the Pyu cities of Halin and probably Tagaung. Much new data on the Samon culture has been documented by excavations of the ရှေးဟောင်းသုတေသနဌာန။။ယဉ်ကျေးမှုဝန်ကြီးဌာန (Department of Archaeology, Ministry of Culture).

The Samon culture is characterized by its use of bronze, iron, stone and glass. Artefacts include ကျေးထုပ် (kye doke) or bronze packets, coffin ornaments, 'mother-goddess' figures, glass rings, beads and discs, and semi-precious stone beads (Figures 5-6). Some of these artefacts, such as stone elephant beads and glass beads had earlier been called Pyu, but most are found together with skeletons of the Samon culture.

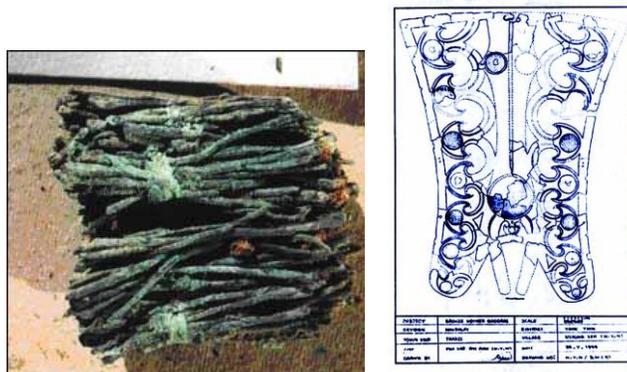


Figure 5-6

ကျေးထုပ် and Bronze 'Mother-goddess' Courtesy ဦးဝင်းမောင် (တမ၍ဝတီ)

A few objects, such as the 'mother-goddess' figures may have been gilded, but the extensive use of precious metals such as gold and silver employed by the Pyu, is absent in the Samon culture. In addition, the religion is ancestral and animistic with no trace of Buddhist or Hindu teachings.

Therefore the Samon culture seems to be linked not to India but to Yunnan. Nonetheless, the technological level of the Samon culture and the Pyu is similar and the two cultures may have co-existed from about 200 BC to 400 AD. With these 600 years in mind, the references to မြင်းသည် (equestrian peoples) have a much earlier significance.

Pyu and Dian

A bronze horse found in the area of Pyawbwe and a gilded bronze horse from the Dian Lake area of Kunming, Yunnan, illustrate one way that these earlier Tibeto-Burman groups may have moved back and forth. In ninth century AD T'ang annals, the Pyu are described as the 'men on horses' (မြင်းသည်). In a Chinese record of the 3rd century AD, the Pyu are noted as robbers, suggesting that they may have been an intrusive group, perhaps from the south. So who were they?

The Pyu are thought to have come south from Kansu province of northwest China via the Shweli River. The fall of Tagaung led to a division of the population: the Kanyan and Thet established Thunapayanta at Bagan, the Pyu moved down the Ayeryarwaddy, and another group founded the 19 *Kharuin* of Kyaukse. In the last of these areas is the massive Pyu walled city of Maingmaw (Pinle).

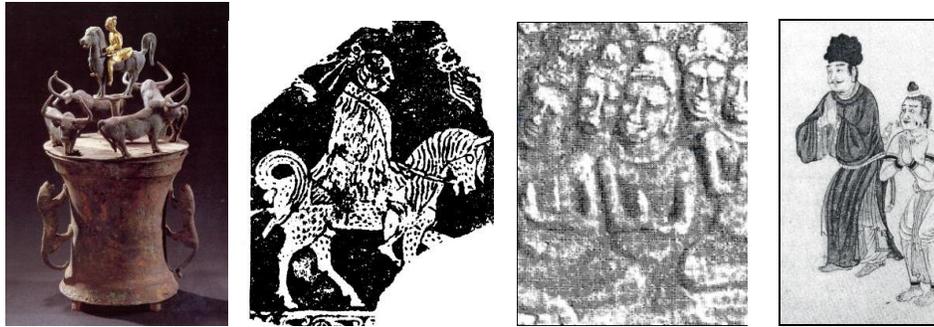
One important find from မိုင်းခေါမြို့ဟောင်း (Maingmaw; Pinle) is a terracotta plaque bearing the figure of a man on a horse. The rider appears to be celebrating, perhaps waving banners or grasping a club. The long snout of the horse and his erect tail are similar to the bronze horse from Kunming. Thus the မိုင်းခေါမြို့ဟောင်း (Maingmaw; Pinle) plaque may possibly recall the early movement of the Tibeto-Burman Pyu tribes.

While such movements have previously been placed in the first millennium AD, excavation of rich cemeteries around Lake Dian near Kunming suggest that equestrian tribes from the northwest moved into the Dian and Erhai Lake areas of Yunnan much earlier.

Dian culture and Tribes of the Pyu

The Shizhaishan cemetery near Dian is the most well-known of the excavations in this area. While the earliest bronzes of Yunnan are dated to *circa* 700 BC, the majority of the Dian bronzes are dated to *circa* 400 BC to 100 AD. Among these are cowrie containers in the form of drums. Their lids are decorated with three-dimensional sculptures showing different population groups and men on horses (Figure 7).

Some of the equestrian peoples wear their hair in buns. This is similar to figures on a stele from the Pyu ancient city of Halin and also the hair style of a figure identified as the King of Nanchao on a 10th century AD Chinese scroll (Figure 8,9,10).



Figures 7-10: Bronze cowrie container with horse; Man on horse drawn from a Dian bronze drum; Devotees on Halin stele; 10th century AD scroll showing King of Nanchao with hair in bun.

As this variation shows, there were undoubtedly many Pyu or Tibeto-Burman tribes crossing between Upper Myanmar and Yunnan in the prehistoric period. The tribes of the Pyu are also mentioned in various Chinese texts, their number ranging from 298 to 32. One of these, the Kadu (Thet), are said in the 11th Century AD to have had their eastern capital at တကောင်းမြို့ (Tagaug).

The last king of တကောင်းမြို့ (Tagaug) is linked အသဘိန္ဒကမြို့ in ဖျော်ဘွယ်မြို့ (Beinnaka). This is a rich site that like both Halin and Tagaung has yielded not only Pyu but Samon artefacts such as the bronze horse discussed above. In addition, at the ancient site of Hnaw Kan, Mahlaing Township, Mandalay Division, one double burial was associated with the deposit of a horse.

In summary, there are similar horses and themes linking Kunming, Tagaung and Beinnaka. These links lasted for well over 1000 years, ranging in date from approximately 400 BC to 900 AD. Therefore the traditional depiction of the arrival of the Bamar begins to be supported by ancient artefacts. However, this was not a single migration or movement of men on horses, but was part of a far longer legacy of movement of many groups between Yunnan and Upper Myanmar.

Tea-eating

But what about the supposed presence of Mons at Kyaukse? The custom of လက်ဖက်သုတ် (*la-phet-thou'* pickled tea) possibly indicates that prehistoric cultural exchange took place not only between Tibeto-Burman groups but also Mon-Khmer speakers of the Austroasiatic language family.

Konbaung period records note that the origin of 'tea-eating' is traditionally attributed to the Shans, part of the T'ai language groups. In the Shan States, it is customary to offer plain tea, often with a pinch of salt, and much tea is grown in this region. But Thai people do not take လက်ဖက်သုတ် (pickled tea).

Recent ethnographic studies in southwest China link the practice or 'tea-eating' to isolated Mon-Khmer groups falling within the Austroasiatic language families. However, the

eating of pickled tea and containers for လက်ဖက်သုတ် (pickled tea) are most closely associated with Myanmar people, and so conceivably a custom arising from within the Tibeto-Burman language group. The place of လက်ဖက်သုတ် (pickled tea) in Myanmar tradition is well reflected in a saying recorded by ဦးပုည (U Po Nya).

သအလှူမသာရှိလေရာတွင် လည်ကာဝါကြွား လက်ဖက်စားသည် ဘုရားမကြိုက်တဲ့လူစုတည်း။
(တိုးလှ ၂၀၀၄:၆၄)

The gist of this saying is that those who boast of going to make an offering to the family of the deceased and pay respects to the body, but in reality go to enjoy လက်ဖက်သုတ် (Pickled tea) are not well appreciated by the Buddha.

Conclusion

The custom of လက်ဖက်သုတ် (pickled tea) carries a rich legacy, possibly bringing together Mon-Khmer, Shan and Bamar traditions. Likewise, thousands of years before Bagan, many different languages were spoken by tribes moving across Upper Myanmar. The general patterns sketched out for the historical period can now be extended well into the prehistoric era. Fluctuating Tibeto-Burman Pyu and Samon rule in the north undoubtedly encouraged the continued flow of Mons to the south. However, as seen with the continued presence of the Pyu after their supposed 'demise' at the hands of Nanchao, the continued contribution of the Mon in Upper Myanmar is well demonstrated in the rich culture of Bagan.

Among the many pre-Bagan Tibeto-Burman tribes, the Pyu perhaps in alliance with the Hindu-Buddhist Bamar and Mon, absorbed the ancestral-animistic cultures of the Samon and Chindwin regions. Thus the saying with which this article opened - that one should 'carry a big stick' when talking about the Pyu - may describe the ancient peoples as well as present day debates about them.

References

ဦးအောင်မြင့် ၁၉၉၈ မြန်မာရေးဟောင်းမြို့တော်များ ရန်ကုန် ယဉ်ကျေးမှုဝန်ကြီးဌာန။

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ဒေက်တာသန်ထန်း ၁၉၆၉ ရေးဟောင်းခတ်မြန်မာ့ရာဇဝန်၊ ရန်ကုန် Maha Dagon Books.

ဒေက်တာတိုးလှ၊ ၂၀၀၄၊ ကုန်းဘောင်ခေတ် ကျေးလက်လူမှုစီးပွားဘဝ (၁၇၅၂-၁၈၈၅))၊ ရန်ကုန် မြန်မာသမိုင်းအဖွဲ့၊ ပညာရေးဝန်ကြီးဌာန။

ဦးဝင်းမောင် (တမ၍ဝတီ) ၂၀၀၁ ဘိန္နကမြို့ဟောင်းနှင့်ပတ်ဝန်းကျင်များ မန္တလေးမြို့၊ ရှေးဟောင်းသမိုင်းနှင့်သုတေသနပညာရှင် ဆရာကြီး ဦးမောင်မောင်တင် (မဟာဝိဇ္ဇာ)၏။

ဦးဝင်းမောင် (တမ၍ဝတီ) ၁၉၉၇ တကောင်းမြို့ဟောင်းနှင့်ပတ်ဝန်းကျင်ကျေးရာများ။ မန္တလေးတိုင်း သပိတ်ကျင်းမြို့နယ်။

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