

Christophe Munier and Myint Aung, *Burmese Buddhist Murals, Volume 1: Epigraphic Corpus of the Powin Taung Caves*. Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2007. 524 pp. Paperbound: ISBN 978-974-480-127-2

The Powin Taung caves are a series of Buddhist rock-hewn excavations near Mandalay, west of the Chindwin River and about 30 kilometres from the city of Monywa in Upper Burma. There are roughly 500 caves, only 29 of which retain their mural paintings, with their original Burmese captions. They are amply illustrated in this tome by Christophe Munier and Myint Aung with nearly 400 black-and-white and 90 colour photographs. According to the authors, only a handful of dated, painted inscriptions have been found, all belonging to the second half of the 18th century—the early Konbaung Period (1752–1885). The authors note that the style of much of the painting suggests, however, that many of the caves were completed in the first half of the 18th century.

Powin Taung has enjoyed a long history in the secondary literature, noted perhaps first by Taw Sein Ko (1901) and later more systematically by Charles Duroiselle (1920) in an *Annual Report, Archaeological Survey of India*. The latter publication put the caves on the map of significant sites, although Powin Taung remained fairly inaccessible until the early 1990s, largely because the area was off-limits to foreigners until then. Lately, however, package-tour groups from abroad have come to share Powin

Taung with a colony of aggressive monkeys that have reproduced there for generations. Added to this mix is an ever increasing number of devotees from Monywa and Mandalay, a journey facilitated by a bridge spanning the Chindwin above Monywa. As donations have grown, so too have the number of local shops and monasteries.

Munier and Myint Aung have collaborated to produce this splendid new monograph on Powin Taung, a study that focuses on the hundreds of Burmese explanatory captions placed beneath the horizontal registers of mural painting. Munier is a long-time student of Burmese who has researched the caves for many years, while Myint Aung belongs to a select group of dedicated senior government officers who witnessed the decline of the Department of Archaeology during the Ne Win era. Now semi-retired, Myint Aung has devoted himself to scholarly projects.

The disposition of the caves is indicated on a handy site plan, with each excavation assigned a number. While the principal caves are known locally by popular names, the new numbering system formulated here is likely to become the standard.

This volume follows upon the heels of another book on Powin Taung, by Anne-May Chew, issued by White Lotus in 2005: *The Cave-temples of Po Win Taung, Central Burma: Architecture, Sculpture and Murals*. While the primary focus of Munier and Myint Aung is the murals and the captions, the authors perhaps should have explained in their

introduction how their study is dissimilar from the earlier one and whether their basic conclusions differ from Chew's, if at all. Chew, for example, refers to a number of dated 18th-century stone and painted inscriptions that are omitted in the volume under review (Chew, pp. 14–17). Also, it is difficult to cross-reference the two books, since Chew adopted only the popular names of the caves, while Munier and Myint Aung fashioned a new numbering system that makes no reference to the popular names. (Pierre Pichard's celebrated *Inventory of Monuments at Pagan* has, for example, a list of the old names used in Pe Maung Tin and Gordon H. Luce's translation of the *Glass Palace Chronicle of the Kings of Burma* [of 1923] which are cross-referenced with the numbering system used in the *Inventory*).

Perhaps the most useful section of the book is chapter 11 ('Epigraphic corpus: Complete texts of the captioned murals and their translations'), which takes up more than one third of the entire volume (pp. 138–374). A ground plan of each cave is presented, complete with invaluable diagrams of the inner walls and the exact positions of the various subjects depicted in the murals. All of the captions are presented in Burmese characters, together with English translations. Such raw data are certainly the most valuable part of this volume.

The subjects of the paintings were rather constant and included the 28 Buddhas, key episodes from the life of the Buddha, the Seven Weeks, and the last 10 *jataka* tales (all but the *Sama*

*Jataka*) and the Eight Great Victories. The list of last 10 *jataka* (pp. 93–94) was taken from the Sri Lankan Pali canon, while the order depicted in the caves follows the Burmese sequencing, which is slightly different. (The same Burmese system is found at Pagan and Thaton.) For example, the *Vidhura Jataka* is No. 9 in the Burmese sequence but is No. 8 in the Sinhalese Pali version. There is no discussion of the Burmese ordering which may confuse some readers who are comparing the list of *jataka* to the sequencing found in the caves.

Artists probably completed the murals before the captions were painted beneath the scenes on long, narrow, horizontal registers. The present reviewer has come to this conclusion because the wording of a number of inscriptions includes small and unusual details featured in the paintings. For example, the caption beneath a depiction of Dipankara in cave No. 281 reads: 'The Bodhisatta Dipankara lives in Rammavati kingdom, in the queen's palace. The Indian gatekeeper is smoking. The Bodhisatta Dipankara leaves for the forest on an elephant' (p. 39). Since the episode of the Indian gatekeeper was not likely part of the Burmese religious text from which the information was drawn, the artists must have included extra elements that were later spotted by those applying the captions. This reviewer's tentative conclusion hints at the flexibility that artists enjoyed—and is testimony to the need for recording such additional descriptions in the captions. Perhaps future comparisons with other 18th-century painting can determine precisely

the ways in which the artists executed their work.

Readers interested in Buddhist life in the 18th century will find in the captions and paintings a treasure trove. For instance, depicted on the ceiling of cave No. 284 are the four legendary stupas that enshrine the Buddha's tooth relics, each identified by an inscription. That their locations differ somewhat from those of the relics in the *Glass Palace Chronicle* is noteworthy. Another example is a reference to the Eight Great Victories in one inscription, dated 1761, from another painting site in Upper Burma. These eight episodes are ubiquitously represented together in 20th-century Burmese pagodas and the inscription is probably among the earliest dated records of this theme; this set of eight was likely borrowed from Sri Lanka at probably about this same time. Such examples are just some of the gems of information revealed by the texts beneath the paintings.

While the captions are the focus of the book, the volume contains a number of references to comparable murals in Upper Burma in terms of style and iconography. Those observations, sprinkled throughout the book, might have profitably been compiled in a single section where the broad topics of chronology and styles in Upper Burma could be viewed in a systematic fashion. Comparisons between the Powin Taung caves and securely dated murals in Upper Burma would help place the cave murals in a tighter context. Many questions remain, such as the extent to which the Powin Taung murals represent

provincial work in the lower Chindwin area or reflect styles or variants that flourished in the Ava-Amarapura area or the Pagan region. Powin Taung straddles numerous contemporaneous painting sites in proximity to the lower Chindwin, such as Aneint, Mau, Yesago and Pakhangyi, many of which Alexandra Green has done much to uncover. The authors state that much of the painting is pre-Konbaung, which is almost certain, but a closer probe of the issue would have contributed to a better sense of how the site evolved throughout the 18th century.

The authors conclude by promising that three future volumes will be devoted to 'different styles, comparative iconography, religious themes and daily life as portrayed in the murals from the late 17th to the mid-19th century' (p. 378). Many unresolved art-historical questions will surely be explored in the forthcoming works. The present volume with its meticulous recording of the paintings and inscriptions at one important site should serve as a model for future projects. Indeed, this volume is indispensable for those interested in later Burmese painting. Art historians of Burma owe a substantial debt of gratitude to Munier and Myint Aung for their contribution and to White Lotus for publishing such a significant and pioneering study.

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