

FROM THE PAGES OF HISTORY

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VAISHALI AND THE INDIANIZATION OF ARAKAN BY NOEL FRANCIS SINGER

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Noel F Singer

THE INTRODUCTION AND THE BACKGROUND HISTORY

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HISTORY



Arakan, the deprived cousin of Burma (Myanmar), has long been neglected. Its antique works of art vandalized or incompetently renovated by the present Buddhist clergy. During the early years of the Christian era, despite rumours of demonic cannibals, its fertile plains attracted Hindu colonists. At the inauguration of metropolis of the Chandra maharaja (s), its inhabitants derided the grandeur of Amaravati, the celestial city of Swargar, Indra's paradise, claiming their capital was more superior. It was a confident kingdom in which Brahmanism, Mahayana Buddhism and local cults flourished. The court language was Sanskrit. Today, evidence of the Brahmanic presence has been almost eradicated by the present Rakhaing people, determined to present a land 'untainted' by any other religion except Theravada Buddhism - when in fact that is far from the case. — Noel F. Singer

INTRODUCTION

This account originally appeared as an article "Sculptures from Vaishali, Arakan", in *Arts of Asia*, July-August 2007, vol. 38, no. 4. The project initially began in 1999 and by 2006, reams of information had been gathered, threatening to turn the article into a book. As space in any magazine is at a premium, this meant that much of the data had to be grudgingly jettisoned and the text ruthlessly edited. Nevertheless, I was determined to retrieve the valuable data and reweave the scattered strands into a book as I felt it was too significant to waste. Many of the photographs not included in the article were also too valuable to be consigned to oblivion.

Obviously, since the article was published, I have received more pertinent information which necessitated several changes in the present text. My interest in ancient Arakan had been simmering since the late 1950s, when I lived in Myanmar, but was unable to visit the 'legendary' sites of Mahamuni and Vaishali.

In those days, it involved an unpleasant sea voyage, and once there, transport was practically non-existent. Many of the locations, too, were also in the hands of rebel groups and extremely dangerous. A virulent form of malaria was rampant – and still is – so intending travelers beware. Medication, insect repellent and a mosquito net are a must. One cannot be too careful about the food either, even in the best hotels.

Over forty years later, and now living in the United Kingdom, I finally achieved my wish. Disappointingly, during each of my two visits, I came away with almost all my long-held illusions shattered, saddened at the terrible neglect, and the vandalism being perpetrated on ancient religious arte-facts by ignorant and misguided men, in particular the Buddhist clergy. There was also extreme poverty in the outlying areas. The total lack of interest from the locals was depressing. Then again, one cannot blame these simple rural folk, as finding the means to fill hungry bellies is far more important than expending energy on the preservation of mouldy old ruins and ancient arte-facts. During my travels in the countryside, it was most distressing to see such abject poverty.

This account of Vaishali does not pretend to be a scholarly work, and despite my lack of academic qualifications, I have tried to tell what is to me a fascinating story which was probably replicated in various parts of ancient Southeast Asia which came under the influence of the Hindu colonists.

The early history of Arakan from 200 to the 900 CE is far from complete and still shrouded in what appears to be an impenetrable haze. Not only have insufficient archaeological investigations been undertaken, it has also been weighed down and sabotaged by inaccurate information by native chroniclers of a later age.

Some foreign writers, too, have either slavishly repeated these fantasies, presented their own interpretations, **Cont. P. 3**

FROM P. 2 refuted the findings of others, or else, ignored this early period altogether. For example, ancient Arakan of the Chandras was omitted by George Coedes in his celebrated *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*.

A number of readers may find it surprising that I have not given due weight to indigenous accounts of a later date quoted in this work. This is a deliberate omission on my part owing to their unreliability, permeated as they are with borrowed historical episodes and myths from Buddhist and Hindu India. Although these native sources are claimed to be 'ancient', they probably date from a time after the 14th century.

Above all, they had a tendency to fabricate, obsessed with a need to present a realm infused with Buddhist piety of the Theravada School when in fact it was a Mahayana version, together with Brahmanism, which predominated. As things stand, an immense amount of research and scientific excavation, unhampered by religious bigotry and political propaganda urgently needs to be accomplished.

One occasionally hears of this or that foreign institution planning excavations and conservation, but nothing constructive appears to have materialized in Arakan. Judging by the articles in the *Burma Historical Commission Journal*, attention seems to be focused on Myanmar proper. This present work is based on the unique lithic inscription of circa 729 commissioned by Ananda Chandra, ruler of Vaishali, together with other epigraphic evidence and iconographic. At this point in time, these are the only contemporary historical materials available for this early period. One can but hope that before long a fuller picture will emerge when other relevant inscriptions have been excavated.

BACKGROUND HISTORY *

The elongated coastal strip of Arakan (Rakhaing) is situated on the western part of Burma (Myanmar) proper and extends for almost 360 miles. At its widest it is roughly 100 miles, while at its narrowest it is only about 25 miles. Oh the west is the Bay of Bengal, the region now called Bangladesh is to the north, and on the east are the high Yoma mountains. Man tended to congregate in the fertile river valleys.

What may conceivably be the earliest representation of this ancient land can be seen in a map based on the findings of the Greek scholar Erathosthenes (circa 276-194 BCE), the Chief Librarian of the Great Library at Alexandria. In it, Hindoi or Indoi (India) and Taprobane (Sri Lanka) are indicated. Included are the Ganga (Bhagerathi) River and its Delta, together with part of the curving coastal strip of Arakan. The Yoma range which separate this region from the country now called Myanmar, is depicted as well. Unfortunately, Arakan is represented as a blank space with no identifiable habitation sites.

A chart by Strabo (c. 63/64 BCE-24 CE) which appears to have been based on the above, is almost identical for this region. However, in a later map derived from those of Claudius Ptolemaeus (Ptolemy: flourished 127-145 CE, another inhabitant of Alexandria), the coastline of Arakan has been updated considerably, and the mountain barrier illustrated in detail. Of particular interest is the inclusion of the premier port city of Sada together with another, also on the coast, called Berabonna.

The river "Sados Flu" [thought to be the present Kaladan] is shown. Another map, also based on Ptolemy's researches and published in 1695, identified the Yoma mountain chain as the "Meandrus Mons". In this and Triglyphon, situated further inland and to the north.

An additional chart entitled "Geographiae Antiquae" and dated 1818, depicted Sada and Berabonna, together with Triglyphon which had now been relocated to the coast; several versions based on Ptolemy are known to exist. In those remote days, it is possible that it was in Bharatavarsha ("The Realm of the Sons of Bharata", a fabled Indian ruler) that the earliest name by which Arakan was known was first recorded, and where it achieved notoriety as "Kala Mukha" (Land of the) Black Faces.¹

The *Mahaniddesa* (circa 200 CE) noted that the *Ramayana* (The Adventures of Rama: circa 500 BCE) and the *Mahabharata* (The Great [battle of the] Bharatas: circa 400 BCE) identified it by that appellation, and described its denizens as cannibals, presumably negritos.²

* All dates not designated BCE are of the Christian Era. Comments in square brackets are by the author version, only two cities are named, Sada on the coast.

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FROM P. 3 Not surprisingly, the Hindus called them *rakshasa* (demons) as they believed them to be the offspring of men and *rakshasis* (shape-changing female demons) who through their magical powers could metamorphose themselves into delectable maidens.³

The legend of the *rakshasa* filtered down the centuries, for the present-day Rakhaing whose presence was first noted in the region in about the 10th century CE ⁴ knew their land as *Yetkhapura (Rakshasa pura)* or Kingdom and City of the Demons; although it is unclear where this city-state was situated or during which period it flourished. Gerini was sceptical of the derivation of *Yetkhapura* from the word "*rakshasa*", he felt that although Ptolemy in his *Geographike Hyphegesis* (Guide to Geography) had populated the littoral around the Gulf of Martaban with cannibal tribes, he had not mentioned their existence in Arakan.

The term Rakhaing can therefore be scarcely connected with the tradition of the Raksasas occupying at one time the land, and any such pretended connection put forward is undoubtedly the modern invention of Buddhist monks, anxious to find some explanation for the name of the country."

Sir Arthur Phayre says that the latter was designated as Rakkha-pura by the Buddhist missionaries from India; but I should like to hear how far back in antiquity this name can be traced. It appears in the Mahavamsa [of Sri Lanka] under the form Rakkhanga at so late a date as A.D. 1592; and in the Ain-i-Akbari at about the same period under the form Arkung. ⁵

Luce, quoting Ptolemy [who in turn was citing Pomponius Mela (circa 43) on the location of ancient Arakan, said : *"Descending the coast south-eastwards from the mouth of the Ganges, he names first the Airrhadoi (with the port of Barakoura) [this was presumably in the Chittagong region]; then the country of Argyre ["Silver Land" i.e. Arakan] with [the towns of] Sambra, Sada, Berabonna and Temala [which Gerini mbelieved was Cape Negrais]; then a Cape; then the cannibals of Besynga [thought to be in the region of the mouth of the Irrawaddy River] in the Sarabak Gulf [most likely the Gulf of Martaban]."* ⁶

These areas were allegedly inhabited by other savage tribes, such as the Beseidai or Tiladai who lived between India and China, therefore somewhere in present day Myanmar. However, Luce, when quoting Ptolemy, offered conflicting descriptions. While on one occasion he defined the people as "big" of stature and "broad and hairy and broad-faced, white-skinned", further on they are described as "stunted."⁷ The Periplus had originally depicted them as 'pygmies'.

Nevertheless, according to Luce "Both Chinese and Greek sources agree in placing, at the beginning of our era, undersized and white-skinned peoples in Burma, and the existence of early trade-routes between China and India."⁸

HOW RELIABLE IS THE ANECDOTE CONCERNING THE CANNIBALS?

Regarding these man-eating savages, was Ptolemy simply repeating the scare stories of them geographers before him, and the sensational traveller's tales which were liable to circulate in ports of the world? After all, it is a well known fact that humans have a tendency to fabricate, either from sheer ignorance or pure malice.

Revealingly, a location map in Moore's recent work pinpoints numerous fortified habitation sites from possibly before 100 CE in the very areas supposedly being terrorized by Ptolemy's cannibals.⁹

The cold archaeological and scientific facts are these. Cave paintings and stone implements said to be over 5,000 years old have been discovered in the Badalin ("Shining-as-Mercury") Caves in the Shan States. Older still are the mysterious hunter-gatherers of a prehistoric period called "Anyathian", from the relatively modern Myanmar word *ah-nyar-tha*, meaning a male from the upper part of the country.

Recent excavations have uncovered hitherto unknown finds from locations which have been identified as the Neolithic, 'Bronze Age' and the 'Iron Age'. The Nyaungyan burial site, in particular, has revealed what appear to be unique 'mother goddess' figures crafted out of thin sheets of bronze; the identification of these symbols is still ongoing. Grave goods include decorative ornaments for coffins, polished stone implements, large perforated stone discs designed for **Cont. P. 5**

FROM P. 4 the wrists and chest, glass rings, pottery and bronze artefacts.**10** Almost similar examples from these periods have also been reported in Thai-land.**11**

It is doubtful if cannibalism was practiced amongst these people who were certainly not wild savages. Carbon-dated evidence has revealed that by circa 200 BCE, the Pyu (Piao or Tircul), possibly one of the earliest civilized ethnic groups, were already established within their small city-states in central Myanmar.

One must presume that the civilized and the uncivilized existed within their own territories, with raids and counter raids being undertaken as the centuries passed. It would appear that the more primitive tribes were finally pushed further back into the wilderness, for the Pyu and the Mon, each in their own kingdoms, soon came to dominate the land. But that is another story.

THE FIRST WAVE OF HINDU COLONISTS

To return to what was occurring at the time in ancient Arakan. In India of the 1st century CE, fuelled by their need for commerce, gold and silver, the initial wave of Hindu colonists undertaking their samudra yatra (sea voyages) across the Purva Samudra (Bay of Bengal) began in earnest.**12**

These extraordinarily courageous travellers, composed of merchants, adventurers, artisans, Brahmana, members of the ruling elite and, one must assume, some of their fearless women folk, braved the terrifying and cramped conditions at sea to seek out strange new worlds such as the fabled Survanabhumi and Suvarnadvipa, which reputedly contained unimaginable wealth. Once at their destination, the pioneers founded settlements and over-came the hostility of the local inhabitants.

Some of their elite married into the families of local tribal chiefs and in time, by their superior knowledge and skills, came to rule over them. It was surprising to learn that even before that early date, many of the coastal areas and shipping lanes of the Indian Ocean and the Straits of Malacca were infested by pirates who either killed all on board or sold them into slavery. This meant that for the prudent ship owners and merchants, precautionary measures had to be taken, and a contingent of archers and spearmen hired to accompany these voyages.**13**

By the 3rd century, the coastal regions of Kala Mukha had been settled, the colonists dominating and coexisting warily with the aboriginal tribes. The Lords of the Solar and Lunar dynasties from far off Bharatavarsha had indeed arrived. In the major habitation sites, Sanskrit was the written language for the ruling classes, and religious beliefs were those current at the time on the subcontinent. Dr. Emil Forchhammer, a Swiss Professor of Pali at Rangoon College, and Superintendent of the newly founded Archaeological Survey [1881] described this fertile region [which was, and is still infested with the deadly malaria mosquito (Culicidae)].

*"The earliest dawn of the history of Arakan reveals the base of the hills, which divide the lower course of the Kaladan and Lemro rivers, inhabited by sojourners from India, governed by chiefs who claim relationship with the rulers of Kapilavastu. Their subjects are divided into the four castes of the older Hindu communities; the kings and priests study the three Vedas; the rivers, hills, and cities bear names of Aryan origin; and the titles assumed by the king and queen regent suggest connection with the Solar and Lunar dynasties of India."***14**

ARGYRE, THE SILVER LAND

Ptolemy, quoting Pomponius Mela, had identified this part of Eastern India as Argyre (Silver Land) as he had been told that it contained numerous silver mines. Its capital was Sada. But since this metal is not found in the region, later scholars found his description perplexing, neither could the city of Sada be identified. Majumdar, too, could not agree with this location for Argyre and felt that "we might look upon the island of Java as corresponding to Argyre, and there are several facts which speak in favour of this supposition."**15**

Fortunately, in 1978 the mystery was partly explained by Mitchiner, who said that the reason it bore the epithet Silver Country was that its government acted as a mediator for the export of bullion which originated in Nanzhao (Yunnan) and an area of Myanmar which is now believed to be located in the present Bawzaing area of the Shan States**16** [the Bawdwin mines are another location]. This immense stretch of country in the Shan States was variously under the **Cont. P. 6**

From P. 5 of the Pyu kingdoms of Vishnupura (City of Vishnu), Hanlin, and the Varman and Vikrama dynasties of Sri Kshetra, named after the holy city of Puri in Kalinga, and sacred to Vaishnavites. According to Mitchiner, the silver was taken down the Temalos (Irrawaddy River) to Temala, thought to be near present-day Syriam (Thanlyin), across the river from Rangoon (Yangon); it was later to become part of the Mon kingdom of Ramannadesa.

From Temala, the bullion from Nanzhao was shipped to agents in the eastern kingdoms and to Sada in the Silver Land from where it was dispatched to India and beyond. This precious metal attracted the attention of the Romans, for it is known that sometime during the 2nd century CE, a small expedition sailed across the Aparasamudra (Arabian Sea) and the Bay of Bengal, and managed to travel to Nanzhao by way of the Irrawaddy River – an incredible and obviously dangerous undertaking. As to the identity of the capital of Argyre, Ptolemy was told that the Sanskrit name of the ruling dynasty was Chandra, which his informants, using the Prakrit parallel, pronounced Chada. Linguistic difficulties meant that Ptolemy's rendition became Sada, which he also used for the capital.¹⁷

Interestingly, the *Mahaniddesa* also referred to the city as Sada, and said that it was a premier port of call for shipping from Palur in the Ganjam district of Kalinga (Udra or Orissa) and Tamralipti (Tamluk), on the Hugli River, about thirty miles southwest of modern Kolkata.¹⁸ Gerini, quoting from Ptolemy, said that Sada was identified:

*"as the terminus of the sea-passage across the Gangetic Gulf (Bay of Bengal) from Palura [in Kalinga], effected in a direct line from west to east, and covering a distance of 13,000 stadia. It was, therefore, the first port touched at in his time by ships proceeding from India to the eastern coast of the Bay of Bengal. Some ships, however, took a more northerly route, and touched at the riverine port of Antibole on the Dhakka or Old Ganges River, before making out for Sada and the Gulf of Martaban."*¹⁹

However, Gerini did not agree with Ptolemy's identification and location of Sada, and was of the opinion that the city was sited at the present port town of Sandoway (Thandwair, with the classical name of Dvaravati) which is considerably further down the Arakanese coast. He added pertinently that some of the later Portuguese maps were still calling the port Sedoa.

[Gerini's assumption is credible, for although all the maps based on Ptolemy's researches show Sada as being situated on the coast; it is in fact over fifty miles inland. Why would the vessels from India travel laboriously inland through winding mangrove creeks, and facing possible attacks by pirates, when the present port of Sandoway was more accessible?]

The large sea going vessels from India, known as *mahanavah*, were heading east to other Southeast Asian kingdoms, in particular to Survanabhumi ("Land of Gold"; claimed to be Lower Myanmar and Malaysia), and to Suvarnadvipa ("Isle of Gold"), which Majumdar identifies as Sumatra, together with some of the islands in the region. Several interpretations of the exact location of these fabled lands are current. Another name for this region was the legendary Chryse, known to Pomponius Mela, Pliny the Elder and other of an earlier period, and which is now accepted as covering a large swathe of Southeast Asia.

THE SECOND PERIOD OF INDIANISATION

The second phase of the Indianisation of Arakan occurred from about the 4th to the 6th centuries, by which time the kingdom of the colonists had been well established. One must also assume that by then, the earlier name of "Sada", for its capital, had been replaced by "Vaishali". As a port city, Vaishali was in contact with Samantata (Tippera-Noakhali region, Southeast Bangladesh), India, Simhaladvipa (Sri Lanka) and other overseas realms. Relations were strengthened by trade and diplomatic connections and the movements of migrants, pilgrims and itinerant craftsmen.

Nearer home, the Chandra rulers were in communication by land and water with the Pyu kingdoms across the mountains in the east, and with the small Mon city states in Ramannadesa. Collis, who in 1925 quoted his source in good faith, said that the archaeologist, San Shwe Bu, had provided him with a translation from an old manuscript called "The True Chronicle of the Great Image" [the Mahamuni bronze which was located at the earlier capital of Dhanyavati].

*"The Chandra kings were upholders of Buddhism, guarding and glorifying the Mahamunni [sic] shrine; their territory extended as far north as Chittagong" [then known as Chatigrama], "The conclusion to be drawn from this MS is that Weasali [Vaishali] was an easterly Hindu kingdom of Bengal, following the Mahayanist form of Buddhism and that both government and people were Indian as the Mongolian influx had not yet occurred."*²⁰

Cont. P. 7

From P.6

THE UNCERTAINTY OVER THE DATE FOR THE FOUNDING OF VAISHALI

Even though the capital of the Chandras is now accepted as Vaishali, there is as yet no coeval epigraphic evidence confirming it, neither is the term by which they identified their kingdom known. Western scholars have based their identification on the word "Waythali" (Vaishali), a corrupt later version in use by the present Rakhaing and the Myanmar peoples who are incapable of pronouncing the character "v".

If it was indeed Vaishali, Dr Johnston, an epigraphist of Balliol College, Oxford, who translated the Sanskrit inscription (circa 729) of Ananda Chandra, Maharaja of Vaishali, felt that the region had come under the control of the descendents of the [Licchavi] ruling family from Vaishali, Bihar, when they fled from the ascendancy of the Imperial Guptas (circa 300-467).^{21& 22} Johnston's theory is plausible, as the time scale corresponds with the second surge of Hindu migration into Southeast Asia, and the creation of the new Vaishali, when the Licchavi, under Dven Chandra (circa 370-425) established a Chandra vamsa (Lunar dynasty); previously the Licchavi claimed to be of the Sun/a vamsa (Solar dynasty).

However, at the present time, different opinions are current amongst scholars as to the identity of the city which Dven Chandra inaugurated. While some believe that it was the older Dhanyavati (meaning "rich as a source for food grains" because of the fertility of the earth), about sixteen miles to the north, others are of the opinion that it was Vaishali.

If we assume that it was the latter, at the location [Latitude 20° 40' 05" North, Longitude 93° 90' East] which was to become Vaishali, there was probably in existence a sizable number of colonists from the subcontinent, making it an ideal choice for the high-born Licchavi.

Then again, if it was Dhanyavati, it is unclear if the Licchavi replaced the earlier ruling house. This was an important site containing the Mahamuni Shrine, with its reputedly miraculous 'living' bronze image of Buddha. However, apart from legendary accounts invented centuries later, there is as yet no evidence of a contemporary nature to suggest that the shrine was already in existence when the Licchavi established the spot as their new capital.

As Sada was mentioned in the *Mahaniddesa*, followed by Mitchiner's interpretation of Ptolemy's 2nd century rendition of "Chandra", perhaps the dynastic name of this older dynasty, too, was Chandra?

Little is known of these early raja(s) who ruled at Dhanyavati, apart from the fabricated accounts in later native chronicles which date this dynasty from 600 BCE to 400 CE. Htun Shwe Kaing has gone further and pushed the date for "the First Dhanyavati dynasty" to 3000 BCE, which one must accept pure wishful thinking.²³

In circa 729 CE, the inscription set by Ananda Chandra provided a list of the long line of past rulers, and the major events which occurred during their time of sovereignty. It stated that as the region was unstable, the monarch Dven Chandra had to subdue no less than 101 kings, presumably local tribal chiefs [this is a common symbolic number used to describe the many races of man, implying that as the conqueror of so many, he was entitled to the status of supreme ruler or Emperor].

Dven Chandra then laid out a *nagaram* (royal city),²⁴ ovoid in plan and measuring 2.7 square miles in area. It was protected by fortifications and moats. If this was the present site of Vaishali, one will have to speculate that either for sentimental reasons, or on seeing the topography with its vast fertile lands which resembled the locality of their former home, the Licchavi decided to name their new city after it. Vaishali is a derivation of Visala meaning broad, extensive, spacious, magnificent. It was also the name of Visala, the founder of the dynasty, who was the son of Trinabundu of the Iksavaku dynasty, possibly a semi-mythical ruler.

The original Vaishali in Bihar, described as "a small but powerful republic governed by nobles of the Vriji family", was one of the six great cities of India visited by Buddha.²⁵ It is situated about 27 miles north of Pataliputra (Patna) and contains the Licchavi Relic stupa and the Abhishek Pushkarini or Coronation Pond of the later Vaishali rulers.

Fa-Hsien and Xuanzang, the Chinese pilgrims who were in India between 401-410 and 629-645 respectively, travelled to the older "Fei-she-li", and reported that although the region was very fertile, this celebrated site was already in ruins.

From P.7 Whether it was Dhanyavati or Vaishali, centuries later in Arakan, the Ananda Chandra Inscription of 729 [henceforth to be known simply as the Inscription] enthused that because of its magnificence the newly built but unnamed capital, "*saundarya hasinam*" (laughed at) the grandeur of Amaravati, the Vedic deity Indra's fabulous capital in *Svarga* ("Light of Paradise").**26 & 27**

Gutman has suggested that the city built by Dven Chandra was not Vaishali but Dhanyavati, and dated the former to the 6th century; this was based on surviving archaeological evidence such as sculptures.**28** Earlier, she had suggested the 7th century.**29** If this is the case, it had to be the splendid city of Dhanyavati which supposedly expressed amusement at the opulence of Indra's *Svarga*. On the other hand, if Dhanyavati had been constructed by Dven Chandra sometime between circa 370-425, who then was responsible for relocating the capital to a site named Vaishali? At the moment, no one appears to agree and each expert offers a bewildering array of dates and theories.

VAISHALI FOUNDED IN CIRCA 2ND CENTURY BCE

In 1972, Aung Thaw, Director of Archaeology, recorded that "a Hinduised dynasty was ruling at Vaisali (Wethali) about the 2nd century B.C."**30**

VAISHALI BUILT IN 327 CE

The writers Myar Aung and Shwe Zan have claimed that Vaishali was built in 327 by Maha Taing Sandra, who is not listed in the Inscription, and that this was the year in which the great Pharagri image was commissioned and installed at the capital at the instigation of his consort Thupaba Devi (see Chapter Eleven).**31** Conversely, the late San Tha Aung, insisted that the year was 370.

VAISHALI ESTABLISHED EARLY 6TH CENTURY

If the first half of the 6th century has been recommended by Gutman for its foundation, there were only two *maharaja* (s) listed in the Inscription for this period. They were Bhuti Chandra (circa 496-520) and Niti Chandra (circa 520-575). In all probability, it was the latter, for the Inscription indicated that he reigned for fifty five years. There was also peace in the realm, and more importantly, the economy appeared to have been strong [this may be attested by fact that the coins issued by him are the most common in the Chandra to have survived].

But that was all. There is no mention in the Inscription of a new capital being built during his reign. The mystery is, why was such a vitally important subject as the relocation of the capital not confirmed and identified in the text? Although it recorded the construction of a city, frustratingly it failed to name or date the event. To confuse matters further, the later Rakhaing chronicles have also claimed a date for the establishment of Vaishali – in fact a baffling number.

To quote but a few. One source **32** asserted that Vaishali was built by the monarch Vasudeva [not listed in the Inscription]. Another said that Vasudeva and his nine brothers took over old Arakan and established themselves at Dvaravati [now Thandwair, also known as Sandoway during British colonial times; the city reputedly had a habit of floating off into the air and had to be tethered to the ground by a massive chain].

Vasudeva is also another name for the god Krishna, who is the eighth Manifestation of Vishnu. Providentially, we have Gutman's version regarding this mysterious Vasudeva. She explains that he was the focus of the Bhagavata cult [connected with the worship of Vishnu or Krishna] adopted by the Gupta monarchs, which the Chandra rulers felt obliged to imitate, doubtless to bolster their self-importance.**33**

According to Dallapiccola, in India the cult later amalgamated with the Vaishnava faction of the Pancharatras.**34** One must assume that somehow this information filtered down through the centuries to later Rakhaing chroniclers who were totally unaware of its significance, and presumed that Vasudeva had to be the name of a very important monarch, and was therefore the ideal candidate for the founder of Vaishali.

VAISHALI CONSTRUCTED IN 788 CE

An indication of how these supposedly ancient Rakhaing chronicles could get their facts terribly wrong is revealed by Collis, who was equally ignorant of the piece of information he was quoting. "*The area now known as north Arakan has been for many years before the 8th century the seat of Hindu dynasties; in 788 A.D., a new dynasty, known as the* Cont. P. 9

From P. 8 *the Chandras, founded the city of Wesali [the dynasty then] came to an end in 957 A.D., being overwhelmed by a Mongolian invasion."*³⁵

[The date could not possibly be 788, for the Chandra dynasty had ended by circa 600. Yet, according to Kyi Khin; who was doubtless quoting one of the later Rakhaing chronicles, it was Maha Tain Sandara who rebuilt the old [and presumably abandoned] city of Vaishali in 788, and that it was destroyed in 957. ³⁶

VAISHALI BUILT IN 790 CE

Forchhammer, quoting the *Sappadanapakarana (Sarvasthanaprakarana)*, claimed to be "*an ancient Arakanese manuscript of great value*" added another twist to the story: "*In the year 152 B.E [Buddhist Era] (A.D. 790) the new city of Vesali [sic] was founded by the King Mahataingcandra on the site where the old town had stood."*³⁷

As the chronicle did not identify this "old town", Dhanyavati is out of the question as it is nearly sixteen miles to the north. Another source, however, said that this "old town" was Ramavati ("The City of Rama").

VAISHALI CREATED IN 887 CE

Aung Tha U, who failed to reveal his source, made the surprising claim that Vaishali was founded by Maha Sandra in 887 CE.³⁸ He was obviously not aware that the oldest section of the Inscription [the text on the east face of the pillar] was already in existence by the reigns of either Bhumi Chandra (circa 489-496) or Bhuti Chandra (circa 496-520) *in Vaishali itself*, and that by 887, the Chandra dynasty had long ceased to exist.

The by now bemused and mystified reader will be relieved to learn that at this point in time all theories are tentative. Until archaeological and scientific investigations have been conducted thoroughly, and centuries of entrenched and bewildering myths created by later native chroniclers which influenced some naive foreign scholars, eradicated.

It will probably be many years before a competent archaeologist or historian, will be able to unravel this mystery and present an acceptable account period. Regarding the founding of the earlier Dhanyavati, as Gutman has suggested a period sometime between 370-425, one must also presume that this should be accepted as the date for the construction of the Mahamuni Shrine on Sirigutta hill, thereby causing the chroniclers, invariably monks of a later age, to spin in their graves.

These pious men have stated, and with great authority, that the dedication of the shrine and its bronze icon was attended by none other than Buddha himself, who 'activated' the icon by breathing 'life' into it, and named it the Candasara image. One is informed that on that fabulous day when the bronze image was created, among the distinguished guests were none other than Indra and Visvakarman (Tvashtri), the celestial architect and creator of Indra's *Swarga*, who was also responsible for casting the image, and for the construction of the shrine to house it.

This preposterous claim is still accepted by the entire country. As supernatural beings, if Indra and Visvakarman were endowed with such impressive magical powers, why was there a need to actually *cast* a bronze image? Could it not have been magicked out of thin air? Then again, why were Hindu gods attending and taking part in a Buddhist ceremony? If as it is now claimed that this centre of worship was of great importance at the time, why was it not mentioned in the Inscription?

The Rakhaing who are of Sino-Tibetan stock, did not arrive at their present homeland from Western China until about the 10th century CE. However, their quasi-historical records which are secondary material compiled centuries later, and liberally sprinkled with anachronisms, now maintain that they have been in their country since 5000 BCE. They also claim, quite seriously, the early Indian dynasties of Dhanyavati and Veshali as their own – *peopled by the Rakhaing race.*³⁹

All these incredible assertions have been eclipsed by Ah Lon Maung's recent and extraordinary account entitled "Some Stupas from Ponnagyun Area" which appeared on the Internet in 2006. In it he stated that over time, there had been several cities in Arakan called Vaishali which had been built and then abandoned. An idea of the time scale between the present city-site and its predecessor in the quote below is mind-boggling.

"With the accession of king Marayu and the rise of Danyawadi, the name of Vesali had gone silent for

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From P.9 *about 36 centuries until 327 AD, when king Taing Candra chose it as his capital to make it the seat of the most splendid dynasty in ancient Rakhaing.*" [Marayu allegedly reigned for 62 years from 2666 BCE; this is a confused and purloined corruption of the word "Maurya", a dynasty of India. According to later Rakhaing chronicles, Marayu was the offspring of a female deer and a Brahmin *rishi* – the animal was miraculously impregnated by drinking his urine which contained semen].

Shwe Zan has also added to these bewildering pronouncements on the supposed founding date of Vaishali. *"Up to 3325 B.C. a local dynasty ruled over Vesali. In 3337 B.C. [sic] savages (Rakkhaik) [presumably rakshasa (demons)] overtook the city and rendered it with-out a king."*⁴⁰

This spectacular dating conflicts wildly with Gutman's more restrained suggestion that Vaishali was founded sometime during the first half of the 6th century CE. Nevertheless, there is a glimmer of light at the end of this dark tunnel which represents present Rakhaing scholarship. Signs are that a more enlightened attitude is being adopted by a few sensible Rakhaing who are better educated, living abroad, and consequently have access to more liberating scientific views. Above all, they have no qualms about offending, with their candid modern views, their old-fashioned and bigoted compatriots back home.

In 2007, it was refreshing to read the Narinjara News (on the Internet) which had been set up in 2001 by a group of Rakhaing who had fled to Bangladesh to avoid persecution by the Myanmar military regime. In the section on ancient Arakan, instead of the usual eccentric claims by their dogmatic fellow countrymen in Rakhaing Land that their race had been in the country since 5000 BCE, they have stated that their forebears entered the country only in the ninth century CE as the advance guard of the Myanmar people.

Doubtless this will be seen as a contemptible statement and will be vigorously denied by the outraged present Rakhaing writers in Arakan. I also acquired a copy of an article by Leider in which the reliability of the Arakanese chronicles was discussed.⁴¹ This was a forthright, no nonsense type of paper which was published, surprisingly, by the Myanmar Historical Commission for their Golden Jubilee in 2005. Yet, less than two decades ago, the dreaded Si-sit-yae or the State Censors would have been foaming at the mouth and declaring that the paper was a vile attack on the integrity of revered Myanmar and Rakhaing scholars.

It would seem things are certainly looking up, and long may they continue. For the reader who feels that my attitude to the native chronicles is a biased one, it is revealing to quote the views from 1922 of an educated Rakhaing on the 'ancient' ancestry of his race, or the reliability of the native chronicles. San Shwe Bu, that great scholar and Honorary Archaeological Officer for Arakan, stated:

*"I thoroughly agree with the view held by Mr. Harvey [the historian] that none of our historians can, on the material, e.g. palm leaf on which they are written, go back three centuries at the outside. For the material is too perishable, the climates too destructive, the old government too unstable for preservation of archives even though proper record-room methods are understood."*⁴²

[Unfortunately, and this is infantile and unwarranted, the majority of Rakhaing civil servants of the colonial days have now been branded "British stooges"] The talent for self-delusion among the Rakhaing is so pervasive, we have "miraculously preserved" hoary old chronicles providing in minute detail dynastic lists of kings and queens beginning from 2666 BCE, and which are frequently quoted, even by foreign scholars who should know better. ^{43 & 44}

Revealingly, many of the names of the chief queens for this extremely early period end with the word "bi" such as Waylutabi, Thuyabi or Thilabi, which are obviously Rakhaing renditions of *Islamic names and titles*.

According to Harvey the spread of Islam along the coast of Arakan and into further Southeast Asia only began in the early part of the 13th century.⁴⁵ This is additional damning evidence that these so-called ancient chronicles had been compiled more than a millennium later.

From the early 15th century, Rakhaing rulers established ties with the courts of Muslim Bengal. Nevertheless, this did not prevent them from raiding the Bengal Delta for slaves; these incursions were masterminded and assisted by the Portuguese who took a cut from the loot and the sale of the unfortunates.

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From P. 10 And here it should be pointed out that unknown to them, the Rakhaing were known in Bengal as Magh or Muggs. Being Buddhists, not only were they considered Infidels, they were also loathed for their cruelty, vicious slave raids, and were designated scum. To secure captives in groups, the Rakhaing slavers had a brutal habit of passing a thin rattan cane through the palm of the hand. Human life was considered so cheap, it did not matter to them if the wound caused an infection and the victim died as a result of this and other ill treatment.

Incongruously, so powerful was the influence from Bengal that the Buddhist kings of Arakan began using Islamic titles in addition to their native ones. Some rulers issued silver coins in Persian script bearing the *kalima*, the Islamic confession of faith. Many a Muslim architect influenced the shape and layout of Buddhist architecture; this can be observed at their capital Mrauk U, with the result that these hybrid structures are quite unlike anything seen in Myanmar proper.

Collis commented on the Rakhaing of this period: *"The [Rakhaing] Court was shaped on Gaur and Delhi; there were the eunuchs and the seraglio, the slaves and the executioner. But [from the 15th century onwards] it remained Hinayana Buddhist."*⁴⁶ Many of the high ranking officials, together with sections of the army, in particular the Archers of the Royal Guard, were Muslims; the latter were known collectively as Kaman: Persian for a bow or archer. From 1661, fresh archers recruited from North India virtually controlled the weak Rakhaing administration, assassinating and setting up kings, until they were finally overcome and exiled in the early 1700s.⁴⁷ Unlike the courts in Myanmar proper, a form of purdah existed within the Rakhaing palace and among the upper classes.

The 15th century also witnessed a great flowering of Rakhaing literature, yet so far, the earliest surviving work, known as the *Rakhaing min-thami ei-gyin* ("Lullaby for a Princess of Rakhaing") only dates from 1455.⁴⁸ It is to be presumed that it was at about this time also that many of the 'ancient' chronicles were compiled. San Tha Aung said that although it is claimed there are forty eight historical works, he knew of only eight, and that regarding these, he was unsure of the reliability of accounts before 1000 CE.⁴⁹

One should bear in mind that the Rakhaing chroniclers of old were incapable of reading the contemporary Sanskrit epigraphic sources in Devanagari from Vaishali. In 1975, San Than Aung commented that native scholars capable of reading Devanagari could be counted on one's hand.⁵⁰ Presumably, these 'experts' have no interest whatsoever in the Ananda Chandra Inscription, for the majority of the un-translated portions still remain a total mystery 2008. The section on Ananda Chandra itself was inaccessible for over a millennium and was deciphered in the late 1930s by Johnston, an Englishman, and published in 1944. A translation of Johnston's article by San Tha Aung only became available to readers in Burma in 1975.

Endnotes :-

1. Majumdar, Ancient Indian Colonies etc, pp. 56-57.
2. Kala Mukha is not to be confused with a Shaivate sect who wore a black urdhvapunda (sectarian mark), and were notorious for their bizarre Tantric practices which the skull of the victim was used as a kapala (drinking vessel).
3. Dowson, A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology ..p. 141.
4. Collis, Arakan's Place in the Civilization of the Bay. p. 488.
5. Gerini, Researches on Ptolemy's Geography of Eastern Asia, p. 38.
6. Luce, G. H., The Tan (A.D.97-132) and the Ngai-Lao, p. 232.
7. Ibid, pp. 233-234.
8. Ibid, p. 234.
9. Moore, E. H., Early Landscapes of Myanmar, pp. 146-147.
Also Moore and T. Tan, "Eyes on the Past: Samon and Pyu beads in Myanmar", pp. 134-141, Arts of Asia, vol. 38, no. 1, January-February 2008.
10. (a) Hudson, Bob, "The Nyaungyan 'Goddesses': Some unusual grave goods from upper Burma", pp. 4-7.
(b) Moore, E., et al., "Prehistoric grave goods from the Chindwin and Samon river regions", pp.1-8.
11. Higham & Thosarat, Prehistoric Thailand, Thames & Hudson, London, 1998.
12. Because of the predominance of shipping from Kalinga which monopolised the searoutes, the Bay was also known as Kalingodresu (Kalinga Sea). Sila Tripathi, p. 29.
13. Ray, The Archaeology of Seafaring in Ancient South Asia, pp. 46-47.
14. Forchhammer, A Report on the History of Arakan, p. 1.
15. Majumdar, Ancient Indian Colonies etc., vol. II, p. 49.

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- From P. 11** 16. The famous Heho airport, gateway to the Shan States, is in the vicinity. Di Crocco, "Silver Coins: Evidence for Mining at Bawzaing in the Shan State circa 6th-8th century A.D.", Journal of the Siam Society, pp. 125-128.
17. Mitchiner, The History and Coinage of S.E. Asia, p. 11.
18. Sila Tripathi, Maritime Archaeology etc., p. 71.
19. Gerini, Researches on Ptolemy's Geography Asia, p. 47.
20. Collis, Arakan's Place in the Civilization of the Bay, p. 486.
21. Johnston, "Some Sanskrit Inscriptions" etc., p. 368.
22. The Licchavi were ambitious, and a splinter group also founded a dynasty (circa 300- 879) in Nepal with their capital near Kathmandu, thought to be Harigaon. Hutt, M., Nepal A Guide to the Art and Architecture of the Kathmandu Valley, p. 18.
23. Htun Shwe Khaing, Yakhaing-shay-haung-myo-daw-myar (Ancient cities of Rakhaing), p. 27.
24. Johnston, "Some Sanskrit Inscriptions" etc., p. 380.
25. Barrett, Antiquities of India, p. 12.
26. Johnston, "Some Sanskrit Inscriptions of Arakan". pp. 374, 380.
27. Swarga is believed to be situated on Mount Meru or Deva parvata ("Mountain of the Gods") which lay at the very centre of the earth.
28. Gutman, Burma's Lost Kingdoms etc., p. 10.
29. Gutman, "Symbolism of Kingship in Arakan", p. 280.
30. Aung Thaw, Historical Sites in Burma, p. 117.
31. Thamaing-dair-hma Mrauk U etc., p. 123 and The Golden Mrauk U, p. 166.
32. Forchhammer, A Report on the History of Arakan, p. 1.
33. Gutman: "Vishnu in Burma", The Art of Burma, p. 30.
34. Dallapiccola, Anna L., Dictionary of Hindu Lore and Legend, p. 38.
35. Collis, Arakan's Place in the Civilization of the Bay, p. 486.
36. Kyi Khin, Departmental Report, p. 2, December 17, 2004.
37. Forchhammer, A Report on the History of Arakan, pp. 5-6.
38. Aung Tha U, Yakhaing Yazawin (Rakhaing History), p. 24.
39. Shwe Zan, The Golden Mrauk U, p. 149.
40. Ibid, p. 149.
41. Leider, "The Emergence of Rakhine Historiography: A Challenge for Myanmar Historical Research", pp. 38-58.
42. San Shwe Bu, Report for the Archaeological Survey of Burma, pp. 61-62, 31 March 1922.
43. Phayre, History of Burma, p. 293.
44. Nyar Na, Sayadaw, Dhanyawaddy Yazawun-thit (The New History of Dhanyawaddy), p. 51.
45. Harvey, History of Burma etc., p. 137.
46. Collis, Arakan's Place in the Civilization of the Bay, p. 494.
47. Harvey, History of Burma, pp. 139-149.
48. Allott, et al., Burma, South-East Asia: Languages and Literatures: a select guide, p. 11.
49. San Tha Aung, Anandasandara etc., p. 216.
50. Ibid, p. 5.

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Noel F Singer was born in Myanmar in 1937. In 1962, he moved to London and worked as a commercial artist and held exhibitions. Having been trained in the classical dances of his country, he often took part in performances. Enthusiasm for Myanmar archaeology and culture, knowledge of the language and frequent visits to Motherland has qualified him, since 1988, to produce thirty-one articles and reviews for *Arts of Asia*; he is now one of its Contributing Editors. His unique paintings of the thirty-seven nat (spirits) were specially commissioned for *Nat Pwe: Burma's Supernatural Sub-Culture (1992)*. Published titles include *Burmese Puppets (1992)*; *Burmah: A Photographic Journey (1993)*; *Old Rangoon: City of the Shwedagon (1995)*; *Burmese Dance and Theatre (1995)* and *the Sorcerer-King and that "Great Abortion" at Mingun (2004)*. He has also written Myanmar language articles in magazines such as *Myawaddy* and *Ngwe Tar Yi*. More articles and books are planned.

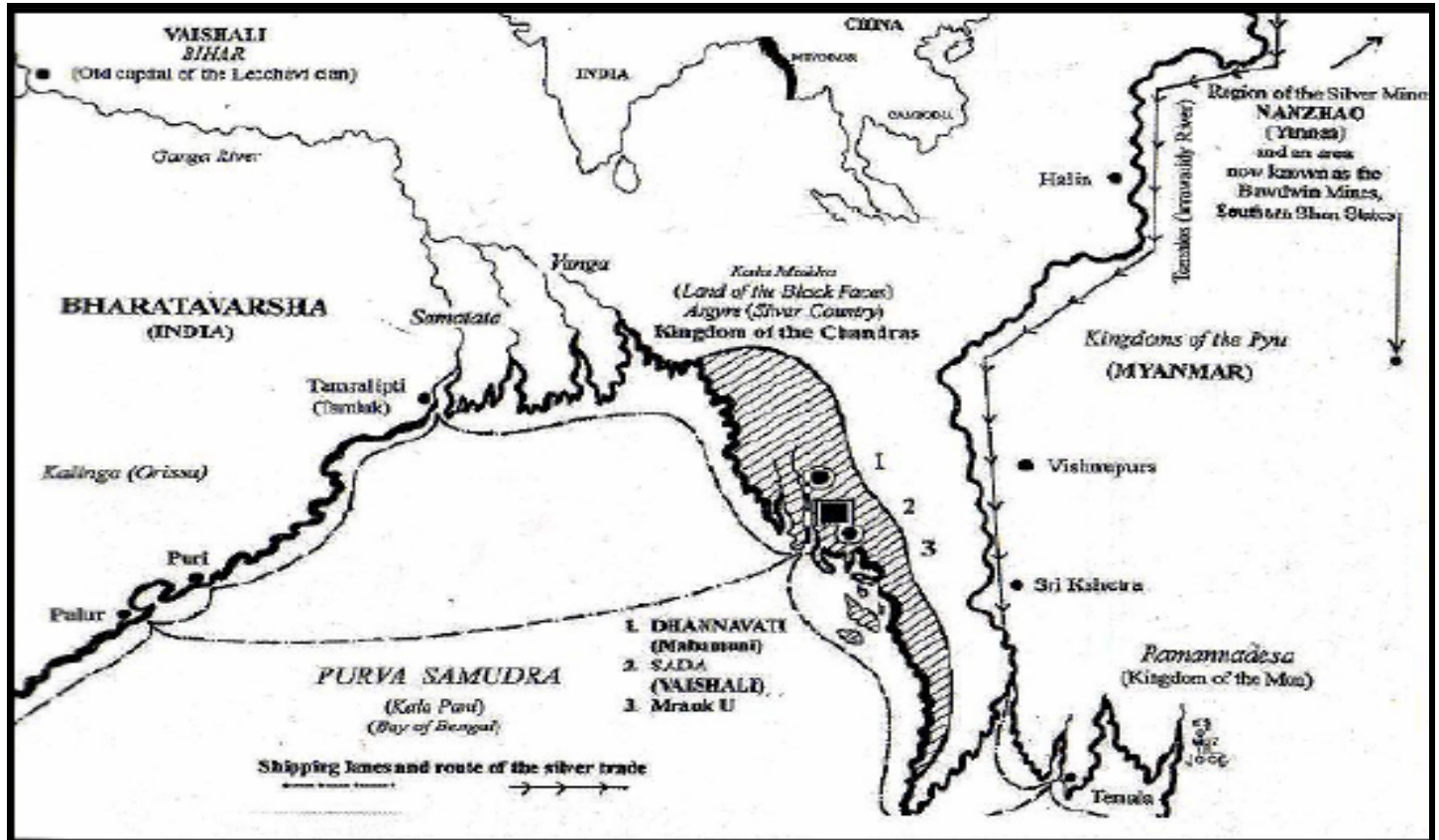
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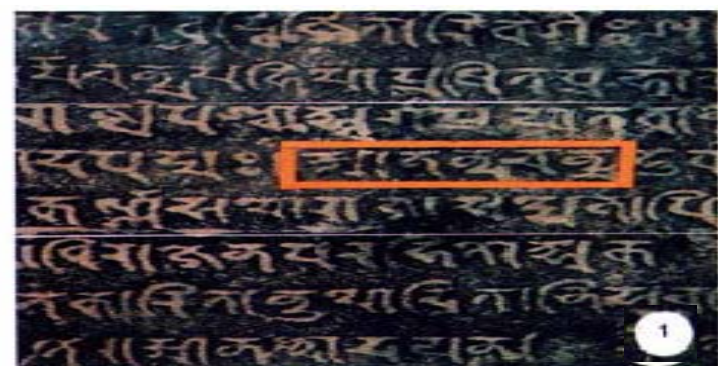
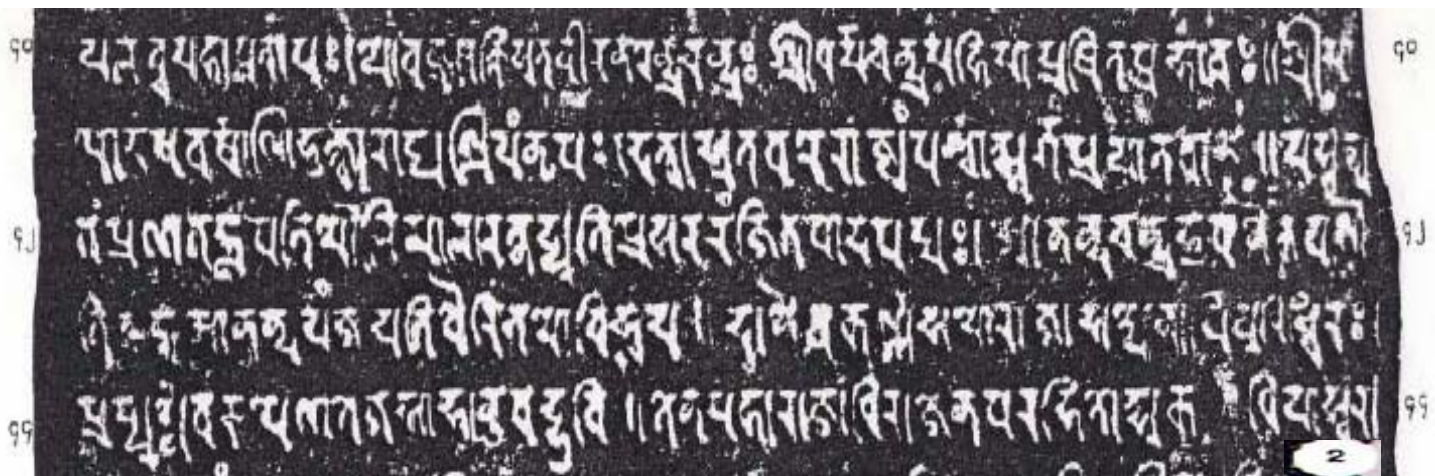
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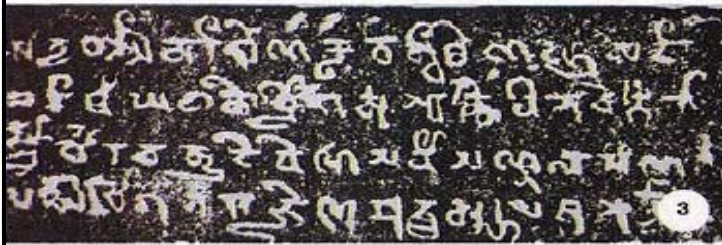
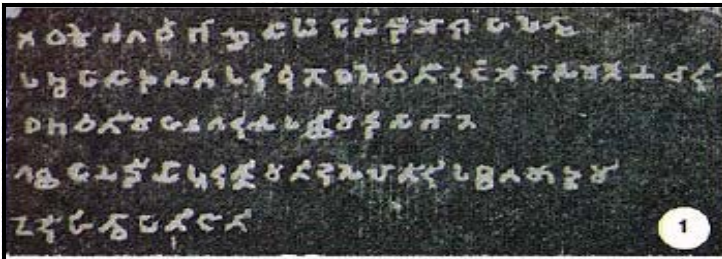
MAPS AND PLATES



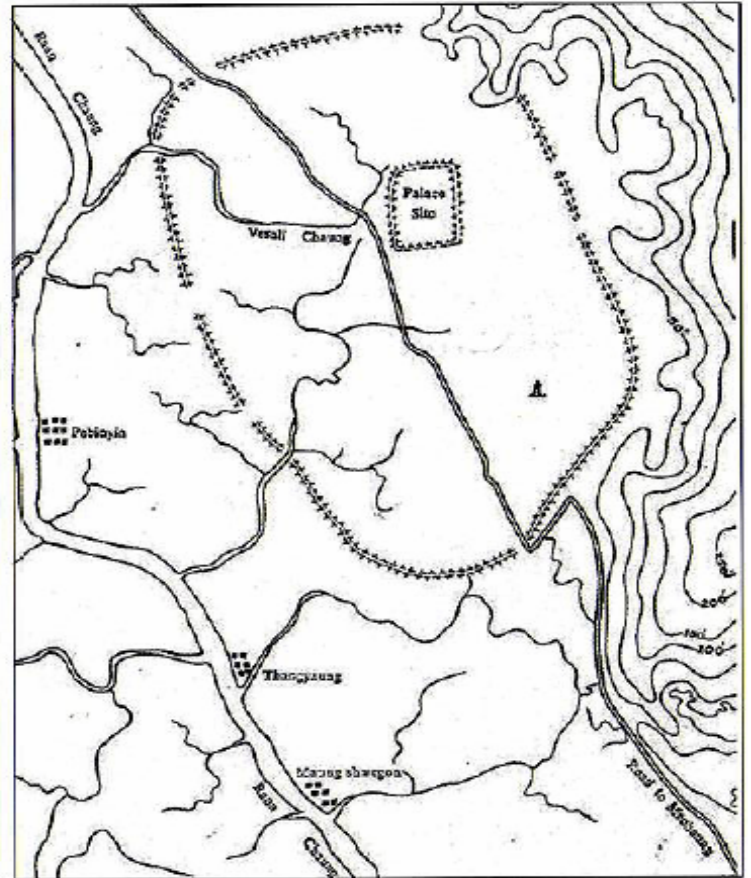
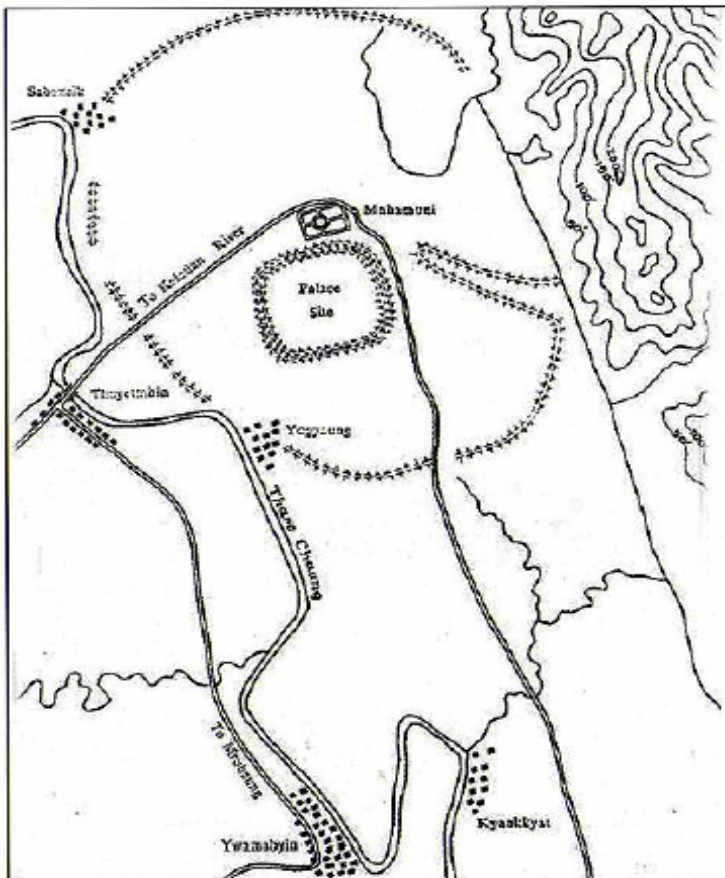
The Chandra realm and adjacent kingdoms (c.370 – c.729 CE) showing mercantile and silver trade routes. Map by the author Noel F. Singer (not to scale)



- (1) RUBBING FROM THE ANANDA CHANDRA INSCRIPTION WITH HIS NAME.
- (2) THE NORTHERN FACE OF THE ANANDA CHANDRA PILLAR HAS A TOTAL OF 78 LINES OF INSCRIPTION OF WHICH, 69 LINES WERE WRITTEN IN PROTO-BENGLI SCRIPT. IN THE 42ND LINE, THE NAME OF ARAKAN (COUNTRY) WAS WRITTEN "ARAKANDESH". THE PLATE CONTAINS LINE NOS. 40 – 44 , COURTESY OF DAW SAW SAW SARPAY.



(1) The Taung Pauk Gyi Inscription. (2) The Saccakaparibajaka (ji) na Inscription. (3) The Sri Vira Chandra (c. 575-578 CE) Inscription. (4) Copper plate charter thought to be by Bhuti Chandra (c. 496-520 CE). (5 & 6) bell inscriptions. Courtesy of Daw Saw Saw Sarpay.



Maps of Dhanyavati and Vaishali, with fortifications, palace sites and waterways. Courtesy of the Department of Geography, Yangon University, 1970.

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1

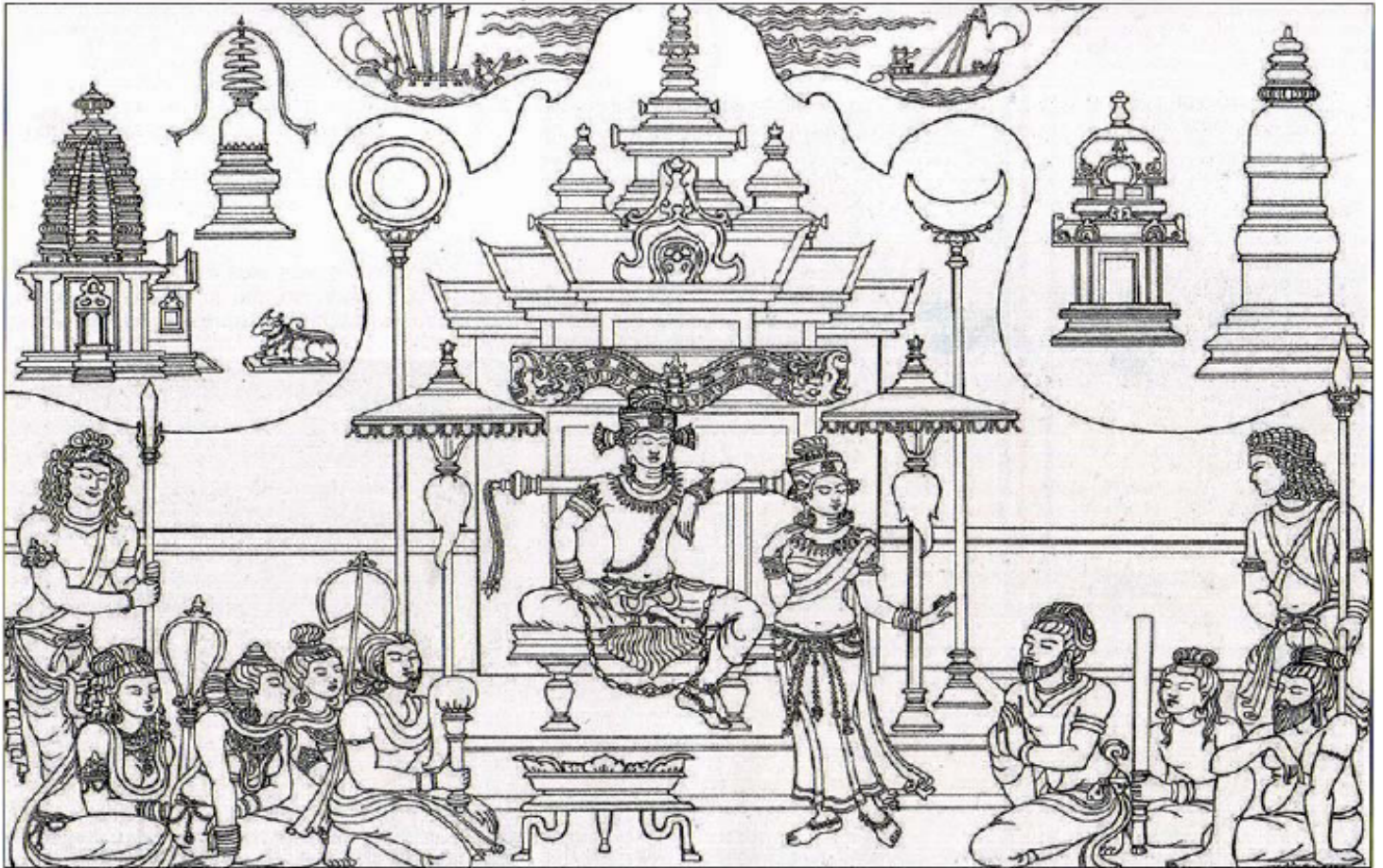


2



3

(1) Remodelled sculpture of a *raja rishi*. (2) Image of Shiva in his aspect as Bhikshatanamurti. (3) The revamped figure of princess Saw Pyi Nyo, alleged mother of Ananda Chandra.



A Maharaja of Vaishali. A conjectural drawing by the author based on indigenous sculptures and Indian sources of the period.