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**“A Reassessment of Hyperbolic Military Statistics in Some Early Modern Burmese Texts”**

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**ABSTRACT**

Indigenous Burmese accounts of warfare have been treated lightly in the secondary literature. Colonial historians pointed to the large numbers provided as fanciful, exaggerated, and unreliable. Later scholars, both indigenous and western, have followed suit. Chronicle accounts of Burmese warfare are judged solely by what “objective” data they can provide. Much of this valuable material thus remains untouched or unconsidered in the secondary literature. The argument of this article is that Burmese chronicle accounts of indigenous warfare can also be read in alternative ways. As this article attempts to demonstrate, lists of armies, their sizes, and their commanders, convey significant subjective data on indigenous views of precolonial Burmese history, culture, and society.

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## INTRODUCTION

Early modern Burmese chronicles provide very rich descriptions of indigenous warfare as well as long lists of the quantities of men, cavalry, and elephants used in battles and campaigns. Historians of Burma have generally rejected such military statistics, since they frequently border on the fantastic, attributing to Burmese kings armies of almost one million men, sometimes more. Writing in the 1920s, G. E. Harvey rejected as simple hyperbole the figures in the chronicles for the armies of later kings. He suggested that the numbers of Burmese rank-and-file recorded by the chronicles were as much as ten times greater than the actual numbers of men involved in Burmese campaigns (Harvey 1967: 333-5). This view, however, represented more than a “colonial” attitude towards indigenous historical traditions; the erudite Paul J. Bennett also summarily dismissed one chronicle’s claim of Pagan-era (eleventh to thirteenth centuries) armies numbering up to 7.6 million men (Bennett 1971: 33). Certainly, while historians of Burma have long been aware that symbolic number schemes are at work in anything from the measurement of temple walls to the number of queens in the court (Heine-Geldern 1942), they have been reluctant to view military statistics in the same way. The prevailing literature continues to accept or, more commonly, to reject early modern military statistics found in the Burmese chronicles. Although there has been in recent years a reconsideration of the prevailing interpretations of information found in Burmese chronicles in general (Aung-Thwin 1998; Charney 2000; Charney 2002), no one has challenged prevailing interpretations of what military statistics in the chronicles actually represent.

In this article, I will challenge the prevailing approach to the military statistics provided in early modern Burmese texts. In doing so, I do not seek to demonstrate the accuracy or inaccuracy of the statistics on warfare they offer. Instead, I will look at how early modern Burmese literati wrote about warfare and attempt to explain why they used they seemingly exaggerated the numbers they provide. My argument is that the military statistics provided by the chronicles are not just numbers. Rather, these lists were a kind of a literary device intended to convey important messages about the society and politics of their own time. At a more general level, I hope to demonstrate that even though we cannot depend upon the lists of warriors found in the chronicles as objective statistics for early modern Burmese warfare, we can still draw out from them valuable, historically relevant, information.

This article will examine the underlying reasons for the inclusion of numerical lists in early modern Burmese accounts of indigenous warfare. I will first look at the authors of these texts, the early modern Burmese literati, and their personal experience with indigenous warfare. I will then turn to several different sixteenth century historical events covered in the indigenous texts. Finally, I will discuss some of the drawbacks of attempting to use contemporaneous European accounts to verify or challenge the indigenous sources.

## **LITERATURE, LITERATI, AND BURMESE WARFARE**

Burma's historical records consist of a wide range of different kinds of materials and made use of statistics in different ways and with different purposes. In terms of the

use of numbers in the text, early modern Burma's historical records can be split into two main groups. First, some kinds of sources were specifically intended to be taken at face value as hard and objective data on a range of items, such as local economy, township boundaries, population levels, rates of taxation, and other matters, in which precise numerical data was necessary for the functioning of the early modern Burmese state. These kinds of materials include inscriptions, *sit-tàn* (local administrative report), *amein-daw* (royal order), *thekkarit* (record of commercial transactions), and *sadan* (treatise). The second category includes *ayei-daw-bon* (a kind of historical account usually focused on the rise to power of one king or dynasty), *maw-gùn* (commemorative poem), *ei-gyìn* (a genealogical poem), *ya-zawin* (chronicle), and *thamaing* (traditionally, a more focused history, usually concerning a specific individual, place, or pagoda) (Hla Pe 1985: 36-44). These kinds of texts were not necessarily intended to be read for the primary purpose of obtaining data. The purpose of these kinds of texts was to provide more subtle information in the context of an overall moral scheme. When statistical data was found, it would be viewed within the overall context of the work, rather than "mined" from the narrative. This article focuses upon works of the second category, whose primary purpose, again, suggests a different agenda whose focus was not the provision of statistics.

We can lay aside any assertion that early modern Burmese literati were unfamiliar with actual warfare and thus wrote about warfare from an uninformed perspective. Characterizations of the early modern secular Burmese literati as merely grander versions of court scribes or as leisurely scholars do not adequately describe this highly diverse group of learned men. While the specialized groups of Buddhist monks and court

Brahmins may indeed have kept their distance from the battlefield, many early modern Burmese literati had a thorough knowledge of the warfare of their time, largely gained through personal experience. Our knowledge of early modern Burmese warfare is generally derived from texts produced by these elite, literate men.

Early modern Burmese elites lived almost simultaneously in several worlds. Certainly, they participated in peaceful literate elite culture. We know that Burmese males at least in the royal capitals would be sent to monastic and other schools to learn not simply to read and write and the major principles of Buddhism, but also to familiarize themselves with secular as well as religious literature (Manrique 1946: 1.194). The social expectation that elites should be literate is reflected in the ridicule that appears in some early modern Burmese texts of nobles who showed disinterest in reading. As we are told by one chronicle account: “Daka Rat Pi never looked at a book, took no heed of good practice, but only sported . . . He was like a deaf and dumb person, never looking at a book . . .” (SRDSR 1923: 58).

Another world was the military campaign. The sons of elite families were also expected to participate in seemingly endless military campaigns as commanders and to demonstrate their personal prowess and loyalty on the battlefield. From both indigenous and European accounts we have strong and convincing evidence of the personal participation of elite men in early modern battles (i.e. De Brito 1607: 237-241). It seems fairly safe to assume that when those who survived returned home, they brought with them a new or strengthened knowledge of warfare obtained “in the field” and shared their experiences with other members of the court.

Thus, many and perhaps most, of the early modern Burmese literati would not have been ignorant of the actual nature of the warfare they described in their chronicles. Banyà-dalá, for example, was a member of the literati who composed the *Razadhirat Ayei-daw-bon* in the sixteenth century. H. L. Shorto believed that Banyà-dalá was at least one of the contributors to the *Nidana Ramadhipati-katha*, another sixteenth-century text (Tin Ohn 1962: 86; Lieberman 1984: 297). Banyà-dalá was also an official in the court of Bayín-naung (r. 1551-1581) and had served as a general under Bayín-naung in the 1564 campaign against Ayudhya, as well as numerous smaller campaigns. Such men would have had much personal knowledge of royal military campaigns, the actual numbers of men who fought in battles, and the strategies or tactics applied in battle. These personal life experiences informed court and other elite literature. This helps to explain the intimate knowledge of warfare and things military by numerous court ministers and writers throughout the early modern period, as we find, for example, in Zei-yá-thin-hkaya's 1783 *Shwei-bon-ni-dàn* and other texts.

Being personally aware of the limited numbers of men used in military campaigns, such men would have known when a chronicle account was likely exaggerated and when it was not. Their strategic use of statistics in chronicle accounts, as I will discuss below, thus may reflect a different agenda from the simple provision of accurate lists of the numbers of men in Burmese campaigns. I will now turn to a few examples of how these men wrote about early modern Burmese military campaigns, and the numerical data they provide.

## THE ARAKANESE CAMPAIGN AGAINST LOWER BURMA, 1598/99

The first example is the western Burmese campaign against Pegu in 1598/99. During this campaign, Arakanese armies joined with Taung-ngu forces, surrounded Pegu, the royal capital of the great First Taung-ngu Dynasty (1486-1599), and then brought down the last ruler of that dynasty (for a detailed examination of this campaign, see Charney 1994). Most Arakanese chronicles include verbatim the information provided in a circa 1608 royal memorial on the campaign composed by Maha-zei-yá-theinka, who had earlier held the title of Banyà-wuntha (Maha-zei-yá-theinka 1608, 25b). I have already discussed this memorial in detail elsewhere (Charney 2002). Maha-zei-yá-theinka was the *go-ran-gri*, one of the four chief royal ministers in the Arakanese court, as well as the nephew of the previous *go-ran-gri*, Damá-thawka (RMAS 1775: 40b; Maha-zei-yá-theinka 1608: 25b; Nga Mi 1840: 170b, 180b), when he composed this memorial. Certainly Damá-thawka and probably Maha-zei-yá-theinka had personally participated in this campaign and were thus first-hand observers (Maha-zei-yá-theinka 1608: 16b).

In his memorial, Maha-zei-yá-theinka includes a list enumerating the western Burmese forces sent against Pegu in 1598/99. These forces comprised:

- (A) 100,000 men under the command of the Ko-ran-gri Damá-thawka, including
  - 20,000 Let-wè-thìn royal bodyguards under the command of Saw-nu, the eater of Kaladan and Rei-baun-nain, eater of Mindon
  - 20,000 Let-ya-thìn royal bodyguards under the command of Kamani, eater of Ta-shwei and the eater of Myó-kyaung (name not given)

10,000 Kaman Lei-kain warriors under the command of Ran-myó-baung, the eater of Taung-kout

10,000 Tagaing spearmen under the command of Don-nyo, the eater of Thantaung

10,000 Ka-swei-kaung shield warriors, under the command of Durin-thu, eater of An

30,000 Sak warriors under the command of the Sak king, Kaung-hlá-pru

(B) 50,000 Bengali warriors and 300 boats under the command the Hsin-kei-kri, Manuha

(C) 100,000 men under the command of the king, Min-ra-za-gri [consisting of]:

30,000 Let-wè-thin royal bodyguards

30,000 Let-ya-thin royal bodyguards

10,000 black shield warriors

10,000 Sak warriors

20,000 Hti-laung-ka cannon, musket, and round shield warriors

(D) 50,000 men under the *ein-shei-mìn*, Mìn-kamaung, and Ukka-byan, the eater of Sadan, including

30,000 Kanran and Balei warriors

20,000 Bengali Hti-laung-ka cannon, musket, and round shield

warriors (Maha-zei-yá-theinka 1608: 16b).

This list is also provided in many later historical texts (Kawisara 1839: 58b-59a; Sandá-mala-linkaya 1932: 2.145).

Taken as figures for the actual number of men involved in this campaign, this list could easily be discounted as exaggeration on a grand scale. The numbers provided amount to 300,000 men, all from a kingdom whose population at the time likely was likely not more than 170,000 people (even in the mid-nineteenth century, western Burma's population only amounted to about 260,000 people (Charney 1999: 334-336).

The fact that this gross exaggeration was made by one so close to the campaign, in terms of both time and participation, immediately tells us several things. First, these large figures were contemporary or near-contemporary figures and were not the result of later embellishment. Second, these figures were provided by one of the key participants in the events covered and the nephew of one of the most important commanders in the campaign, who had also held the same court ministership during this campaign. Third, Maha-zei-yá-theinka composed his memorial in the royal court while the king who sponsored this campaign, Min-ra-za-grì (r. 1593-1612), was still on the throne, so the information had to have the king's at least tacit approval.

The timing of the composition is especially important, because four major developments had occurred between the end of the campaign in 1599 and the composition of the 1608 memorial: Min-ra-za-grì, after several years of disastrous warfare, lost control of Lower Burma to Philip de Brito after 1603 (Charney 1998b; Charney 1999: 107-108; Bocarro 1876: 1.131-148). These wars had been costly to the

Mrauk-U court in terms of men and arms. Next, in a 1607 naval battle with De Brito, large numbers of important members of the Mrauk-U nobility and some of its chief vassal rulers were lost (De Brito 1607: 237-241; Guerreiro 1930: 3.80). Mìn-ra-za-gri also alienated important segments of the western Burmese *sangha* when he blamed the *sangha* for his failures and put thirty elder monks to death (Guerreiro 1930: 2.319; Charney 1999: 111). Finally, a rebellion by the heir apparent, Mìn-kamaung, had almost unseated Mìn-ra-za-gri as king (Maha-zei-yá-theinka 1608: 22a-b; Charney 1998b: 195-6). In short, at the time the 1608 memorial was composed, Mìn-ra-za-gri's kingdom was unraveling and the elite families upon whom he depended for his security on the throne were in disorder. We also know that by 1608, Mìn-ra-za-gri was taking steps to prevent the increasing likelihood of his downfall and he did in the long run resurrect stability and a return to the processes of political centralization and territorial aggrandizement that had been underway before (Charney 1993; 1998b).

Considering all of this, I suggest that the listing of figures for the 1598/99 campaign tells us several things. First, it is a kind of social and political map, indicating the relative importance of particular elite families, in the Mrauk-U court, thus reaffirming a social order that had worked well for Mìn-ra-za-gri in the past but that was now in very real danger of breaking down. Second, it treats Mìn-kamaung, the heir apparent, with special care. Although Mìn-kamaung had rebelled, Mìn-ra-za-gri forgave him as he was his only surviving son by a chief queen and otherwise most promising heir. But this rebellion is included, almost out of place, in Maha-zei-yá-theinka's memorial. Possibly, Maha-zei-yá-theinka was making a point about Mìn-kamaung. If we look at the enumerated data provided by Maha-zei-yá-theinka for the campaign, it is clear that the

distribution of forces relegates Min-kamaung to a position equal to that of a lower-ranking minister.

More importantly, Min-kamaung is placed in a position beneath that of Damá-thawka, who is presented as being on par with that of the king. This could be for several reasons. I think two are likely and another is possible. First, it reinforces the important place in the court of a family, the family of the author, who had proved to be Mìn-ra-za-gri's chief prop among the nobility. As the eldest brother of Maha-zei-yá-theinka's father, Maha-Banyà-kyaw (Maha-zei-yá-theinka 1608: 25b; RMAS 1775: 40a-40b), Damá-thawka was most likely the head of Maha-zei-yá-theinka's clan. As both Maha-Banyà-kyaw and Damá-thawka had died in the years since the campaign against Pegu, Maha-zei-yá-theinka was heir to their glory, as well as to Damá-thawka's status as the kingdom's *go-ran-gri*. Thus, when Maha-zei-yá-theinka promoted Damá-thawka in his memorial, he was also, in a sense, promoting himself.

Second, it is a preemptive downgrading of Min-kamaung in the expectation of Mìn-kamaung's possible removal as heir-apparent. Third, given that there were no other royal sons to claim the throne, Maha-zei-yá-theinka was reinforcing the prowess of his own line and downgrading the person of Mìn-kamaung in order to make a possible bid for the throne after Mìn-ra-za-gri died. The numbers, then, play a useful role in measuring not the actual numbers of men involved, but rather in reinforcing the social and political order of the court constructed by an individual who stood to benefit from its realization, as did the king in whose court this text was composed.

## **THE CAMPAIGNS AGAINST AYUDHYA**

A similar use of military statistics can be found in the treatment of Tabin-shwei-hti's (r. 1531-1550) and Bayín-naung's (r. 1551-1581) sixteenth-century campaigns against Ayudhya in two central Burmese histories, the *Hman-nàn maha-ya-zawin-daw-gyi* and Û Kalà's *Maha-ya-zawin-gyi* (great chronicle), both of which use the same figures for these campaigns (the best study to date of Tabin-shwei-hti's and Bayín-naung's reigns, as well as the First and Restored Taung-ngu Dynasties generally remains Lieberman 1984). The *Hman-nàn maha-ya-zawin-daw-gyi*'s sources are not difficult to find. The compilers – learned ministers, Buddhist monks, and court Brahmins – met together over the course of 1829-1831 on the orders of King Ba-gyi-daw (r. 1819-1837) and produced what amounts to an upgrading of the old “Great Chronicle” of Û Kalà (circa 1730). In some places they introduced new material into the pre-1711 coverage of Burmese history, but generally they incorporated nearly verbatim Û Kalà's text for this period (Hla Pe 1985: 39). The inflated figures, then, can be drawn back to 1730. Trying to move further back than 1730 is more difficult, though not impossible: the royal library, and many of Û Kalà's sources, were lost to fire during the siege of Ava in the early months of 1752 (Lieberman 1984: 294). Other materials have survived, however, especially Mon histories that do shed considerable light on contemporary statistics for the reigns of Tabin-shwei-hti and Bayín-naung.

According to the *Hman-nàn maha-ya-zawin-daw-gyi* and Û Kalà, Tabin-shwei-hti invaded Ayudhya in 1548 with 100,000 men:

Marching in the middle: One army under the King of Prome, Thado- damá-ya-za, one army under Thiri-zei-yá-kyaw-din, one army under Thamein Bra-tha-maik, one army under Thamein Maw-kun, one army under Thamein Baran [consisting altogether of] 100 elephants, 1000 cavalry, 50,000 Men.

Ascending on left: one army under Bayín-naung-kyaw-din-naw-ra-ta, one army under Nan-dá-yaw-da, one army under Sawlu-ku-nein, one army under Thamein Yei-thin-gyan, one army under Thamein Than-kyei [consisting of]: 100 elephants, 1000 cavalry, 50,000 Men (HNY 1883: 2.284).

This gives Tabin-shwei-hti's army exactly 200 elephants, 2000 cavalry, and 100,000 men.

Chronicles and other texts that predate Û Kalà's chronicle do exist. One of these is the sixteenth-century Mon text, the *Nidana Ramadhipati-katha*, which was composed at least in part by Banyà-dalá, one of Bayín-naung's chief commanders (Lieberman 1984: 297). The date and location are important not so much because they verify the 100,000 figure, but rather because they demonstrate that these figures were not the result of post-sixteenth century exaggeration. They were certainly current in the First Taung-ngu court in the early 1580s. As the *Nidana Ramadhipati-katha* explains, in 1547, Tabin-shwei-hti "took the field against Ayuthaya with more than 100, 000 Shans, Burmans, and Mons and numerous elephants and cavalry" (RDK, n.d.: 47). The importance of this relatively unexaggerated figure emerges when we compare it to accounts of Bayín-naung's campaign against Ayudhya in 1564.

The importance of this relatively unexaggerated figure emerges when we compare it to accounts of Bayín-naung's campaign against Ayudhya in 1564. While Tabin-shwei-hti had a meager 100,000 men for his campaign, the *Hman-nàn maha-ya-zawin-daw-gyi* reports that Bayín-naung had over eight times as many (HNY 1883: 2.424-427): The following is a translation of the *Hman-nàn maha-ya-zawin-daw-gyi*'s list of forces taken by Bayín-naung against Ayudhya in 1564.

(A) As for the men the king appointed to march against Chiengmai: Mogaung *saw-bwà*, one army; Mohnyin *saw-bwà* one army, Möng Mit *saw-bwà* one army, Ounbaung *saw-bwà* one army, Thibaw *saw-bwà* one army, Nyaung-shwei *saw-bwà* one army, Möng Nai *saw-bwà* one army, Thiha-ba-dei one army, Mìn-kyaw-din one army, the royal son-in-law, the *bayin* of Inwa, Thado-mìn-zaw one army

These ten armies included altogether 300 war elephants, 6,000 cavalry, and 120,000 warriors placed by the king under the overall command of Thado-mìn-zaw and ordered to march against Chiengmai by the Monei route.

(B) As for the armies that marched from the royal feet: Let-wè-yè-dain horse army, Ya-za-da-man horse army, Duyin-ya-za horse army, Nan-dá-thein-si horse army, Duyin-bala horse army

In the elephant army: Nei-myò-kyaw-din one army, Thamein Yè-thìn-yan one army; Nan-dá-thìn-gyan one army, Banyà-gyan-daw one army, Tha-yè-si-thu one army, Banyà-dalá one army, Thi-rí-zei-yá-kyaw-din one army, Banyà-sek one army, Si-thu-kyaw-din one army, the *maha-uppa-ra-za* (the prince) one army.

With the five horse armies, amounting to fifteen armies altogether, there were 500 war elephants, 6,000 cavalry, and 120,000 warriors. They had to march by the right-side route.

(C) Let-ya-yaw-da horse army, Bayá-ya-za horse army, Duyin-thein-di horse army, Duyin-banyà horse army, Sik-duyin-gathu horse army. In the elephant army: Nan-dá-kyaw-din one army, Thamein Than-kyei one army, Thin-khaya one army, Thamein Yo-garat one army, Min-maha one army, E-mon-taya one army, Nan-dá-kyaw-thu one army, Thamein Than-leik one army, Baya-kyaw-din one army, the royal younger brother, the *bayin* of Prome, Thado-damá-ya-za, one army.

With the five horse armies, amounting to fifteen armies altogether, there were a total of 300 war elephants, 6,000 cavalry, and 120,000 warriors. They had to march in the middle.

(D) Let-ya-ye-dain horse army, Let-wè-baya horse army, Zei-yá-daman horse army, Let-ya-duyin horse army, Duyin-yaw-da horse army. In the elephant army: Zei-yá-kyaw-din one army, Thamein Zeit-pon one army, Bayá-kyaw-thu one army, Thamein Ngo-kun one army, Ya-za-thìn-gyan one army, Banyà-bat one army, Thek-shei-kyaw-din one army, Banyà-law one army, Nan-dá-yaw-da one army, the royal younger brother, the *bayin* of Taung-ngu, Min-kaung one army.

With the five horse armies, amounting to fifteen armies altogether, there were a total of 300 war elephants, 6,000 cavalry, and 120,000 warriors. They had to march to the left side.

(E) Duyin-thein-si horse army, Duyin-deiwa horse army, Deiwa-thuri horse army, Thura-gama horse army, Kaza-thiri horse army. In the elephant army: the son-in-law of the king of Ayudhya, Ei-ya-damá-ya-za one army, Zeiya-thìn-gyan one army, Ei-ya-thuwana-lawka one army, Theik-daw-shei one army, Ei-ya-thauk-kadei one army, Thiri-zei-yá-naw-ya-ta one army, Ei-ya-beit-si one army, Satu-gamani one army, Min-yè-thìn-hkaya one army, the royal nephew Thayawaddy-Min-yè-kyaw-din one army.

With the five horse armies, amounting to fifteen armies altogether, there were a total of 300 war elephants, 60,000 cavalry [appears to be an error for 6,000], and 120,000 warriors. They had to march against Chiengmai from Eindi-giri.

(F) Deiwa-thara horse army, Zei-yá-duyin horse army, Deiwa-baya horse army, Duiyin-kyaw horse army, Deiwa-thiri horse army. In the elephant army: Let-ya-yan-da-thu one army, Thamein Lagu-nein one army, Bayá-gamani one army, Thamein Zaw-gayat one army, Nei-myò-thin-hkaya one army, Min-yè-lu-lin one army, Nan-dá-meit-kyaw-din one army, Thamein È-ba-yè one army, Zei-yá-gamani one army.

With the five horse armies, amounting to fifteen armies altogether, there were a total of 700 war elephants, 5,000 cavalry, and 150,000 warriors.

The men on the four sides of the royal entry point in the royal army, were exclusively ordered to carry golden shields.

(G) In front of the king, Bayá-nan-dá-thu was appointed as *sit-kè* and Nan-dá-kyaw-din as commander with 100 war elephants, 1,000 cavalry, and 10,000 soldiers. On the right side of the king, the king appointed Zei-yá-yan-da-meit as *sit-kè* and Thek-shei-kyaw-din as commander with 100 war elephants, 1,000 cavalry, and 10,000 soldiers. On the left side of the king, the king appointed Bayá-yan-da-meit as *sit-kè* and U-dein-kyaw-din as commander with 100 war elephants, 1,000 cavalry, and 10,000 soldiers. In back of the king, Nan-dá-thiha was appointed as *sit-kè* and Let-wè-zei-yá-thin-gyan as commander with 100 war elephants, 1,000 cavalry, and 10,000 soldiers.

(H) After the 1,000 Indians had been ordered to tie up their turbans [or sashes around their waists], they were ordered to carry their muskets and follow in front and back of the royal elephant, one both sides of the [elephant's armpits]. The 400 Portuguese were ordered to take the cannon [mortars] and follow on all sides [of the king's elephant].

(I) Banyà-bayan one army, Taya-pya one army, Tanaw one army, Bayá-thìn-gyan one army, [one army is missing here in the text]. These five armies, together with their complement, were appointed by the king to guard the royal city of Hanthawaddy . . . . In 1564, the king marched from Hanthawaddy...(HNY 1883: 2.424-427)

Clearly there is a good deal of stylization in the account with an attempt at exact symmetry, but the attention here is on the statistics themselves. These figures and divisions are clearly derived, and repeated nearly verbatim, from Û Kalà, although the *Hman-nàn maha-ya-zawin-daw-gyi* adds a few additional commanders to the former's account (Kalà 1932: 2.349-351).

Bayín-naung's forces numbered at least eight times those suggested for the size of Tabin-shwei-hti's armies less than twenty years earlier. As was the case with the figures for the western Burmese campaign against Pegu, similarly exaggerated numbers can be traced back to Bayín-naung's reign. As the *Nidana Ramadhipati-katha* explains: in 1663, "the King gave the word to march on Ayuthaya. His forces at this time, not including the

Chiengmai rebels, amounted to more than 900,000 men, with 500 tuskers and 4,000 horses . . .” (RDK n.d.: 105) The exaggeration then was not created by later writers. Rather, these figures must have circulated among Burmese literati in Bayín-naung’s court and were recorded by one of them, Banyà-dalá, in his contemporary text.

It is doubtful if such great differences between the figures provided for Tabin-shwei-hti’s campaign against Ayudhya and that of Bayín-naung can be explained by Bayín-naung’s admittedly greater command of manpower in sixteenth century Burma alone. Even with a stronger degree of political centralization and allegiance than that enjoyed by Tabin-shwei-hti, it does not seem likely that Bayín-naung could have increased First Taung-ngu manpower reserves eight or nine-fold in less than two decades. Furthermore, in terms of logistics alone, as Harvey points out, it would have been impossible to muster and move an army even several times smaller than that suggested for Bayín-naung’s force (Harvey 1967: 335). A better explanation for the disparity in the texts between Tabin-shwei-hti’s and Bayín-naung’s armies is needed.

There are several alternative explanations. One explanation is that the author (s), as an insider(s) in the court of Bayín-naung, would have had reason to embellish to some degree Bayín-naung’s eminence. A better answer, however, is found by examining why Tabin-shwei-hti would be undermined through the statistics for his armies by comparison with those of Bayín-naung. Tabin-shwei-hti, unlike Bayín-naung, was not popular among important groups in the First Taung-ngu court. Both Burman and Mon literati denigrated him in their historical texts by their insertion into these texts of Tabin-shwei-hti’s many failings. Û Kalà establishes the basis for the eventual fall of Tabin-shwei-hti by stressing that he had abandoned Burman cultural practices and committed himself fully to Mon

cultural practices, such as a Mon manners and dress (Kalà 1932: 2.215). Other references are more explicit: the royal ministers were unhappy that Tabin-shwei-hti sent them away on campaigns to keep them away so that improper things could be done with their wives (Kalà 1932: 2.246). Û Kalà also points attention to Tabin-shwei-hti's relationship with a certain Portuguese mercenary, with whom he drank alcohol, something unbecoming an ideal Buddhist ruler (Kalà 1932: 2.246). The Buddhist monk Shin Sandá-linka also inserted into his *Maní-yadana-bon*, his account of the fifteenth century sayings of Wun-zin Min-yaza, a comment on Tabin-shwei-hti's un-Buddhist abuse of alcohol and his mistreatment of his ministers (Sandá-linka 1896: 149). Given the claimed antiquity of the sayings, this would have been a highly anachronistic reference, indicating that this insertion was meant to make a point. As a result, Tabin-shwei-hti had alienated many of his ministers, Mon and Burman alike, and to pre-empt a possible coup, Bayín-naung attempted to ameliorate the situation by giving the corrupting mercenary a ship, with gold and silver, apparently intended as a bribe, and dispatched him back to India (Kalà 1932: 2 247). This move came too late: Tabin-shwei-hti had already alienated too many of his ministers and was murdered by some members of his court in 1551 (Kalà 1932: 2 250).

Bayín-naung, however, is portrayed as the man with the real kingly virtues. In fact, Tabin-shwei-hti's reign appears in the chronicles less as accounts of Tabin-shwei-hti's activities than as accounts of Bayín-naung's exploits during the reign of Tabin-shwei-hti. This suggests that the extreme difference between the figures provided for Tabin-shwei-hti's and Bayín-naung's campaigns is partly due to his unfavorable image in the eyes of Burmese and Mon literati in the late First Taung-ngu court and after. Indigenous exaggeration regarding warfare worked from an understanding that a man of

*hpòn* (power derived from his good *kharma* or superior store of merit), a true king such as Bayín-naung, would attract the loyalty of a large number of men. In other words, the size of the army of such a king was a reflection of his superior *hpòn* and thus his legitimacy as a ruler. A king of lesser *hpòn*, such as Tabin-shwei-hti (by comparison to Bayín-naung), would command the loyalties of fewer men (For a background to these expectations, see Lieberman 1984: 65-78, especially p. 75).

I have considered the possibility that early modern Burmese literati may have reduced Tabin-shwei-hti's forces in their accounts because he, unlike Bayín-naung, lost his campaign against Ayudhya, thus requiring some excuse for his defeat. This is a western perspective that does not fit well with early modern Burmese historiography. While western accounts, such as those of the early seventeenth century Portuguese at Syriam, dramatically underestimate their own forces and exaggerate those of the enemy in order to demonstrate personal bravery or divine providence, Burmese literati appear to have associated the attraction of men to the royal standard, as mentioned above, as indicative of the king's *hpòn*. Thus, if Burmese literati sought only to explain the defeat of the campaign against Ayudhya, and nothing else, some other device would likely have been used to explain defeat (perhaps treachery or the lack of firearms). By stressing the low numbers available to Tabin-shwei-hti, they were also stressing his inferior *hpòn*, just as his defeat *per se* was a reflection of the same. As Lieberman explains, ambitious subordinates "could always justify rebellion through Buddhist notions that interpreted military defeat as evidence of the High King's moral failure" (Lieberman 1984: 36).

Again, as mentioned above, the low numbers attributed to Tabin-shwei-hti's armies during his campaign against Ayudhya served the same purpose in the narrative as

Ù Kalà's references to unhappiness amongst his followers, and other signs of Tabin-shwei-hti's lesser prowess and diminished legitimacy. Burman and Mon literati refused to embellish Tabin-shwei-hti's image by attributing to him any more than one-eighth the number of men they attributed to Bayín-naung. By commanding fewer manpower reserves, indirectly demonstrating a lesser degree of prowess, Tabin-shwei-hti was in effect reduced in stature by comparison to the more popular Bayín-naung. This interpretation of the numbers would be in full keeping with Ù Kalà's implied goals in composing his text: to put Burmese history into a moral framework (see also the discussion in Hla Pe 1985: 54).

#### **THE LATE FIRST TAUNG-NGU EXCEPTION**

One might reasonably question this interpretation of the “exaggeration” in the chronicles to “rate” the prowess of kings by raising up the example of Nan-dá-bayin. Like Bayín-naung, he too commanded massive armies and yet his failures as king far surpassed those of Tabin-shwei-hti. He bled Lower Burma literally to death, alienated the population and the monks, and suffered the ultimate disgrace, the loss of Pegu and his own murder (Lieberman 1984: 41-43). One would expect that chroniclers would have been attributed to him as well smaller armies than those of his glorious predecessor. Nan-dá-bayin, however, presents a complex case. He was the chosen successor of his father (Lieberman 1984: 36), unlike Bayín-naung for whom the chronicles make no claim of his having been selected by Tabin-shwei-hti. Indeed, in the latter case, being selected by such an ignominious king would have cast a shadow of doubt on Bayín-naung himself,

something Burmese chroniclers avoided. Thus, the chronicles are silent concerning any grant to Bayín-naung by Tabin-shwei-hti: Bayín-naung had to prove his prowess and right to rule on his own merits through conquest. Indeed, it took Bayín-naung two years to suppress his chief rivals and secure the throne (Lieberman 1984: 36).

Instead, Nan-dá-bayin is treated in the chronicles as a rightful heir to a glorious king, but one who eventually was negligent and became guilty of *azaravapatti*, a “failure of duty” (Than Tun 1988: 118). By ignoring his responsibilities and as a result of poor administration in the later years of his reign, he suffered from instant *kharmā*: his people fled to other kingdoms (HNY 1955: 3.99), his son and nominated heir was killed in battle (HNY 1955: 3.98; Du Jarric 1919: 73), his kingdom fell apart as outlying vassal lords rebelled (HNY 1955: 3.102), and his sister’s husband had him murdered (HNY 1955: 3.109). Clearly this portrayal reads something like the plot of a major tragedy in full keeping with Û Kalà’s stated goals in composing his text: Û Kalà sought to show the reasons for the rise and fall of kings in the context of moral and immoral rule.

Thus, Nan-dá-bayin’s armies in the early, good years, of his reign were quoted as being very large, though not as large as those of Bayín-naung, but then dwindle as the quality of his rule declined. This is indicated by an examination of the numbers of men the chronicles claim Nan-dá-bayin could put into the field against his chief enemy Ayudhya: in the 1586 campaign against Ayudhya, Nan-dá-bayin’s army consisted of 1,200 war elephants, 12,000 cavalry, and 352,000 men (Kalà 1961: 3.81); in a 1590 campaign, Nan-dá-bayin put together two armies, one consisting of 500 war elephants, 6,000 cavalry, and 100,000 warriors that marched against Mogaung and a second army of 1,000 war elephants, 12,000 cavalry, and 200,000 warriors that marched against Ayudhya

(Kalà 1961: 3.86-87; HNY 1955: 3.93), making a total of 1,500 war elephants, 18,000 cavalry, and 300,000 warriors; in the 1592 campaign against Ayudhya, for example, Nan-dá-bayin could only muster an army of 1,500 war elephants, 20,000 cavalry, and 240,000 warriors (Kalà 1961: 3.90-91; HNY 1955: 3.97); and in the 1594 campaign against Mawla-myine (Moulmein), on the route to Ayudhya, his army consisted of a mere 400 war elephants, 4,000 cavalry, and 80,000 warriors (Kalà 1961: 3.93). This analysis, however, obviously does not include limited campaigns against smaller polities unrelated to the First Taung-ngu-Ayudhya rivalry. In the 1591 campaign against Mogaung, for example, he put together an army of 600 war elephants, 6,000 horse, and 80,000 men (Kalà 1961: 3.88; HNY 1955: 3.95).

Burmese sources on the later years of Nan-dá-bayin's reign are few, beyond that of U Kalà, due in part to the damage to texts in the royal library in 1752, as mentioned above. Thus, most later Burmese accounts are dependent upon U Kalà's admittedly strategic portrayal of events. We can still arrive at contemporary indigenous perspectives through some of the European accounts. We do have European sources that provide figures for the size of Nan-dá-bayin's armies and these sources indicate a drop in the size of those armies from the early to later years of his reign. The largest army first sent against Ayudhya by Nan-dá-bayin, for example, was quoted by Du Jarric's sources as numbering 900,000 men; for 1595, as numbering only 150,000 men; and for 1596/7, he is said to have commanded a population, not an army, of only 30,000 "men, women, and children" (Du Jarric 1919: 73, 76, 78). As I will explain in the following section, European sources though used to confirm indigenous accounts, frequently repeat the same (oral) sources upon which the Burmese texts are based and thus I suggest that such

European figures may reflect contemporary indigenous perspectives on Nan-dá-bayin's reign. This cannot yet be demonstrated with complete certainty, as, again, contemporary indigenous sources for the reign of Nan-dá-bayin, unlike those for his father, are extremely limited.

My contention is that we should not reject these numbers on the basis of their exaggeration, but view them as one way that early modern Burmese literati chose to reflect their impressions of very real developments during Nan-dá-bayin's reign and those of his predecessors in the First Taung-ngu Dynasty. I should stress that I am not suggesting that the declining figures for Nan-dá-bayin's military muster are solely a literati creation. My argument is actually the reverse. The statistics themselves are not based on precise accounting. Instead, they reflect real developments and real impressions from contemporary sources and it is the relationship between the statistics provided in the chronicles, such as when one king is said to have had a million men and another a hundred thousand men, that must draw our attention. Indeed, there was a very real decline in Nan-dá-bayin's military manpower base (Lieberman 1985: 41), but the statistics offered in the chronicles only intended to reflect this trend in declining sets of exaggerated numbers, not to provide a precise accounting of the actual numbers of men available at different points of time.

As I have mentioned, these contemporary literati were probably aware of the difference between real numbers of troops involved and those they claimed and thus, the degree of exaggeration or under exaggeration served as a kind of index for their favor or disfavor of the reigning king. Later literati, writing on the basis of these accounts, carried these numbers into their own compilations. In other words, Harvey's negative assessment

of these figures as later and falsely enumerated data on royal armies is a misreading of the origin and purpose of this kind of exaggeration. This is not completely Harvey's fault. He wrote his history in the context of the colonial period in which indigenous source accounts tended to be treated with contempt by European historians. As a result, however, Harvey misunderstood and rejected as fanciful what is in reality valuable subjective data.

### **USING NUMERICAL DATA FROM THE CHRONICLES**

Thus far, I have attempted to demonstrate that hyperbolic quantified data should not be rejected out of hand as unreliable. Instead, I have argued that such data actually yields valuable subjective data not despite being exaggerated, but because such data is exaggerated (to different degrees). This does not mean, however, that we cannot use some numbers provided in the indigenous texts as objective data. Instead, each set of numerical data has to be approached on its own merits and interrogated in its own context. Several problems must be taken into consideration first if such interrogation is to be successful.

First, historians frequently establish the veracity of a stated figure in the indigenous sources by comparing it to contemporary European accounts and similar or dissimilar stated figures. This approach has some hazards, as it bifurcates into two separate and mutually unintelligible groups those who were frequently in intimate communication concerning the events, the people, and the quantities involved in the events in which they all participated. A good example is that of Portuguese and Burmese

accounts, themselves or their main sources being first-hand accounts of the events they describe. We know that in the 1630s western Burmese court at Mrauk-U, for example, Portuguese freebooters as far away as Chittagong were intimately aware of private royal information through Christian Japanese who served in the royal bodyguard and some of whose indigenous wives were servants of the court queens and noble ladies (Manrique 1946: 1.173-4). Father Manrique, the Portuguese priest who lived in Mrauk-U in the 1630s conveyed an impressive awareness of sixteenth-century First Taung-ngu dynastic history, which he gained by conversing with indigenous learned men and by learning to read for himself western Burmese texts and Lower Burmese texts captured from Pegu in 1599 (Manrique 1946: 1.241-2).

The results of this kind of familiarity with indigenous interpretations of events (and numbers) has made their verification using European sources problematic. Probably the most significant problem, is that we occasionally find the same suspicious statistical data sets moving around through indigenous and Portuguese sources, but being used to demonstrate different things in different places, and at different times. The best example is that of the three thousand cannon taken at Pegu in 1599. Both western Burmese and the Portuguese sources agree on the number of cannon involved. According to the early seventeenth century account of Du Jarric, who based his account entirely on letters sent to Europe by Portuguese witnesses to this campaign, Pegu had exactly three thousand cannon prior to its fall to western Burmese and Taung-ngu armies (Du Jarric 1919: 76). According to Maha-zei-yá-theinka, however, who was almost certainly personally involved in the 1598/99 campaign, western Burmese forces had captured the younger brother of the Ayudhyan king Naresuan when he came through Pegu to take some of the

spoils from the fallen capital after the siege. He was held for ransom, and, in exchange, Naresuan provided three thousand cannon (evidently on the spot) as well as a number of bronze images (Maha-zei-yá-theinka 1608: 20b). At first sight, a comparison of the Portuguese and western Burmese accounts may seem to confirm the reference to three thousand cannon. A more thorough interrogation of the reference, however, reveals a high probability that the figure was derived in both accounts from the same indigenous source(s). It may also be important that there are no other references to anyone having seen these cannon at any later time. The number itself becomes more suspicious when we compare it to other enumerated data provided for the booty from the campaign in indigenous sources: three hundred Pegu court women, three thousand cannon, three thousand Thai families, and thirty thousand Mon families, all taken back to western Burma (Maha-zei-yá-theinka 1608: 20b-21a).

Second, both the indigenous and the Portuguese accounts tended to exaggerate their figures for different reasons, but ultimately lead to comparable hyperbole. As I have explained above, indigenous exaggeration in the kinds of accounts discussed in this article worked from an understanding that a man of prowess, a true king such as Bayín-naung, would attract the loyalty of a large number of men. In other words, the size of the army of such a king was a reflection of his superior *hpòn* and his legitimacy as king. A lesser king, such as Tabin-shwei-hti (by comparison to Bayín-naung), would command the loyalties of fewer men. Again, as discussed above, the low numbers attributed to his armies during his campaign against Ayudhya served the same purpose in the narrative as Û Kalà's references to unhappiness amongst his followers, and other signs of Tabin-shwei-hti's lesser *hpòn* and diminished legitimacy (Kalà 1932: 2.246-7, 250). Thus,

whether a campaign was won or lost, a great king such as Bayín-naung would have an extremely large army.

Portuguese perspectives on such matters were very different. Earthly events being a reflection of divine providence, success in warfare could be achieved by a small number of men favored by God. The lesser the number of men in the face of an even innumerable host, the greater the role that divine intervention played in bringing victory. For this reason, Salvador Ribeyro, in his account of his stand with a few dozen Portuguese against much larger western Burmese forces at Syriam (1601-1603), makes only infrequent reference to the thousands of Mon warriors upon whom his victories depended (BDCCR 1936). In the Portuguese accounts of Philip de Brito, consistent attempts are made to explain his immorality and that of his supporters prior to the fall of his fortress at Syriam in 1613 (Faria y Sousa 1630: 3.191-194). On the other hand, references to the high numbers of men attributed to indigenous armies were made in the context of their earthly wealth, a frequent theme in Portuguese accounts of Burma. Large Burmese armies, for the Portuguese, were not the result of moral virtue (indeed, many Portuguese accounts argued a lack of moral virtue in Burma) and the favor of God, but instead reflected their wealth and the resources of the kingdom, very attractive to booty-minded freebooters. Portuguese witnesses, then, had a different reason for accepting high figures for indigenous armies, numbers they likely did not have the ability (or motive) to challenge any degree of certainty. Further, they had motive to embellish these numbers even more than the Burmese accounts. The European sources upon whom Du Jarric based his account, for example, state that Bayín-naung's invasion army sent against Ayudhya, numbered 1, 600, 000. This is significant, as it does not appear to be a

randomly selected number, but instead an exact doubling of the indigenous figures circulated in Bayín-naung's time (Du Jarric 1919: 70). This might possibly explain the fact that the quantities of men in First Taung-ngu armies as exaggerated in the indigenous sources, and all being contemporary exaggerations as I have discussed above, were equally exaggerated by the European accounts. The European sources claim, for example, that Nan-dá-bayin mustered an army of 900,000 men for his attack on Ayudhya (Du Jarric 1919: 73).

In short, European (at least Portuguese) sources from the period are problematic because they lend themselves to confirmation of indigenous data while having very little reliable basis to do so. Portuguese and Burmese perspectives on warfare were very different, but in their own way arrived at very similar results when it came to estimating the numbers of men involved in early modern Burmese warfare. This is thus another reason to look for other ways to interpret such numerical data.

## **CONCLUSION**

Any analysis of early modern Burmese texts as reliable sources for data on indigenous warfare must begin with an understanding of who composed these texts and identify their purposes in including military statistics (and enumerated data generally) in their narratives. I have taken into consideration the experiences of early modern Burmese literati with warfare and examined their writings in this context. Using the examples of the 1598/99 western Burmese campaign against Pegu, Tabin-shwei-hti's campaign against Ayudhya in 1548, Bayín-naung's campaign against the same in 1565, and the

complicated case of Nan-dá-bayin, I have attempted to identify the ways in which these statistics were meant to be understood.

My argument is that rather than attempting to provide consistent hard statistics of the men involved in early modern Burmese military campaigns, early modern Burmese literati, living at the same time and sometimes engaging in the campaigns described, manipulated such “hard” numbers to convey subjective data on the political world around them. In doing so, they would likely have been keenly aware of the inconsistency between the manipulated figures, the “soft” figures, and the actual numbers, the “hard” figures, of men fighting in the field. For several reasons, however, they chose to exaggerate or understate a given number at certain places in their narrative. I also attempted to identify some of this subjective data. Finally, I examined the problems involved in using early European sources in attempting to confirm the statistics found in the indigenous texts.

I do not suggest that previous studies that have used statistics from the chronicles are necessarily less strong as a result of my argument. Indeed, in many cases, they will be strengthened in additional, though perhaps unintended ways. While it is true that many of the statistics offered in the Burmese chronicles are not based upon objective enumeration, they do reflect contemporary subjective perspectives of the rulers the numbers are contrived to support or to denigrate. These subjective perspectives were in turn a reflection, in turn, of the objective power of the subject, his victories, his successes, and so on. Thus, to take one example I have used in this article, Bayín-naung may not have commanded eight times as many men (though he probably did have more) as Tabin-shwei-hti, but we do know by other registers that he was a more successful ruler, his

court was more stable, and his victories in war more significant. These basic facts helped to influence the perspectives of the moral strength (or weakness) of these two rulers. Hence, Tabin-shwei-hti's lesser number of troops and the greater number of Bayinnaung's were rendered in the sources as a reflection of their *hpòn* or moral strength (subjective), which in turn indirectly reflected their victories, strengths, and the overall stability of their realms (objective).

To sum up, the numbers of warriors, cavalry, and war elephants in the early modern texts we use as primary sources should not be automatically rejected on the basis of exaggeration. Rather, we need to grapple with such material in order to fully understand what the early modern Burmese literati were trying to tell us, and tell others, during their own time.

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