

The Aggressor at the Battle of Chiang Kran, 1538

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ABSTRACT—In Thai academic circles it is generally understood that the first battle between Ayutthaya and Burma was initiated by King Tabinshwehti of Burma. In other words, it was the Burmese not the Thai that started the military engagement. This view was put forward by Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, the father of Thai historical writing, in his famous book, *Our Wars with the Burmese*. He stated that after King Tabinshwehti of Pegu won control over the Mon state in southern Burma, he marched eastward to attack and capture Martaban, then proceeded to capture Chiang Kran at the border between Ayutthaya and Burma. Research in Burmese sources shows that the king of Ayutthaya started the battle, rather than Tabinshwehti. This expedition reflected Ayutthaya's ambitions to extend its influence across to the Andaman coast to participate in westward trade. However, this ambition was undermined by unrest in Siam, though only temporarily. The rising commerce in the Bay of Bengal attracted both Siam and Burma and brought them into a long conflict.

Prince Damrong and the battle of Chiang Kran

In the understanding of Thai scholars, the wars between the Thai and the Burmese began when King Tabinshwehti of Burma attacked the city of Chiang Kran (Diangkrai in Mon) at the Thai–Burma border in 1538 CE. This interpretation was provided by Prince Damrong Rajanubhab in his famous book *Our Wars with the Burmese* in the chapter titled “When the Burmese invaded Muang Chiang Kran.”² The prince based his interpretation on two historical sources: the Luang Prasert edition of the royal chronicles of Ayutthaya and the memoir of the Portuguese, Fernão (or Ferdinand) Mendes Pinto.³ Damrong described how Tabinshwehti came to the throne, conquered Pegu, moved his capital there, subdued Martaban, and “made arrangements for the proper administration

¹ An earlier version of this article appeared as “Suek chiang kran” [The battle of Chiang Kran] in Sunait, *Phama rop thai: wa duai kan songkhram rawang thai kap phama* [The Burmese Wars with the Thai: On the wars between Siam and Burma] (Bangkok: Sinlapa Watthanatham, 1990). The author wishes to thank Chris Baker for help in editing this article.

² Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, *Our Wars with the Burmese*, tr. U Aung Thein, ed. Chris Baker (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2001), pp. 10–13.

³ *Prachum phongsawadan chabap hosamut haeng chat* [Collected Chronicles, National Library edition], Vol. 3, p. 9.

of the provinces in the Mon country. He then advanced towards Chiang Kran, a town on the borders of Siamese territory.”⁴ According to Pinto, in Damrong’s account, King Chairacha commandeered 120 men from the Portuguese trading community in Ayutthaya who “were able to overthrow the Burmese and drove them out of Chiang Kran and brought it back to the possession of Siam as formerly.” The king rewarded the Portuguese with a grant of land and permission to practice their religion.⁵

Interestingly, these sources do not identify the event as a military engagement between the Burmese and Ayutthaya or between King Tabinshwehti of Burma and King Chairacha of Ayutthaya. The Luang Prasert Chronicle simply states: “In the eleventh month, the King went to Chiang Krai Chiang Kran.”⁶ Similarly *The Voyages and Adventures of Ferdinand Mendez Pinto* does not mention a battle at Chiang Kran in the reign of King Chairacha, but relates a war between Ayutthaya and Chiang Mai (Chiammay) after which the king returned to Ayutthaya and was poisoned by a consort who had become pregnant from an adulterous liaison during the king’s absence.⁷ A war between Ayutthaya and Chiang Mai is also mentioned at this time in the Luang Prasert Chronicle of Ayutthaya. The *Phongsawadan Yonok* and the *Chiang Mai Chronicle*⁸ also record a war between Ayutthaya and Chiang Mai at this time but do not mention a confrontation between Ayutthaya and Burma at Chiang Kran.

The confrontation between Ayutthaya and the Burmese at Chiang Kran is also not mentioned in the Burmese *yazawin* or chronicles which never fail to recount the exploits of King Tabinshwehti, particularly his military expeditions. Moreover, the Burmese chronicles narrate that King Tabinshwehti invaded Pegu or Hantawaddy, the Mon capital, in the year 1539 and captured the Mon coastal city of Martaban in 1541.⁹

In sum, King Tabinshwehti did not incorporate the Mon territories into Burma until at least 1541, three years after the Chiang Kran battle. The Burmese could not have attacked Chiang Kran, a city to the southeast of Martaban, before they had overrun the coastal cities of Pegu and Martaban which were the centers of Mon government. A glance at the strategic routes, shows that a Burmese army could not attack a city on the Ayutthaya–Burma border without first taking control of the Mon territory to the west of there, particularly the port city of Martaban.

⁴ Damrong, *Our Wars with the Burmese*, p. 11.

⁵ Damrong, *Our Wars with the Burmese*, p. 12.

⁶ *Phraratchaphongsawadan krung kao chabab luang prasoet* [The Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya, Luang Prasert edition] (Bangkok: Saengdao, 2001), p. 22 (CS 900); Richard D. Cushman (tr.), *The Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya* (Bangkok: Siam Society, 2000), p. 20.

⁷ *The Voyages and Adventures of Ferdinand Mendez Pinto*, translated by Henry Cogan (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1892), pp. 398–405.

⁸ Phraya Prachakit Korachak, *Phongsawadan yonok* [Yonok chronicle] (Bangkok: Kranwitthaya, 1973), pp. 381–2; David K. Wyatt and Aroonrut Wichienkeo (tr.), *The Chiang Mai Chronicle* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1995), pp. 110, 111.

⁹ G. E. Harvey, *History of Burma* (London: Frank Cass, 1967), pp. 154–157

Ayutthaya and the Andaman coast

Srisakra Vallibhotama provided an interesting analysis of the landscape. The main military route from the Mon-Burmese territory into Siam went by way of the Ataran River and the Three Pagodas Pass. The route started from Martaban, and proceeded south-east along the Ataran river through a small valley flanked by mountains on both sides up to the town of Ataran or Chiang Kran. From there the route went up the Sami River to its source and the town of Sami, where the terrain levelled out into a high, flat plain, then crossed the Sakrin and Mae Kasat rivers, and passed through a defile at the watershed, before reaching the point known as the Three Pagodas Pass.¹⁰

In the year when the battle of Chiang Kran was supposed to have taken place, the Burmese king was not in a position to mount an attack along this route. Perhaps, it was King Chairacha of Ayutthaya who provoked the battle by invading the Mon territory to gain access to the Andaman Sea. If so, this was one of several attempts by Ayutthaya kings to extend their political domain across to the Andaman coast where there were several important port cities such as Martaban, Ye, Tavoy, Mergui and Tenasserim.

Prior to the time when the Toungoo kings moved their capital from the hinterland city of Toungoo to the coastal city of Pegu around 1537, Ayutthaya had attacked Tavoy. According to the Luang Prasert chronicle, “In the 850 of the Lesser Era [1488] a year of the monkey, King Boromracha went to seize Tavoy.”¹¹ This invasion of Tavoy is also

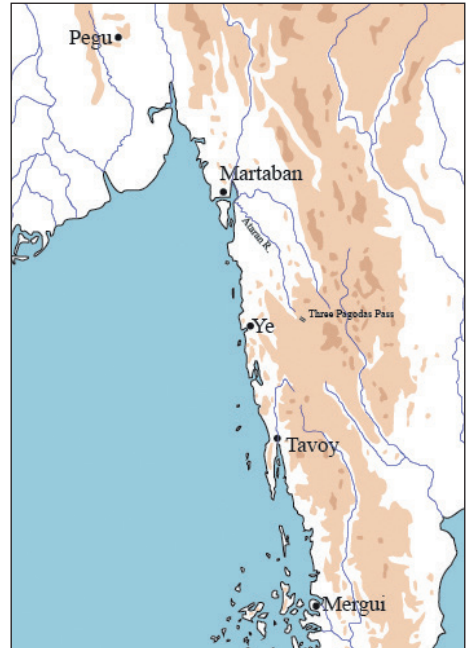


Figure 1. The Andaman coast and the Ataran river.

mentioned in *Phongwawadan mon-phama* [Mon-Burma chronicle] which states: “In 832 of the Lesser Era, the king of Ayutthaya came with his army to attack Tavoy and took back a number of war prisoners.”¹²

Similarly, after the battle of Chiang Kran, Ayutthaya continued to attack the cities on the Andaman coast at every opportunity. According to the Burmese chronicles:

Taking advantage of Mintara Shweti’s¹³ absence in Arakan, the King of Siam sent Thamin Kanburi and Thamin Dawtaka with 200 elephants, 1,000 horses, and

¹⁰ Srisakra Vallibhotama, “Thammai phama rop thai” [Why did Burma war with Siam], *Muang Boran* 14, 4 (1988), p. 45.

¹¹ *Phraratchaphongsawadan krung kao chabab luang prasoet*, p. 18; Cushman, *Royal Chronicles*, 18.

¹² *Prachum phongsawadan chabap hosamut haeng chat*, Vol. 1, p. 298.

¹³ Mintara Shweti is the Burmese chronicler’s name for Tabinshwehti in his early years.

60,000 men to capture Tavoy. On the arrival of the Siamese troop the governor showed only a shadow of resistance and then fled to Ye.

News of the capture having been brought to the capital, Mintara Shweti sent 40,000 men by water with a flotilla of 100 big and 300 small sailing vessels, and 200 elephants, 2,000 horses and 80,000 men by land to expel the Siamese from Tavoy and beyond the frontier. The expedition was quite successful, and the Burmese followed the Siamese forces well into Siamese territory.¹⁴

After the kings of the Toungoo dynasty moved their capital from Toungoo to Pegu and incorporated the major Mon coastal ports such as Tavoy and Tenasserim into their political domain, they had to confront the Ayutthaya kings who wished to control these cities on the Andaman coast, especially Tavoy, Mergui and Tenasserim.

According to the Ayutthaya chronicles, after King Naresuan won victory over the *maha upparat* of Pegu in the famous elephant duel in 1592, he sent Chaophraya Chakri to attack Tenasserim and Phraya Phrakhleng to attack Tavoy, which had earlier been taken by the Burmese.¹⁵

In general, Ayutthaya was interested in controlling the port cities on the Andaman coast and showed no interest in extending its influence over the Burmese seats of power further to the north beyond Martaban in the Irrawaddy basin such as Pegu, Toungoo and Ava. King Naresuan, however, was an exception. According to Nicolas Gervaise,

The Siamese have long been at war with the inhabitants of the kingdom of Ava and have taken from them the city of Tanau, which was formerly theirs, and the whole of the province of Tenasserim.... but, since the king of Pegu has seized the kingdom of Ava, they are no longer fighting each other and each of them now rests content with what it possesses.¹⁶

Usually, the kings of Ayutthaya attacked the coastal ports when they saw a strategic opportunity. For example, the attack on Tavoy and Tenasserim in the reign of King Naresuan (1590–1605) occurred after the Burmese had been bruised by the heavy loss of troops in a series of battles during the reign of Nandabayin.¹⁷ Similarly, the attack on Tavoy in the reign of King Chakkraphat (1548–1564) took place when King Tabinshwehti of Pegu was at war with the Arakanese. King Chairacha chose the moment

¹⁴ U Aung Thein, U, "Burmese invasions of Siam, translated from the Hmannan Yazawin Dawgyi," *Journal of the Siam Society*, 5, 1 (1908), p. 4; see also U Kala, *Mahayazawingyi*, edited by Saya Pwa (Rangoon, 1960), vol II, pp. 229–230.

¹⁵ Cushman, *Royal Chronicles*, p. 133; *Phraratchaphongsawadan krung si ayutthaya chabap phan chanthanumat* [Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya, Phan Chanthanumat edition] (Bangkok: Sipanya, 2000), pp. 183–4; Sunait Chutintaranond, "Chakkraphatthirat khwam khiat tang kanmueang buang lang songkram thai rop phama" [Wheel-rolling emperor: the political thinking behind the wars between Thai and Burmese], *Muang Boran*, 44, 2 (1988), p. 105.

¹⁶ Nicolas Gervaise, *The Natural and Political History of the Kingdom of Siam* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1998 [1688]), p. 201.

¹⁷ Victor B. Lieberman, "How Reliable is U Kala's Burmese Chronicle? Some New Comprisons," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 17, 2 (September 1986), pp. 242–243.

to attack Chiang Kran when the Burmese were distracted by a series of battles against the Mon territories.

At this time, the Mon territories were disunited. When Tabinshwehti dethroned the Mon King Takayutpi of Pegu (1526–1539), Saw Binya, the Mon lord of Martaban, did not come to his rescue.¹⁸ Indeed, disunity among the Mon rulers was the rule rather than the exception. After King Rajadirit/Rajadiraja (1385–1423) ascended the throne, he was challenged by several Mon war lords and had to spend time and expend men and other resources to reunite the Mon territories.¹⁹ The internal conflict among the Mon lords plus the tension between Toungoo and Pegu created a golden opportunity for King Chairacha to extend his domain towards the Andaman coast by first attacking the frontier town of Chiang Kran.

The best access for Siam to the lucrative trade of the Bay of Bengal and routes westward to India, Persia and Arabia was across the peninsula to the Andaman coast. The alternative route rounding the peninsula and passing through the Malacca Straits was both long and beset with pirates. Ayutthaya's interest in the Andaman coastal ports from Martaban down to Tenasserim increased after Malacca was captured by the Portuguese in 1511. The fall of the Muslim sultanate of Malacca had direct and indirect effects on the maritime trade of Southeast Asia. The Muslim traders who had dominated the trading networks before the arrival of the Europeans looked around for alternatives to Malacca as a commercial center, resulting in the rise of several new ports such as Aceh and the ports along the Andaman coast of the peninsula.²⁰

The Muslim lords who governed these ports competed for shares in this redistribution of trade. They also attacked the Portuguese in order to reduce the role of Malacca. For example, Sultan Alaud-din Ri'ayat Shah of Aceh (1530–1568) attacked Malacca in the years 1537, 1547, 1551 and 1568.²¹ After the Portuguese takeover, Malacca never recovered its significance as a major trading center of the Southeast Asian waters.²² The counterpoint to the decline of Malacca was the rise of ports along the peninsula and in the islands. In his book written in 1516, the Portuguese trader Duarte Barbosa talked of the prosperity of trading centers around the Bay of Bengal, particularly Pegu, Tanacary (Tenasserim) and Quedaa. He reported that: "Hither come every years many Moorish ships to trade," and especially singled out Tenasserim as a center for "merchants both Moor and Heathen which deal in goods of every kind, and also possess many ships

¹⁸ Harvey, *History of Burma*, p. 154.

¹⁹ Harvey, *History of Burma*, pp. 154–157.

²⁰ J. K. Whitmore, "The Opening of Southeast Asia Trading Patterns through the Centuries," in Karl L. Hutterer (ed.), *Economic Exchange and Social Interaction in Southeast Asia: Perspective from Prehistory, History and Ethnography* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Paper on South and Southeast Asia, 1977), p. 147; Kenneth R. Hall, *Maritime Trade and State Development in Early Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985), pp. 24, 25.

²¹ D. G. E. Hall, *A History of Southeast Asia*, 4th ed (New York: St. Martin's Press 1981), pp. 366–367; Anthony Reid, *Europe and Southeast Asia: The Military Balance*, James Cook University Centre for Southeast Asian Studies Occasional Paper No. 16 (Townsville, Queensland, 1982), p. 15.

²² George Cho and Marion W. Ward, "The Port of Melaka," in Kernial Singh Sandhu and Paul Wheatley (eds), *Melaka: The Transformation of a Malay Capital (1400–1980)*, Vol. I (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1983).

which sail to Bengala, Malaca and many other places.”²³ The growth of these ports after the fall of Malacca in 1511 not only encouraged the Ayutthaya kings to extend their influence across the Tenasserim range but also encouraged the Burmese rulers to transfer their seat of power from the Satong valley to the Irrawaddy delta. As a result, the political ambitions of Ayutthaya and Burma overlapped. Victor B. Lieberman argued that the wars between the first Toungoo dynasty and the Ayutthaya rulers resulted from their clashing interests over the maritime trade in the Bay of Bengal.²⁴

The complications of internal disunity at Ayutthaya

The fact that King Chairacha attacked Chiang Kran, which was the gateway to Martaban, showed Ayutthaya’s strong desire to capture the sea ports and open up a commercial route to the western world. Nevertheless, the *Luang Prasert Chronicle* does not indicate whether the king succeeded in taking Chiang Kran and reports no other expeditions by this king across the Tenasserim range. Why might he have failed in this ambition?

There is no direct evidence, but there are two likely causes: first the strength of the Mon rulers, and second, the disunity and instability at Ayutthaya.

In 1538, the Mon rulers had not yet been subdued by Tabinshwehti’s Burmese army. They were independent and had the freedom to raise their own armies. Moreover, they had been alerted by Tabinshwehti’s seizure of Pegu, and had likely mobilized their troops and strengthened their defenses. So Pinya of Martaban recruited a Portuguese army and fleet under Paulo da Seixas. When Tabinshwehti attacked Martaban in 1541, the siege lasted seven months—an indication of the strength of their defenses. If Chairacha had advanced beyond Chiang Kran in 1538, he would have been in hostile territory with no local allies and his supply routes under strain. In sum, this was not the sort of favorable situation in which Ayutthaya kings pursued their territorial ambitions.

More importantly, perhaps, King Chairacha had to deal with unrest in the Northern Cities²⁵ and at the capital. The *Luang Prasert Chronicle* mentions that, shortly after the expedition to Chiang Kran, “When the King came to Kamphaengphet, he said that Phraya Narai [the governor] was plotting a revolt. The King had Phraya Narai arrested and taken to be executed in the city of Kamphaengphet.”²⁶ This political unrest in the Northern Cities may be the reason why the expedition to the Mon territories was not completed. Moreover, the execution of Phraya Kamphangphet did not bring an end to this unrest. In the reigns leading up to that of Chairacha, the kings of Ayutthaya had used various means including armed expeditions, religious diplomacy, kinship connections and political strategies to exert control over the Northern Cities, the territory of the

²³ *The Book of Duarte Barbosa*, Vol. II (London: Mansel Longworth Dames, 1921), pp. 152–157, 162–164.

²⁴ Victor B. Lieberman, *Burmese Administrative Cycles: Anarchy and Conquest, c.1580–1760* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 28.

²⁵ Ayutthaya’s term for the former territory of the Sukhothai kingdom, dominated at this period by Phitsanulok.

²⁶ *Phraratchaphongsawadan krung kao chabab luang prasoet*, p. 22 (CS 900); Cushman, *Royal Chronicles*, p. 20.

former kingdom of Sukhothai.²⁷ The revolt in Kamphaengphet indicated that these efforts had failed.

Chairacha attempted to use both force and political means. Khun Phirenthorathep was an influential figure in the Northern Cities because “his father was from the lineage of Phra Ruang [i.e., Sukhothai] and his mother was from the lineage of King Chairacha.”²⁸ In order to separate him from his power base, Chairacha brought Khun Phirenthorathep to Ayutthaya and gave him a post as head of the guard, in charge of the king’s security. Yet this does not seem to have diminished Khun Phirenthorathep’s influence. After Chairacha died suddenly in 1547, Khun Phirenthorathep intervened in the ensuing succession dispute. He did not support the claims of Chairacha’s two sons but backed another candidate of royal lineage called Phra Thienracha, and had one of Chairacha’s son arrested and sent to Thienracha as a court prisoner.²⁹

The Northern Cities were not the only region in turmoil during the reign of Chairacha. According to Ferdinand Mendez Pinto and Turpin, Chairacha’s sudden death was caused by poison.³⁰

Chairacha must have been aware of this conflict which threatened his power and the stability of the kingdom. In response, he established a guard unit of 120–130 people drawn from the Portuguese trading community in Ayutthaya. The formation of this unit is usually interpreted as a strategy for fighting against Lanna, but its main purpose was as a royal bodyguard. Pinto relates that this Portuguese unit enjoyed the king’s trust more than any other unit.³¹ But the Portuguese could not protect the king and maintain stability. After Chairacha died, Thienracha fled into the monkhood, Chairacha’s son Yot Fa was eliminated, and a royal consort, Si Sudacan, maneuvered an outsider (Worawong) onto the throne, only for both to be ousted and killed by Khun Phirenthorathep and other nobles from the Northern Cities.³²

In sum, the internal conflict at the capital and the external conflict in the Northern Cities prevented Chairacha from fulfilling his ambition to extend Ayutthaya’s influence across the Tenasserim range. The unrest in the Northern Cities was settled after the northern nobles installed Phra Thienracha as King Chakkraphat, and King Chakkraphat

²⁷ Charnvit Kasetsiri, “Phutthasasana lae kan ruam anachak samai ton ayutthaya 1839–1991,” [Buddhism and the merger of kingdoms in early Ayutthaya, 1296–1448] in *Rueang khnong song phranakhon* [The matter of two capitals] (Bangkok: Chaophraya Press, 1981); Dhida Saraya, “Sang ban plaeng mueang: rabob mueang khu sathaban mueang lukluang” [System of paired cities and grandchild cities], *Muang Boran* 9, 2 (1983); Srisasakra Vallibhotama, “Mueang lukluang kap kan pokkhong thai boran [Grandchild cities and the old Thai system of government] in *Kho khayaeng kiao kap prawatisat thai* [Conflict over Thai history] (Bangkok: Muang Boran, 1981).

²⁸ *Phraratchapongsawadan chabap somdetphraphannarat* [Royal chronicles, Phra Phannarat edition] (Bangkok, 1972), p. 32.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

³⁰ *The Voyages and Adventures of Ferdinand Mendez Pinto*, pp. 403, 404; F. H. Turpin, *A History of the Kingdom of Siam and of the Revolutions that Have Caused the Overthrow of the Empire up to 1770*, tr. B. O. Cartwright, (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1997 [1771]), p. 3.

³¹ *The Voyages and Adventures of Ferdinand Mendez Pinto*, p. 399; Joaquim de Campos, “Early Portuguese Accounts of Thailand,” *Journal of the Siam Society*, 32, 1 (1940), p. 6.

³² *The Voyages and Adventures of Ferdinand Mendez Pinto*, p. 403–411; *Phraratchapongsawadan krung si ayutthaya chabap phan chanthanumat*, pp. 64–7; Cushman, *Royal Chronicles*, 21–23; Sunait Chutintaranond

in turn made Khun Phirenthorathep the ruler over Phitsanulok with the traditional Sukhothai title of Phra Thammaracha. The conflict at the core of the kingdom was brought to an end when Chairacha's son, Phra Srisin, was killed during an attempted revolt. Shortly after, in 1549, King Chakkraphat resumed the expeditions across the Tenasserim range to the port cities of the Andaman coast.

But the geopolitics had changed. The center of gravity of the Burmese had shifted from the hinterland cities of Pagan, Ava and Thounghoo in the Irrawaddy basin to the coast, attracted by the rise of international commerce, a new factor in the region's history.³³ This was the fuse that sparked inter-regional conflict involving Arakan, Chiang Tung, Chiang Rung, Lanna, Luang Prabang and the Chaophraya plain

Conclusion

The event at Chiang Kran in 1538 was not a battle between Burma and Ayutthaya, but an exercise of the ambitions of Ayutthaya kings to extend their power to the Andaman coast in the era following the fall of Malacca to the Portuguese.

Prince Damrong Rajanubhab believed that the battle at Chiang Kran began from an attack by Tabinshwehti of Pegu. Examination of the Burmese sources suggests otherwise: it was not the Burmese but the Ayutthaya king who was the invader. However, after the initial attack, the following operation was delayed on account of political conflict in Ayutthaya and unrest in the Northern Cities, but only temporarily. The campaign resumed after King Chakkraphat came to the throne and attacked Tavoy. However, Ayutthaya's westward ambitions were no longer blocked only by the Mon rulers, but also by the Burmese kings and armies. Tabinshwehti's siege of Ayutthaya in 1548 was the first signal of the changed situation.

This attack by the king of Ayutthaya began the series of war between Pegu and Ayutthaya which led to the first fall of Ayutthaya in 1569.

³³ Lieberman, *Burmese Administrative Cycles*, 9–10, 15–16; Lieberman, "Europeans, Trade and the Unification of Burma, c. 1540–1620," *Oriens Extrmus* 27 (1980), pp. 203–226; Harvey, *History of Burma*, pp. 155–156.