

WAYS OF SEEING A PYU, MON AND DVARAVATI ARTISTIC CONTINUUM

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ABSTRACT

During the last 100 years artistic relationships between the Pyu and Mon of Burma and the Dvāravatī Mon of Thailand have been frequently hinted at yet until recently these ideas had not been explored further. In light of contemporary research, and in particular, relatively stable access to Burma, there is renewed interest in the cultures which inhabited the region extending from Upper Burma through Lower Burma and into central and south-west Thailand during the first millennium CE. Conventionally viewed as distinct cultural groups, on reappraising archaeological and historical research associated with the Pyu, Mon and Dvāravatī it is now suggested that these communities were more closely linked than traditionally thought. The art from these regions supports this. Buddhism was the common catalyst for visual culture and the artistic repertoires of the Pyu, Mon and Dvāravatī share many similarities. Examination of themes and styles which appear in the art of these cultures indicates there was a flow of ideas back and forth across the region, and likely beyond. The apparent openness of these groups to the integration of new ideas offers insight into the patterns of knowledge exchange and challenges preconceived notions of cultural division throughout this large region of mainland Southeast Asia.

INTRODUCTION

The art of the Pyu, Mon and Dvāravatī flourished during the second half of the first millennium AD. Each was developing a visual repertoire that reflected the adoption of Buddhism as their principle religion. No defined geographical boundaries traversed this large area of mainland Southeast Asia, which extends from Burma to Thailand, and connections have been recognized between the visual cultures of these groups. Despite all this, each group's visual culture has conventionally been considered independent of the others. Luce (1965) described some of the similarities and differences between the art and architecture of Burma and Dvāravatī in general terms

in the 1960s. The subject remained dormant until Brown (2001) articulated more specific commonalities between these groups with a focus on the Pyu and Dvāravatī. Brown identified six categories of objects for comparison across Pyu and Dvāravatī art: anamorphic objects; Buddha images; Buddha-and-stupa triads; the First Sermon with ascetics and monks; megaliths, thrones, *sema* stones and wheel-topped pillars; and stylistic similarities of stucco sculpture. These groupings can be broadly categorized as representing stylistic and iconographic similarities. The case presented for these commonalities is convincing, yet has not been taken up further. This paper aims to invigorate interest in the Pyu-Mon-Dvāravatī nexus. It considers some artistic links between the three groups, and introduces an additional category for Brown's list. This category can be termed 'theme' and aims to demonstrate iconological linkage through a shared acceptance of a similar form of Buddhism. Shared themes allow for stylistic variations in visual interpretation that may otherwise be interpreted as indicating difference rather than commonality.

The examples discussed are done so in the context of these three groups. However, the shared themes are not necessarily exclusive to these groups and similarities in artistic form may also be found in other areas of Southeast Asia, particularly in relation to connections between Thailand and Cambodia. Discussion of the broader interactions across the Southeast Asian region, however, is beyond the scope of this paper.

DEFINING THE PYU, MON AND DVARAVATI

Pyu, Mon and Dvāravatī are terms used in the west to describe cultural groups that developed city states in Upper and Lower Burma, and in central Thailand during the first millennium CE. The Pyu, also known in historical records as the P'iao, Pru, Chu-po, T'u-lo-chu and Tircel (Luce 1960:309) were the dominant people in Upper Burma. Pyu settlements were centred around the tributaries of Burma's great rivers –

the Irrawaddy, Sittang, Chindwin, Salween and Mu – with major city sites at Beikthano, Halin, Maingmaw and Sriksetra. Beikthano is considered the earliest, flourishing during the second-fourth centuries CE, Halin the second-ninth centuries, Maingmaw the fourth-fifth centuries, and Sriksetra the fourth or fifth centuries- ninth century (Moore 2009:108, Hudson and Lustig 2009:273-4). The Pyu are mentioned in Chinese annals from the late fourth century and possibly earlier (Sun Laichen 1997:9-11). Records indicate they sent tribute missions to China, accompanied by court dancers and musicians, during the Tang dynasty (618-907 CE). Final reference to the Pyu in Chinese records dates to the early Song dynasty, likely the early eleventh century. The Pyu are associated with the earliest Buddhist artifacts in Burma. Their artistic repertoire was varied, and included stone sculpture in relief as well as in the round, terracotta sculptures, votives and relief tiles, and metalwork. (Guy 1999:14-28). During the ninth century for reasons still unclear the Pyu ceased being a significant regional polity. The last contemporaneous mention of the Pyu is found at Pagan in the Rajakumar inscription of 1113 CE after which time Pyu script and the Pyu disappear from record (Luce 1969:73-75, 96).

The Mon occupied sites in Lower Burma. This region's history is the least well known of the three groups discussed and there is relatively little extant cultural material. Thaton, on the Martaban gulf, was a major settlement and has yielded notable Mon artifacts, as has Winka and Kyontu (Moore 2007:198-202). Some wonderful large stone sculptures were found in the early twentieth century, though most were destroyed during WWII and are known to us only through photographs (Luce 1985 1:170-71). Small quantities of artifacts have been found at other sites (Moore 2007:194-225, Moore and San Win 2007:211-212, Luce 1985-1:164-177). The scattered and often damaged Buddhist imagery associated with early Mon settlements discourages investigation of cultural links between the Mon of Burma and those of their counterparts of Dvāravatī. The paucity of Mon inscriptions dated to the first millennium is another factor hindering our understanding of cross-cultural interactions of the time (Guillon 1974:273-74), as most Mon inscriptions date from the eleventh century onwards. The Mon have been subject to scrutiny in recent years over the suggestion that they were not a significant presence in Lower Burma at all (Aung-Thwin 2005). However, this premise has not gained widespread support (Stadtner 2008).

Of the three groups, Dvāravatī's history and culture is best known. That said, speculation and re-evaluation on the exact nature and extent of Dvāravatī is ongoing (Barran and Glover 2006:175). The Dvāravatī polity of Thailand was likely well established when the name was first recorded in Chinese historical records during the seventh century, though the exact timing of its formation is still uncertain. Dvāravatī continued its prominence through to the twelfth century. There is

evidence that the people of Dvāravatī were Mon. Even though Dvāravatī was linked through language to the Mon of Lower Burma, connections between the two groups have been difficult to define. Mon communities were located through peninsular, central, west and north Thailand. Dvāravatī also linked linguistically with the Khmer of Cambodia, likely through the Nyah Kur people who inhabited a region extending from north-east Thailand into the central plain (Luce 1985 1:1-23, Diffloth 1984, 17-29). As with the Pyu, Chinese records indicate that the Dvāravatī sent tribute missions to the Chinese court. The first mission occurred in 638 CE (Woodward 2003:51). Coincidentally, 638 CE is the same year the Pyu started the Burmese calendar, which is still in use today. Major Dvāravatī centres were located at Nakhon Pathom and U-Thong in the lower plain of the Chao Phraya river. The earliest local evidence for the use of the term Dvāravatī was found at Phra Pathom, inscribed on a silver coin dated to the 7th-8th centuries (Cœdès 1966:114). Dvāravatī is associated with a range of distinctive art forms – fabulous and often monolithic stone sculptures, most notably of the Buddha and the great “wheels of law,” and the creative use of terracotta and stucco to form depictions of the Buddha and other imagery associated with Buddhism (see Brown 1996, Dupont 1959).

Current review and integration of past with present archaeological research has raised the question of whether the Pyu and Mon should be considered as discrete ethnic groups even though they had a different language. By extension, boundaries between the Burmese Mon and the Mon of Dvāravatī are also being questioned, as part of a broader debate on the concept of ethnicity. Moore's recent review of literature associated with the Pyu notes that a number of early scholars cautioned against assuming that there was a singular “Pyu culture” (Moore 2009:104-05) but convenience saw these remarks sidelined and “the ethnic and linguistic homogeneity of ‘Pyu culture’ has become entrenched in Burmese archaeology, spawning many misconceptions” (Moore 2009:115). Luce considered Old Mon linguistic patterns and their continuity across the region with Old Khmer (Luce 1985 1:1-10; see also Diffloth 1984), acknowledging a cultural connection. The concept of fluid cultural boundaries, however, remained overlooked and the Mon have historically been viewed as possessing discrete ethnicity. Even though their first millennium history is scant, unlike the Pyu, the Mon are an identifiable ethnic group in Lower Burma today. While we have a much better understanding of Dvāravatī, it remains a complex entity. As Woodward writes:

The name Dvāravatī is a real one, and the concept of Dvāravatī culture is a legitimate one, but the story of the rise and fall of Dvāravatī art is elusive. Scholarship is strewn with wildly contradictory opinions. The reason is simple: not a single work of Dvāravatī art can be dated with exactitude. About many important works there is

not even a consensus about which are generally early, which are late (Woodward 2003:54).

Woodward's remarks could just as well refer to the Pyu and Mon.

EARLY ART HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY

Regional politics during the early period of the twentieth century did not encourage cross-cultural investigations of mainland Southeast Asia's past. With France and Great Britain the region's dominant colonial powers scholarship was divided into two distinct camps with the British directing research in India and Burma, and the French in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. A strong French archaeological presence was also found in Thailand with much of the pioneering work undertaken by Cœdès and Dupont. The post-colonial period offered many opportunities as interest in Southeast Asia expanded dramatically but Burma was unable to benefit (Galloway 2006:13-33). From the 1950s to the 1980s the country was effectively off-limits to all but a very small number of foreign academics. Thus, new research was scant, especially when compared to their neighbours (Glover 2001:121). Lack of interaction with foreign researchers markedly inhibited the investigation of historic interactions across Burma and Thailand, and beyond (Aung-Thwin and Stark 2001:4). Since the 1980s archaeological and art historical research has become more coordinated. From an art historical perspective, however, much reliance is placed on early photographic records of Burma from the first half of the twentieth century. Access to original artifacts, where they still exist, is challenging or simply not allowed. That said, there is enough information about the art from Pyu and Mon sites in Burma to appreciate the cultural richness of these communities during the first millennium CE. In contrast, Thailand experienced continual growth in art historical and archaeological research from the 1930s, though it was not until 1959 that the first major study on Dvāravatī art was published. Pierre Dupont's (1959) fieldwork at Nakhon Pathom, undertaken in 1939 and 1940, resulted in the posthumous publication of his extensive study of Dvāravatī material and a proposed chronology based on archaeological excavation which was substantially revised a decade later after new material came to light (Woodward 2003:76). His work, along with that of important scholars such as George Cœdès, Jean Boisselier and Subhadradis Diskul, firmly established Dvāravatī as an important art historical period in Southeast Asia's history.

Art historical discourses relating to the Pyu, Mon and Dvāravatī cultures favoured descriptive analysis and compartmentalized discussion. Descriptive analysis served to highlight the differences between each group. Missing, however, was an understanding of the impetus behind the development of artistic repertoires across the groups, namely Bud-

dhism. Most artifacts from Pyu and Mon sites emerged during archaeological surveys in the early years of the twentieth century and initial interpretive writings were undertaken by those responsible for their discovery. There was no formal discipline of Southeast Asian art history, and commentary was written by those with a strong interest in, but often little understanding of, the cultures and religion which created and inspired the art. With the benefit of time we know that initial interpretations of Buddhist art were based on an understanding of Buddhism that was biased. Colonial scholarship favoured texts, and imagery was seen as a direct representation of the Buddhist scriptures while broader meanings such as their relationship to Buddhist practices were largely ignored (Snodgrass 1995:79-98, Karlsson 1999:28). Reassessing art from the perspective of Buddhism itself potentially offers great opportunity to enhance our understanding of the connections across the region.

The stylistic origins for Buddhist art in Southeast Asia have been conventionally considered in relation to Indian precursors, not to other nearby Southeast Asian communities. The Buddhist art of India was well described by the time Western scholars started to investigate that of Burma and Thailand, and comparison allowed for assumptions to be made about the timing and origin of Buddhism's arrival in these regions. Buddhist artifacts attributable to the early centuries of the first millennium CE have been found throughout Southeast Asia, but Buddhism did not gain popular support until around the sixth century. This has been determined principally by the stylistic features of Buddhist artifacts. There is scholarly agreement that the majority of each group's Buddhist art shares origins with the Gupta dynasty's (c. 320-647 CE) art of northern and eastern India. Luce (1960:313) referred to large stone steles from Sriksetra as "betraying Gupta influence". More recently Guy (1999:27) remarks that a lively terracotta relief tile from the Mon settlement at Kyontu is 'pure Gupta' and Woodward (1997:46, 50) links early Dvāravatī art to Indian fifth century models, and artifacts made after this period to those of Bengal. The major centres for Gupta Buddhist art were Sarnath, Nalanda and Mathura. Gupta India is not the only source. For example, Guy (1999:19) identifies south Indian influence in some Pyu art, while Woodward (1997:45) also notes a seventh century connection between Dvāravatī and an unknown Mahayanist south Indian site. Woodward (2003:73-74) suggests additional artistic linkages with China and possibly Japan. Reference to differing sources of influence illustrates the extensive trade and travel networks developing across the region. However, while evidence for earlier Buddhist influence appears haphazardly across each group, the late Gupta period can be regarded as the point from which Buddhism gained traction simultaneously across this broad area.

A shared Indian origin for the Buddhist art of the Pyu, Mon and Dvāravatī is a foundation stone for an artistic con-

tinuum across these groups. Acknowledging a common origin for the Buddhist art of the Pyu, Mon and Dvāravatī, commits us to recognizing an affinity across these groups for the ideals associated with this newly introduced spiritual philosophy. This validates further investigation of cultural commonalities rather than differences. Visual analysis of art is usually a primary means of illustrating cross-cultural exchange and formulating a chronology of artistic change. When applied to these groups it does not convincingly support shared visual aesthetics. Woodward (1997:46) remarks that while a developmental pattern seems to be present in Dvāravatī, the variance across centres means “it is futile to look for uniformity”. The same applies to Pyu and Mon regions. This is perhaps another reason why connections between the Pyu, Mon and Dvāravatī cultures were not seriously considered in the early art historical studies. Now, however, interpretation of art is much more complex than visual analysis. Another way shared visual culture presents itself is through thematic rather than stylistic similarities.

The Buddhist art styles of the seventh–ninth centuries that emerged across Burma and Thailand quickly demonstrated independence from their early Indian counterparts. While recognizing affinities to Indian models, local Buddhist art developed its own identity and researchers familiar with the subject would rarely confuse a Pyu, Mon or Dvāravatī image with an Indian image. The earliest Buddhist imagery in all regions was eclectic and drew on both Mahayana and Theravada traditions indicative of Buddhist influence coming from multiple directions (Woodward 2003:51-76, Luce 1961:314-15). As direct comparison between the groups based on visual analysis alone offers limited support for interconnections, what other ways of “looking” are there?

The six groups of similarities identified by Brown are a good starting point for comparative analysis and can be expanded on. Within the category of Buddha images, for example, there are some characteristics found in Pyu, Mon and Dvāravatī art that are not readily seen in their Indian counterparts. These elements are not necessarily exclusive to the three groups and occasionally appear in sculptures of the Buddha from other areas of Southeast Asia during this time, highlighting the likelihood of a broader regional Buddhist movement. One particular feature, possibly reflecting an early period of “independent” art is the appearance of oversized plump hands on otherwise well proportioned bodies (see Woodward 1997:Figure 39, Luce 1985-2:Plate 43d-f and 96e). This is an unusual feature shared across the region but by the 11th century has virtually disappeared. Large hair curls are another commonality which appear early in sculptures of the Buddha but again, this stylistic form loses popularity by the 11th century. Like Woodward, Brown (2001:37-38) noted the difficulties in developing a chronology of Pyu Buddhist sculpture though a loose dating of early art can be made as this most closely resembles its Indian origins



Figure 1 Lion, Sriksetra (Pyu), terracotta, c.7th - 8th century. Height est. 75cm

(Brown 2001:35-41). Forming a chronology based on stylistic and iconographic features is beyond the scope of this paper but I believe it is possible to make reasonable assumptions based on careful inter-region comparison.

Looking at stylistic similarities in stucco sculpture, Brown (2001:40-41) compares terracotta fragments of figures from Pyu, Mon and Dvāravatī sites and rightly concludes “the striking similarities speak for themselves”. Again, these figures are unlikely to be called “Indian” and are an example of a shared aesthetic and thematic preference. Another case for this category is the appearance of terracotta lions intended for architectural use. Sriksetra has yielded a wonderfully animated terracotta lion in a plaque form, now located in the Archaeological Museum at the site (Figure 1). It is in a rather



Figure 2 Lion, Kyontu (Mon), terracotta, c.7th – 8th century, after Luce, *Phases of Pre-Pagan Burma* vol. 2 Plate 78d. Height est. 43.5cm

clumsy full frontal position, with a double-layered mane full with vigorous curls. The moulding gives it an animated appearance, with gaping mouth that almost looks like it is smiling. From Kyontu the remains of a terracotta lion shares similar characteristics such as a broad opened mouth (Figure 2). The mane is more realistic, crafted in tufts rather than curls. It is formed as a sculpture almost in the round, the rear projection indicating it was intended to be inset into an architectural structure. A plaque with two lions of similar style has been found at Winka, also with tufted hair (see Moore 2007:197). A stucco lion head from Nakhon Pathom, dated to the seventh-eighth century, shows a shared interest in this iconographic element (Figure 3).

Shared iconography does not, however, always equate to shared stylistic characters. Iconography is simply a symbol. The iconology is the meaning of the symbol and I suggest this is an important category to add to Brown's list. The lion, for example, is a simple example of a shared iconology with a visible, but weaker stylistic link than, for example, the terracotta figures illustrated by Brown. The lion is an important symbol of Buddhism and has a number of meanings. The lion represents the Buddha's clan origins as a member of the Sakya tribe. It also symbolises the spread of the *dhamma* through the lion's roar. A lion throne can be interpreted as representing temporal and spiritual rule. In the Pyu-Mon-

Dvāravatī context the use of the lion motif by all groups suggests each were exposed to a doctrine that promoted one of those meanings. The location and use of the symbol would ideally offer an indication as to what meaning is likely being conveyed. Unfortunately the original context of the artifacts is often not complete, and the comparative purpose of the iconology can only be surmised. In this case, lion figures were frequently incorporated into prominent locations within the architectural fabric of a temple and possibly served protective functions. However, this was a period in which Theravada Buddhism was becoming better known across the region. Therefore, I consider it likely that the use of the lion motif also symbolized the spread of the *dhamma*, particularly given that the lion is often portrayed with an open mouth.

There are clear parallel developments in the artistic repertoire of the three groups, but the mechanisms of these cultural connections have not been proposed. One way of potentially addressing this is through Buddhist texts. Text and image relationships are complex and require careful interpretation (Galloway 2002:45-52). Shared texts, however, offers another avenue for understanding and explaining the artistic developments of the Pyu, Mon and Dvāravatī.

During the Theravada ascendancy in mainland Southeast Asia around the sixth-seventh century Buddhist influences were entering the region from multiple traditions (Skilling 1997:91-103, Ray 1998:1-18, Woodward 1997:33-54). Sanskrit and Pali texts—associated with Mahayana and Theravada doctrines, respectively—were known across the region until the latter part of the first millennium CE, when the Theravada tradition appears to have gained popularity over the Mahayana. The Theravada traditions of Burma and Thailand do not link directly to any known school, though as Skilling remarks, the Pali inscriptions of both the Pyu and Dvaravati share similarities in content around the 6th-7th centuries (Skilling 2003:96-98). Some of the earliest Buddhist epigraphs have been found at Sriksetra. Epigraphic analysis of Pyu inscriptions from the Khin Ba Gon mound support a well established Buddhist presence from the fifth century (Guy 1999:19, Stargardt 1995). This script has its origins in Indian precursors and likely developed during the fifth century (van Driem 1995:436). While there is still debate over the dating of the script (Brown 2001:38, Skilling 2005), these are examples of early Buddhist texts that potentially help us explain certain imagery. Written on gold leaves, the texts are extracts from the Pali canon; the Vibhanga, from the Abhidhamma Pitaka, and Anguttara Nikaya, from the Sutta Pitaka. The former explains aspects of the *Dhamma*, and the latter is a guide for the theory and practice of the *Dhamma* (Ray 1998:4, Perenchio 1993:91, 121). Ray concludes the presence of extracts from these complex texts indicates Buddhism was sufficiently well known for some people in the region to be studying its doctrine in detail. Ray suggests that the sources of these texts were important Theravada centres from the

Andhra-Pallava region of south India, including Amaravati. More recently, Skilling (2003:93, 99, 101) argues that it is not possible to be as definite since there is little information on the history of the Theravada doctrine in India, though he acknowledges the likely South Indian connections. However, a doctrinal link with Amaravati potentially supports Hudson and Lustig's recent proposal that Amaravati may have been the iconological source of the well-known Pyu stone warrior stele (Hudson and Lustig 2009:273-274). Depicting a warrior king with two attendants, on the obverse there are two figures flanking an empty throne which may represent an early aniconic Buddhist image (see Hudson and Lustig, Figure 2). If this is the case, this stone could date to the second to third centuries CE and be the earliest example of Buddhist art known in Burma or Thailand.

There is also, however, a possible Amaravati link in Thailand. Griswold (1966:41) noted some early Dvāravatī standing figures of the Buddha were “in the style of Amarāvātī or Anurādhapura” and Woodward (2008:81) has remarked that an Amaravati-style architectural fragment has been found at U-Thong, and can be dated stylistically to around the 5th century. Even though comparable texts are absent, this artistic similarity adds weight to proposal that there was a movement of themes across the region. The alternative explanation would be that there were roughly simultaneous, completely independent introductions of Amaravati-style artistic form to each region. This does not seem very probable, and raises another limitation for efforts to compare these three groups. Dvāravatī is defined as a polity that started in the seventh century, offering no connection to the early Pyu and Mon settlements. While there is a dearth of Buddhist artifacts from the Dvāravatī region that pre-date this period Barram and Glover (2006) suggest that habitation at Dvāravatī sites existed around the same time as the Pyu cities, from around the second century onwards. Noting that there have been few artistic remains uncovered from “the earlier levels revealed by field archaeology,” they suggest that this earlier period could be termed “Early or Proto-Dvāravatī,” a pre-Buddhistic phase (Barram and Glover, 2006:181). Artifacts from this phase could then be reviewed in relation to those of the early Mon and Pyu and contribute to further understanding of this earlier period of regional development.

There are also stone and metal inscriptions from the Pali canon in Dvāravatī, though production of sections here are not as extensive as those found in the Khin Ba Gon mound. Skilling (2005:389) notes that the Pyu and Dvāravatī frequently used the same texts for inscriptions, suggesting close philosophical linkages or, as Skilling described it, “remarkable resonances” between these groups. The use of the “Ye Dhamma” stanza is one of these resonances. Commonly found in Dvāravatī inscriptions, the same phrase appears in the Pali inscriptions found at Hmawza (Ray 1946:33-37). This formula, which likely originated and was often used



Figure 3 Lion, Lopburi (Dvāravatī), terracotta, c. 8th century after Dupont 1959 Plate 314-315. Height est. 110cm

in India, was popular across the Buddhist regions of mainland Southeast Asia (Skilling 2003). This phrase retained popularity in Burma, and is associated with the votive tablets of Anawrahta (r. 1044 - 1113). The text itself is often referred to as the “Buddhist creed” and extols the virtues of following the dhamma (Woodward 2003:63, Luce 1969 1:17-18; Skilling 2003:273-274). It is extremely plausible that when local kings adopted Buddhism they embraced the concept of an earthly monarch being the stepping stone to future Buddhahood. This is an obvious way for the religion to attract the interests of leaders and gain traction, as Buddhism offered spiritual status and authority (Heine-Geldern 1956). With evidence of similar doctrinal influences across the Pyu-Mon-Dvāravatī axis, is it possible these influences were independent? Was the same textual bias introduced to each centre in isolation? It is unlikely, yet mechanisms for the exchange of Buddhist themes and art styles have not been identified. One factor that I believe is underestimated and may provide an axis for cultural exchange is the Mon centre of Thaton.

Importantly for the Burmese context Ray remarks the Andhra-Pallava region—in which early Pyu inscriptions are thought to have their origins—“are [sic] intimately associated with the Buddhagosa tradition,” a key event underpinning Burmese Buddhist history (Ray 1998:4). Buddhaghosa, the great Buddhist commentator, plays a major role in Burmese chronicles and is said to have come to Thaton in the late fifth century and brought the first written copies of the Tipitaka to

Burma (Gray 1998:10-14, Pe Maung Tin and Luce 1960:46-50). Thaton is also associated with the legend of King Asoka's missionaries, two of which, Sona and Uttara, were dispatched in the third century BCE to Suvannabhumi, believed by the Burmese to be Thaton (Ray 1946:7-13). This is heralded in local chronicles as the beginnings of the Buddhist religion in Burma. Burmese chronicles also tell how the first great Burman king, Anawrahta (r. 1044 - 1074), brought the copies of the Mon Tipitaka from Thaton to Pagan, and reinvigorated Theravada religion (Pe Maung Tin and Luce 1960:77-80). Mon influence was keenly felt at Pagan following the introduction of the Tipitaka texts, after which the artistic repertoire expanded (Galloway 2006:123-132).

Thaton's importance in the Buddhist history of Burma is in contrast to the paucity of physical remains from the area. Yet Thaton is the only city credited with such specific Buddhist activities and while the chronicles are not always reliable, they are usually based on an element of truth, and it would be unwise to discount Thaton's possible role as a major centre of Buddhist thought and learning in the region. As such Thaton was ideally placed to be a centre for new Buddhist visual imagery. From here these new visual repertoires could readily be dispersed both east and west where they were integrated into local styles. This proposed mechanism would allow for the presence of shared iconology, such as the example of the lion imagery, with a differing visual aesthetic.

There is evidence to support the proposal of Thaton's importance even in the absence of significant archaeological or art historical artifacts. The Mon regions adjacent to the Gulf of Martaban were trading centres (Gutman 2002:108-109). Wicks (1985:196-197) notes there are numismatic connections as Mon Pegu coins are considered influential in the development of both Pyu coinage and that of Mon Dvāravatī in Thailand. Wicks (1985:198, 209) dates the coins found at the Pyu sites of Sriksetra to the sixth-eighth centuries and concludes that Thaton was likely the "Mon cultural axis linking lower Burma with central Thailand". Woodward (2003:40) comments on coins issued at Khlong Thom in the "first half of the first millennium; the small gold coins [were] modeled on a silver prototype associated with Pegu in Burma". He also suggests that the prototype for a particular type of seventh century Dvāravatī stele "is a sculpture of Visnu discovered at Srikshetra" (Woodward 2003:61). Quaritch Wales was definite in stating Mon influence on Dvāravatī. In discussing the seventh century Gupta influenced art of Dvāravatī he remarks "The increase in late Gupta influence can hardly be explained as other than due to an influx of Indianised Mons via the Meklong river route from Burma, who came to join their brethren in now independent Dvāravatī. This in turn almost necessitates the existence at that time of a flourishing Buddhist city at or near Thaton which, according to local tradition, was washed away by sea" (Wales 1969:16). All of these pieces of "evidence" of Pyu-Mon-Dvāravatī in-

teractions are rarely brought together because of past compartmentalization of academic disciplines. When considered together with artistic material and Buddhist texts, however, the case for widespread cultural exchange strengthens dramatically.

CONCLUSION

Current studies are moving in a direction that is challenging traditional boundaries between the Pyu, Mon and Dvāravatī, and the artistic repertoires associated with these groups supports this approach. Thorough investigation of artistic themes shared across the Pyu-Mon-Dvāravatī geographic region will greatly enhance our understanding of mechanisms for regional exchange of conceptual, visual and intellectual ideas. Recognising relationships between text and image offers further opportunities for comparative thematic analysis of artistic developments that expand a traditional view of stylistic visual association. Crucial in the case for intra-regional development of Buddhist art is a shared rejection of directly copying Indian models. Each group embraced change and non-uniformity in its art and this, therefore, becomes a commonality. This approach breaks away from conventional models of evaluating cross-cultural interactions which start with points of "difference" and look for future similarities.

Art was not a significant cultural identifier amongst the Pyu, Mon and Dvāravatī. Rather, there was a free interchange of ideas across the region with local adaptation and individual preferences being the primary determinants of artistic form. It was not until power bases became politically charged that distinct artistic styles emerge such as those associated with the Burmese and Pagan, and Khmer dominated centres in Thailand and Cambodia during the eleventh-thirteenth centuries. Creating images of nationhood discourages the ready integration of foreign cultural elements. Certainty and confidence must be portrayed through all forms of cultural expression, which leads to uniformity rather than progressive innovation. The absence of uniformity may indicate an environment conducive to the sharing of ideas. This is a model that potentially can help determine the nature of relationships between identified cultural groups. Evidence of a willingness to adopt change across a region is suggestive that communities lack a central power locus. Once uniformity appears in artistic expression, it is likely that a central power base exists, with inherent differentiation between peoples based on territorial rather than ethnic grounds.

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