

TRACING GAVAMPATI IN BURMA

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ABSTRACT—The monk Gavampati, a disciple of the Buddha often known in Southeast Asia as the “Fat Monk”, is examined at two locations: Pagan (Bagan) between the 11th and 13th centuries, and in the southern region known as Rāmaññadesa in 15th-century Mon traditions. Epigraphy, Mon, Burmese, and Pali chronicles, and archeological evidence indicate his diverse roles, from associations with kingship at Pagan to later traditions concerning the introduction of Buddhism and tooth relics in the south. Earlier scholarship maintained that this legendary figure arose in Burma (Myanmar) during the first millennium, but a re-examination of a stone image discovered in Rangoon (Yangon) in 1948 challenges this conventional view of the monk’s historical trajectory.

KEYWORDS: Buddhist Relics; Gavampati (Fat Monk); Lower Burma (Rāmaññadesa); Mon Buddhism; Myanmar Archeology

Background and Sources

Both Mon and Burmese traditions in Burma (Myanmar)² drew upon a wide corpus of Pali literature, including the Canon itself, together with its commentaries and related Sri Lankan texts. Although the two traditions had access to the same external sources, they highlighted different narratives. In most cases, the Pali origins of myths circulating in Burma can be readily identified, yet the reasons why one tradition favored certain legends over others remain unclear. From the beginning, narratives adopted from Pali literature were subject to continuous indigenous accretions (Stadtner 2015a); this helps explain why Gavampati’s

career in Burma bears little or no relationship to the occasional biographical notices found in traditional Pali and Sanskrit literature (see John Strong, this Special Edition).

Gavampati, an early Buddhist monk known in Pali sources as a disciple of the Buddha and often associated with miraculous powers, became in Burma the focus of vernacular legends and traditions that developed independently of these canonical references. For example, Gavampati’s native place is named Bārāṇasī (Banaras) in the Pali *Vinaya*, but Mon inscriptions and chronicles cast him as a resident of Mithilā, or, in Mon, “Mituiw”.³ Some local inscriptions and chronicles touching on Gavampati are dated while others are not; thus, charting

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² Older place names, such as Burma, Pagan, and Pegu, are preferred by the author; the official modern forms, such as Myanmar, Bagan and Bago, are used only in the contemporary context—*Editor’s note*.

³ It appears that only a single Burmese chronicle lists Gavampati’s hometown as Banaras, the late 18th-century *Varisadipani*, completed in 1794 by Jinalankaradhaja, the orthodox “*Vinaya* jurist” (Pranke 2004: 130).

a reliable chronology for the monk's multiple personae throughout the second millennium in Burma is similar to a jigsaw puzzle with an unknown number of missing pieces. Myths resemble mighty rivers drawing upon innumerable tributaries, large and small, making tracing origins and permutations difficult. For instance, Gavampati's key role in salvaging a tooth-relic from the Buddha's funeral pyre was almost certainly derived from an earlier 13th-century Sri Lankan Pali work, the *Dāthavaṃsa*, or *The Chronicle of the Tooth* (trans. Law 1925). This work stated that a monk named Khema recovered a tooth from the pyre [FIGURE 1]; this tooth-relic, according to modern Sri Lankan belief, came eventually from Kalinga (modern Odisha) in India to be worshipped in Kandy.

Gavampati rose to official prominence in only two moments in Burma's history: first, during the reign of Kyanzittha (1084–1112) at Pagan (Bagan) and, second, in the 15th century in the Mon kingdom whose center was Pegu (Bago), or Hamsavatī. Many of the sparse episodes relating to Gavampati in 15th-century Mon epigraphs became scaffolds for vastly embellished narratives in subsequent Mon chronicles compiled in local monasteries. Despite his former importance, however, Gavampati is largely forgotten in Myanmar today. By contrast, images of the so-called “Fat Monk”, poetically described as “bulging belly built” (Baker & Pasuk 2024: 45), are prominent in Thailand and Laos, where they are often identified with (Mahā-) Kaccāyana (Lagirarde 2001; see also Gregory Kourilsky, this Special Edition).

Gavampati's many diverse roles during the second millennium cloud any clear

unitary trajectory. For example, earlier Pagan-period inscriptions make no reference to his later contribution in acquiring the tooth-relics (see below). Moreover, even the same episode witnessed enormous variation. For instance, 15th-century Mon inscriptions spotlight only a single tooth-relic that multiplied itself 33 times at the Buddha's funeral pyre in India.⁴ Yet a later Mon chronicle claims that the monk recovered not one but all four eyeteeth in India, which were then miraculously transformed into 32 relics at Thaton by a miracle jointly effected by Gavampati and his brother, the king of Thaton (Tun Aung Chain 2010: 11). Such examples, along with many others, highlight the malleability of Gavampati's persona and suggest that it is wiser to speak of many Gavampatis across the ages rather than to seek a single historical figure, as H.L. Shorto (1970) urged long ago. These variations also illustrate how different versions of the same legends commonly coexist—for instance, in the contradictory explanations offered for the symbolism of particular Buddhist relics or how different miracles are ascribed to the same Christian saint.

Although Gavampati appears to have been important during the two

⁴ The best complete published source for Mon inscriptions, translated into Burmese, is Chit Thein 1965. The key Mon inscriptions are listed in H.L. Shorto *A Dictionary of Mon Inscriptions* (pp. xxvii–xxxii), but the most comprehensive up-to-date list was compiled by Christian Bauer, “Preliminary Inventory of Mon Inscriptions” (<http://sealang.net/oldmon/>). Few of the 15th-century inscriptions have been translated, but the late government epigraphist, Nai Pan Hla (1923–2010), translated into English the most important examples for me. Inscriptions referred to in this article are cited by the page numbers in Shorto's *Dictionary* (1971: xxxi–xxxii) and Nai Pan Hla's *Buddhist Narratives* (1987: 26, 29, 40).



FIGURE 1: The monk Gavampati in Burma was modeled on the flying monk Khema depicted here; Kaunghmudaw Pagoda, Sagaing; painting on a metal panel by Maung Ba Thein, 1960s © Donald Stadtner

aforementioned periods, depictions of him are rare in Burma. This paradox may be explained by the fact that the monk played no decisive role in the two subjects most favored by artists, namely the major life stories of the Buddha and the Jatakas. Even Gavampati's far more famous canonical companion, the arhat Yasa, is rarely depicted in later illustrated manuscripts, where he sometimes appears with his fellow arhats in identical monastic garb (Herbert 1993: 47; San San May & Igunma 2001: 134). Murals from the Konbaung period (1752–1885) depict Gavampati only in the context of the 80 Great Disciples (*asīti mahāsāvakas*), each identified by ink captions. Importantly, Gavampati is portrayed like the others—as the 12th disciple to the right of the Buddha—kneeling as a monk, and never as the Fat Monk. Examples occur at the Sulamani temple, Pagan [FIGURE 2]⁵

and at Anaint village in Chaung-U Township, where each monk—named in Burmese—is drawn from a list preserved in the commentarial tradition, notably in the *Theragāthā Commentary* (Tha-a III 205–206).

Hence, written records constitute our primary sources. One of the most likely sources for Gavampati, the disciple of the Buddha (treated concisely by John Strong in this Special Edition) has long been recognized as the Sanskrit *Mahākarmavibhaṅga*, or *The Great Classification of Acts*, composed in the first millennium CE. This text lists six individually named monks sent to missionize six foreign lands in Jambudvīpa, among which was Gavampati, assigned to convert Suvarṇabhūmi, the “Land of Gold” (Lamotte 1988: 268). The monk's

⁵ Julian Wheatley (pers. comm.) reads this caption:

“u.rū ve [a kassapa thar || gavaṃpati thar 'arhaṇ || puṇṇa ji thar 'arhaṇ || viz., “Thera Uruvela Kassapa; Thera Ashin Gavampati; Thera Ashin Puṇṇaji”.



FIGURE 2: Gavampati (center) in a row of the 80 Great Disciples, each identified by an ink inscription; south corridor, Sulamani temple, Pagan, 1775–1800 © Donald Stadtner

missionary role in the *Mahākarma-vibhaṅga*, however, was never invoked in Pagan-era inscriptions and appears only much later in the 15th-century inscriptions from Lower Burma. The Mon homeland was identified as the Land of Gold, and this congruence likely helped explain the Mon preference for Gavampati. Moreover, because Gavampati's biography in early Pali literature was neither as extensive nor as celebrated as that of other disciples—such as Sāriputta, Moggallāna, or Upāli—the Mon adoption of Gavampati may have offered a relatively blank slate for new myth-making. Many modern summaries of Gavampati's career conflate episodes from 15th-century

Mon inscriptions with later material from chronicles, but this approach obscures the resulting chronological layering and its cultural implications, shaped by the Burmanization of the Mon region in Lower Burma beginning in the 16th century.

Gavampati in Upper Burma

Kyanzittha's Inscriptions

The earliest conclusive evidence for Gavampati's worship in Burma consists of seven Mon inscriptions issued by King Kyanzittha at Pagan in the 11th–12th century (ed. Duroiselle 1919, 1923). The précis below is based on these

inscriptions. First, it begins with the Buddha's prophecy to Ānanda at the Jetavana Monastery, foretelling that Viṣṇu (*Bisnū*), assuming the appearance of a sage (*risi*), would construct the city of Śrīkṣetra (*Śrī Kṣet*) together with "my son, Gavampati" (*kon ey Gawaṃpati*), King Indra (*smiñ In*), Vissakamma (*Bissu-karmmadewaput*), and a *nāgarāja* named Katakarmman (*Katakarmmanāgarāja*) (ed. Duroiselle 1919: 114). The Buddha then deputed Gavampati to the Tāvatiṃsa heaven (*Tāwatin*) to inform King Indra of the prophecy regarding the founding of Śrīkṣetra (Ibid., 114–115). Indra then descended from heaven to earth and informed Viṣṇu that Gavampati, Vissakamma, and Katakarmman would found the city of Śrīkṣetra (Ibid., 127).

The Buddha further prophesied to Ānanda that Śrīkṣetra would come into existence "in the year when [he would] achieve *nirvāṇa*" (Ibid., 141). This prediction emphasized the Buddha's stake in the formation of the city at Śrīkṣetra and underscored the role that both the Buddha and Viṣṇu would play in the birth of Kyanzitttha at Pagan. This principal narrative in the Pagan inscriptions finds a direct parallel with Sri Lanka's 5th-century *Mahāvamsa*, in which the nation's founder, Prince Vijaya, was foretold by the Buddha to reach Sri Lanka's shores at the time of the Buddha's death, thus echoing a nearly identical notion in the Pagan inscription. Moreover, not only do both the Mon and Sri Lankan versions accord Viṣṇu a key role, but both also describe him as a hermit. Such compelling affinities suggest that the version recorded at Pagan likely adapted the basic narrative from the earlier *Mahāvamsa* (Pranke & Stadtner 2015).

The *Mahāvamsa* never included Gavampati, but the chronicle itself was well known at Pagan during Kyanzitttha's time, when large sections of the text were illustrated among the murals of Kyanzitttha's own Kubyauggyi temple, dated to circa 1112, whose captions are translations into Mon from the Pali *Mahāvamsa* (Luce 1969–70: I, 380).

Second, although Gavampati was grouped together with several deities in these Pagan-period inscriptions, he was singled out for special significance insofar as the Buddha himself requested only him to visit the Tāvatiṃsa heaven to inform Indra of the prophecy regarding Śrīkṣetra. The text then skips immediately to the Buddha's death in Kusinārā (*Kusinār*), stating that Gavampati ascended for a second time to the Tāvatiṃsa heaven to inform Indra of a second prophecy: that a sage named Viṣṇu would be reborn 1,630 years after the Buddha's death as Kyanzitttha in Arimaddanapūra, Pagan's formal name (ed. Duroiselle 1919: 115). Another inscription adds that the hermit Viṣṇu had previously been a wealthy merchant in Banaras at the time of Kassapa Buddha; this merchant was later born into the royal line at Pāṭaliputra (*Pāṭaliputtanagara*), King Aśoka's capital. He was subsequently reborn in the family of King Rāma of Ayodhya (*Ayodhapūr*). During the lifetime of the Buddha, Viṣṇu was reborn as the sage (*risi Bisnū*), living on a "silver mountain" named Kelasa (*Kelāsaparwata*) (Ibid., 139).

Third, one of Kyanzitttha's inscriptions commemorated the consecration of a palace at Pagan in which "a golden statue of the Buddha, statue of the Lord Gawaṃpati, [and] with books of the

Vinaya, Sutta, (and) Abhidhamma" (ed. Duroiselle 1923: 37–38) was established. This sculpture of Gavampati therefore stood for the entire Sangha in this triad of objects that comprised the Three Jewels. This inscription is additional confirmation of Gavampati's key position during Kyanzittha's reign. How the artists at Pagan depicted Gavampati is uncertain, but he was probably represented as the Fat Monk, judging from a small number of such images found in Pagan and in Upper Burma (see below). There appear to be no textual explanations in Burma for the monk's corpulent appearance, unlike in Thailand and Laos, as François Lagirarde (2001) pointed out (see also John Strong and Gregory Kourilsky, this Special Edition).

The above-mentioned inscription describes in detail the consecration rituals of wooden pillars in a palace sacred to Nārāyaṇa (Nār), a common Sanskrit epithet for Viṣṇu (ed. Duroiselle 1923: 35). Nothing remains of this palace, but the belief that Viṣṇu was reborn as Kyanzittha is likely the background for the only extant Vaiṣṇava temple at Pagan, the Nathlaungkyaung, situated prominently within the ancient walled city (Pichard 1995: 236–239). No inscriptions date this temple, but it was probably planned to memorialize Kyanzittha's own descent from the deity Viṣṇu. The temple's outer walls and entrance hall collapsed centuries ago, but it was originally far larger and comparable in size to its neighbor, the Pahtothamya temple. The sanctum's outer walls still retain six original stone sculptures of Viṣṇu's major *avatāras*: Varāha, Narasiṃha, Vāmana, Balarāma, Rāma, and Paraśurāma (clockwise from the entrance), all august deities that

a king claiming ancestry from Viṣṇu would be only too glad for the association (Luce 1969–70: I, 221).

The Fat Monk Images

Despite Gavampati's importance during Kyanzittha's time, no extant depictions of the figure belonging to his reign have been recorded. Nevertheless, Gordon Luce and others identified small stone images at Pagan and elsewhere in Upper Burma as Gavampati, the Fat Monk (Luce 1969–70: I, 204–205; Lagirarde 2001: 101–134; Hudson 2011). These images, numbering some two or three dozen, differ slightly from each other, but the majority are under a foot in height (30 cm) and always show the corpulent monk seated [FIGURES 3a–b]. Some are clothed in a monk's robe, recognized by a hem, while the majority are bare-chested. The position of the hands varies: some with one hand on the other, resembling the meditation gesture, while others show both hands, splayed open, placed above the waist. Most were made of stone; a few are in terracotta or wood, and a single crude example in bronze exists. The poor craftsmanship of this small group contrasts with many large Pagan-age stone sculptures. Little uniformity marks these images, apart from the monk's seated position and corpulence.

The dates for these objects are difficult to fix, but they appear to fall mostly toward the end of the Pagan period or later (pers. comm., Samerchai Poolsuwan). Although some published images were found within ruinous stupas, the majority have no confirmed findspots (Luce 1969–70: II, pls. 90–91). Apart from being deposited within a



**FIGURES 3a–b: Small stone images depicting the seated Fat Monk;
Pagan period or later; approx. 30 cm, Bagan Archeological Museum © Thein Lwin**

stupa, the function of these small stone figures is unknown. Were these crafted in ateliers for personal devotion by laymen or monks, or made to deposit inside stupas? Why are there so few? And why are the examples generally so crude in appearance? No major large stone images of Gavampati have been found at Pagan, nor is the monk depicted among the site's extensive mural art during this period. In addition, the numerous stone inscriptions at Pagan, following Kyanzittha's reign, no longer spoke of Gavampati, strengthening the conjecture that Gavampati's popularity faded soon after Kyanzittha's rule. However, the existence of these later small images indicates that the memory of Gavampati was never completely

forgotten at Pagan and in Upper Burma during the late medieval period.

Why Gavampati's stature diminished at Pagan after Kyanzittha's time invites speculation. Perhaps a negative reaction emerged following his reign, both at court and in the Sangha, in protest against undue and unwelcome Mon cultural and political influence. It may also be no coincidence that Gavampati's decline in importance coincided with the replacement of the Mon language by Burmese in inscriptions and mural captions after the reign of Kyanzittha. That the deity Viṣṇu never again achieved importance at Pagan after Kyanzittha's time can perhaps also be attributed to this conjectured negative reaction to earlier Mon influence.

The real explanations behind Gavampati's decline at Pagan will probably never be known, but the memory of the monk endured in Lower Burma, where his significance expanded dramatically in the 15th century.

Gavampati in Lower Burma

There are two major historical sources for Gavampati during the second millennium in Lower Burma. The earlier consists of a large group of Mon inscriptions from the second half of the 15th century, while the latter comprises Mon, Burmese, and Pali chronicles composed in monasteries after the conquest of the Mon country (Rāmaññadesa) in 1538.⁶ Some 50 or more stone inscriptions survive in Mon from the second half of the 15th century in Lower Burma and fully seven accord Gavampati a principal role. Only two of the seven retain their dates, both from 1486; most can be attributed to the reign of the famous Mon king Dhammaceti/Dhammazedi (1470–1492; Shorto 1971: xxx–xxxi).

Dhammaceti's Pali and Mon inscriptions at Pegu's Kalyani Monastery do not attribute the conversion of Rāmaññadesa to Gavampati but rather to two arhats, Soṇa and Uttara, who were dispatched from India at the time of King Asoka, centuries after the lifetime of the Buddha. This account in

the Kalyani text borrows from Sri Lankan traditions beginning with the *Dīpavaṃsa* and *Mahāvamsa*. The other 15th-century Mon inscriptions, by contrast, generally champion Gavampati's role in the conversion of Rāmaññadesa. Paradoxically, the contemporaneous Kalyani inscriptions exclude him altogether. Perhaps the authors of the Kalyani text felt constrained by the weight of Sri Lankan orthodoxy, leaving no place for a competing version of the conversion of Lower Burma engineered by Gavampati during the lifetime of the Buddha.

In the Mon inscriptions, however, the roles attributed to the two arhats, Soṇa and Uttara, differ completely from those in the *Mahāvamsa* and the Kalyani inscriptions. In the later texts they were sent to missionize the "Land of Gold" (Suvanṇabhūmi), whereas in the earlier Mon inscriptions their task was to discover and restore lost and ruinous stupas rather than to conduct missionary activity (Shorto 1971: xxxi; Nai Pan Hla 1987: 20, 27, 30, 38). Sri Lanka likewise received visits from the Buddha, but accounts depict him chiefly occupied with chasing demons off the island and settling a quarrel among contentious snake-kings, thereby setting the stage for the island's celebrated conversion centuries later through the arrival of Asoka's son Mahinda.

The composite image of Gavampati that emerged from these Mon inscriptions later provided platforms for elaborate myths in subsequent chronicles. For example, the inscriptions never address Gavampati's parentage, but later chronicles added miraculous episodes concerning his mother. In one story, when she was seven years old, milk

⁶ The best introduction to Mon chronicles is Tun Aung Chain 2010, a Burmese translation of a Mon chronicle whose narrative begins in the late 16th or early 17th century. The most relevant Mon histories are discussed by Shorto (1963, 1970). Another important work is the *Slapat rajawan datow smin ron* (သုပတိရာဇဝင်တော်သိရော်ဝင်; Halliday 2000). Many of the basic legends involving Gavampati are summarized in the *Sāsanavamsa* (trans. Law 1952) and in the Burmese *Vaṃsadīpanī* (Pranke 2004).



FIGURE 4: Two hermits raised the offspring of two snake eggs, one became Gavampati and the other the king of Thaton; Daw Pwint's Pavilion, Shwedagon Pagoda, Yangon, painted panel, 1930s © Donald Stadtner

flowed from her breasts into the monk's mouth in Thaton, thereby publicly demonstrating their kinship in previous lives. This episode appears in at least two late Mon chronicles: the undated *Uppanna sudhammawati rajawamsakatha* (ဥပ္ပန္နသုဓမ္မဝတီရာဇာဝံသ) and a chronicle titled *Gawampati* (ဂဝမ္ပတိ), circa 1710 (Shorto 1970: 18; pers. comm., Mathias Jenny). The Pali *Sāsanavamsa*, written in Burma in 1861, omits this "milk-flowing" episode but states that Gavampati journeyed to Suvannabhūmi to save his mother from "demerit leading to hell", since she was living among "hunters and fisherman" (trans. Law 1952: 41).

Another example concerns the monk's family. The 15th-century inscriptions are silent on this subject, apart from noting that Gavampati and the king of Thaton were "kinsmen" (Shorto 1970: xxxi; Nai Pan Hla 1987: 8). Later chronicles, however, claim that Gavampati and the future king of Thaton were in fact brothers hatched from two eggs abandoned by a snake-goddess (*nāga-ma*) who had coupled with a wizard (*weizka*) [FIGURE 4]. The chronicles further relate that the wife of the Thaton king and her sister were also born from two snake eggs, the king's wife eventually becoming a major *nat* goddess known

today in Burma as Shwe Nan Kyin (Stadtner 2015a: 164). These examples, among many others, illustrate how episodes in Gavampati's biography were stretched in multiple directions. A key unresolved question is to what degree, if any, such colorful mythological material was already current in the 15th century but remained unrecorded in inscriptions. These later embellishments might be classified as folklore, perhaps intended for an illiterate peasantry, but these narratives were taken up in Burmese, Mon, and Pali historical and religious chronicles that were composed by the elite.

Three core myths appear in the Mon inscriptions of the 15th century. Dating their origins is impossible, but they may have arisen as early as the 14th century, perhaps during the reign of the celebrated Mon king Rājādhiraja (r. 1384–1420) (Shorto 1963: 574). The most famous of the three underpinned the Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon and centers on hair relics brought to Burma from Bodhgayā by two merchant brothers. The second concerns six hermits who received hair relics from the Buddha in Thaton. Only one of the three myths includes Gavampati, whose dual roles involved inviting the Buddha to convert Rāmaññadesa, at the request of the king of Thaton, and obtaining a tooth relic from the Buddha's funeral pyre [FIG. 1]. This tooth multiplied itself 33 times in India, each relic being enshrined in a stone stupa—*cela ceti* (P., *selacetiya*)—by the king of Thaton, Gavampati's "kinsman" (Shorto 1971: xxx; Nai Pan Hla 1987: 8).⁷

⁷ The dispersal of the 33 tooth relics throughout Lower Burma by Soṇa and Uttara is recounted as a *fait accompli* in the late Mon chronicles (Shorto 1963), but

As mentioned earlier, Gavampati's retrieval of a tooth relic was modeled on the monk Khema in the medieval Sri Lankan Pali work *Dāthavaṃsa*. In that text Khema likewise removes a tooth from the embers at Kusinārā. A replica of this tooth, eventually worshipped in Kandy, was later sent to Burma and enshrined near Mandalay at the Kaung-hmudaw Pagoda in the 17th century (Stadtner 2015a: 239). But how did artists depict Gavampati during the peak of his importance in Lower Burma in the 15th century? To answer this question, we must revisit an image of Gavampati discovered at the Botataung Pagoda in colonial Rangoon at the end of World War II, together with another sculpture unearthed at Pegu in 2000.

Gavampati in Rangoon and Pegu

On 8 November 1944, Royal Air Force bombers flattened the Botataung Pagoda, situated a stone's throw from the bank of the Hlaing River and about a mile (1.6 km) south of the famous Strand Hotel in Rangoon (modern Yangon). The rebuilding of the stupa began when five lay notables drove gold stakes into the ground to inaugurate the stupa's reconstruction on Independence Day, 4 January 1948. As the brick rubble was

this dispersal legend does not appear in the 15th-century Mon inscriptions. The distribution of the 33 tooth relics is treated in at least one chronicle, the *Shwemawdaw thamaing* (ရွှေမော်တောသမိုင်း), edited by Thet Tin, and possibly also in a Pali inscription at the Shwemawdaw Pagoda (pers. comm., Jason Carbine). Apart from the Shwemawdaw, no other stupas can be positively associated with the dispersed tooth relics (Stadtner 2011). Shorto connected the distribution of these relics to the wider Mon polity symbolized by the 32 Mon principalities, or *myos* (1963).



FIGURE 5: Stone reliquary once *in situ* at the center of the relic chamber, Botataung Pagoda; containing an image of Gavampati and a miniature gold stupa, 15th century; photo dated 1948, Rangoon © *The Light of Dhamma*

cleared, few members of the Botataung Rehabilitation Committee could foresee the enormity of what lay below the surface. An eyewitness, the Australian David Maurice (1899–1981), whose pen name was Maung Ohn Ghine, recorded the discovery in *The Light of the Dhamma* (1953; hereafter *The Light*). At a depth of seven feet (approx. 2 m) a relic chamber was exposed measuring 20 feet square (approx. 6.1 × 6.1 m) containing some 700 objects scattered within the chamber. The objects, “precious stones, ornaments, jewelry, terracotta plaques, and images of gold, silver, brass, and stone”, were never properly catalogued, but dozens are now displayed in glass cases within the hollow shell Botataung Pagoda,

whose completion coincided with the opening of the 6th Great Buddhist Council that Prime Minister U Nu convened at the Kaba Aye Pagoda in 1954 (*The Light*: 8).

In the center of the relic chamber, protruding from the floor, was a laterite cone, 27 inches in height (approx. 68 cm), that enclosed a small stone stupa-shaped reliquary, standing 15½ inches tall (approx. 39 cm), composed of a circular base capped by a separate tapered top, now on display at the Botataung Pagoda. The only known photograph of this stone reliquary *in situ* was published by Maung Ohn Ghine (*The Light*: 10) [FIGURE 5]. Its basic shape and its two-part design conform broadly to a

small number of stone examples from Pagan that cannot be firmly dated (Luce 1969–70: II, pl. 414.c).

Leading monks concurred that “as an act prompted by good motives and religious faith it would be quite meritorious to open the casket” in the presence of worshippers (*The Light*: 8). The top was then removed to reveal two objects: a stone image of Gavampati and a hollow repoussé gold stupa-shaped object [FIGURES 6a–b]. The gold stupa measured 4½ inches in height (approx. 11 cm) and featured four seated buddhas on the base, each with its hands in the meditation gesture. The miniature stupa was made from a single sheet of hammered gold with a visible vertical seam and was supported by an octagonal base fashioned from a small sheet of silver. Inside the gold stupa was a “gold cylinder of three-quarter-inch length [about 1.9 cm, ...] that contained two small body relics, each the size of a mustard seed, and a sacred Hair of the Buddha [...] coiled round and fastened with a little lacquer on which there were traces of gold plaster” (*The Light*: 11). The single hair inside the miniature gold stupa created a sensation that quickly changed the mythic foundation of the Botataung Pagoda, told below. The crude stone figure of Gavampati, however, was immediately overshadowed by the hair relic, but the sculpture captured the attention of Luce, who illustrated the image in his major study of Pagan (1969–70: II, pl. 91a–c). However, Luce misattributed the object to the 7th century.

Very quickly a fresh myth arose that incorporated the newly discovered hair relic into the emerging national

narrative based on the Shwedagon Pagoda. The hair relic, with no evidence, was thought to have been gifted to the Botataung Pagoda by the same two merchant brothers who returned from Bodhgayā to Rangoon with hair relics intended for the Shwedagon. In this new retelling, this strand of hair was actually enshrined prior to the relics that were interred within the Shwedagon. The sign above the entrance proclaims that the Botataung Pagoda is “The Buddha’s First Sacred Hair Relic Pagoda”. The hair relic is the chief object of worship today and is placed beside a modern sunken shaft whose location marks the center of the ancient stupa. The pagoda’s two earlier Mon myths, centered on tooth relics from Thaton, were soon jettisoned and are no longer remembered, providing a case study in how myths can drift in and out of history even within a generation or two (Stadtner 2015a: 115). At the beginning, the bone relics were woven into the earlier Mon myths by Maung Ohn Ghine, but this narrative was soon dropped in favor of an episode connected to the Shwedagon. The newly built Botataung Pagoda symbolized the spiritual and physical renewal that the new Buddhist nation embarked upon at independence.

The hundreds of terracotta tablets recovered from the relic chamber exhibit a wide chronological distribution but furnish an approximate date for the stone Gavampati. The earliest tablets belong to the second half of the first millennium and are similar to those commonly associated with the Pyus at Śrīkṣetra and the Mons of Lower Burma (Luce 1985: pl. 73a, d). Later tablets show affinities with those from the



a



b

FIGURES 6a–b: The miniature gold stupa, the stone reliquary top, and the stone image of Gavampati (a); the two objects originally placed within the stone reliquary (b); 15th century, Botataung Pagoda Museum, Yangon © Donald Stadtner

Pagan period (Luce 1969–70: II, pl. 175; Luce 1985: pl. 73b). The latest tablets are probably from the 15th century. Such a broad range of tablets found in the same relic chamber indicates multiple interments occasioned by repeated rebuilding of the stupa over many centuries. One group of tablets included the “earth goddess”, depicted wringing out her hair at Bodhgyā and washing away the demons of Māra and his army. This specific Buddhist theme never appeared during the Pagan period and probably arose in Burma by the 14th or 15th century. This group, together with the interred stone reliquary, probably signals the final construction phase of the stupa until its exposure in modern times. No written records exist, but the relic chamber was likely sealed before the collapse of Mon rule in Lower Burma in 1538.

The Botataung Pagoda was one of a number of laterite stupas from the same period in Rangoon, such as the Sule and the Kyaikkasan. The most spectacular of these Mon-period stupas was found near the Shwedagon in 1860 and contained an early 15th-century gold sheet inscribed in Pali, gold and silver objects, and bone relics from Rājādhiraja’s reign. The key finds, including the bone relics, long ago entered the Victoria & Albert Museum in London (Stadtner 2015b).

As stated above, the stone Gavampati image and miniature gold stupa from the Botataung Pagoda were misattributed by Luce to the 7th century, a conclusion that led directly to the misleading notion that the worship of Gavampati in Burma began at that time or before (Luce 1969–70: II, pl. 75). Luce’s error was understandable since he incorrectly

thought that the small stone reliquary contained a third object, a clay tablet with its reverse side bearing the well-known *ye dhammā* formula “inscribed in a 7th-century hand”, an error repeated in a publication after his death (Luce 1985: II, pls. 75, 162). The only published eyewitness account stated clearly that the reliquary contained only two objects and that the inscribed clay tablet was found not in the stone reliquary but within the relic chamber (*The Light*: 8, 11). Yet the 7th-century proposed date for the Botataung’s stone Fat Monk, first suggested by Luce, is highly unlikely, since decades of archeological exploration at scores of sites throughout Burma have failed to yield a single image of Gavampati that can be securely attributed to the first millennium.⁸ Luce’s misattribution, however, was accepted by Lagirarde (2001) and is still generally accepted by scholars of Burma (e.g., Saw Tun Lin 2018: 190).

Key evidence for dating the Gavampati image, 4½ inches in height (approx. 11 cm), are traces of gilded lacquer on the base [FIGURE 7]. Lacquer was also “coiled around” the hair relic found in

⁸ Similar claims have been advanced for small terracotta images of the “Fat Monk” discovered in Thailand, including one found by Pierre Dupont in 1940 at Chedi Chula Prathon in Nakhon Pathom, and a small “hunchback” piece now in the Walters Art Museum (25.57) in Baltimore. The latter lacks archeological context and its date therefore remains uncertain. The example from Chedi Chula Prathon was reportedly recovered as a surface find atop the monument, providing no stratigraphic basis for assigning it to the 7th or 8th centuries. Another small bronze image, interred together with three bronze buddhas (now on display at the Ramkhamhaeng National Museum), was discovered within a small stupa in the compound of Wat Mahathat, Sukhothai. This context instead suggests veneration of the figure in the 13th–14th centuries or later—*Editor’s note*.



FIGURE 7: Miniature stone image of Gavampati, found within the stone reliquary, with traces of gilded lacquer on the base; 15th century, approx. 11 cm, Botataung Pagoda Museum, Yangon © Donald Stadtner

the gold stupa (*The Light*: 11). The image of Gavampati was certainly once completely coated in gilded lacquer, and the large loss of its gilded surface probably reflects repeated offerings made by worshippers. That this image was included in the stone reliquary signifies its once highly venerated position, despite its small size and crude

execution. Its placement in the reliquary, probably during the 15th century, not only confirms the importance of Gavampati for the Mons at that time but also helps demonstrate that Gavampati was depicted as the Fat Monk. It also adds weight to Luce's assumption that these images found in later Pagan and elsewhere in Upper Burma (see above)

should indeed be identified as Gavampati. Although lacquer is closely associated with Burma, it was not until after the Pagan period that its use became widespread, therefore establishing a mid-second-millennium date for the gilded lacquer Botataung image (Isaacs & Blurton 2000: 22).

Also, the gold repoussé stupa placed inside the stone reliquary shares the tapered contour of a small stone stupa found in a relic chamber belonging to a ruined stupa in Pathein in the western reaches of the Irrawaddy Delta, a major Mon principality of the Hamsavati kingdom. This example can probably be dated by a Mon stone inscription to 1524, found in the ruins (Shorto 1971: xxxii). Inside the relic chamber were discovered over a hundred small monk-like stone figures in a kneeling position, labelled arhats in the archeological report. One is possibly Gavampati, described only as “with a protuberant belly with the hands pressing against it” (Maung Mya 1936: I, 206; II, pl. 118d). There are too many figures to associate them with the 80 Great Disciples, but if the aforementioned figure is Gavampati, then this indicates that the monk was known, unsurprisingly, to artists in the Western Delta in the 1520s and included among arhats.

Another stone image of Gavampati was discovered more recently in Pegu (modern Bago) when an enormous reclining brick Buddha image was cleared of jungle in 2000 and rebuilt the following year. It is located only a stone’s throw west of Pegu’s famous recumbent Buddha, the Shwethalyaung, which was also cleared of jungle and rebuilt in the 1880s. Scattered about the base of the recently recovered Buddha, now

called Myathalyaung, were hundreds of small stone buddha figures displayed in an adjacent pavilion. All the figures were seated buddhas, with hands in the earth-touching gesture. However, a single image of Gavampati was recovered, shown with one open hand placed on his crossed legs and another against his belly [FIGURE 8]. There is no certainty that the head now attached to this Gavampati is the original, since the heads of most of the images broke off long ago and were recently joined with headless buddha images recovered in the rubble. These images probably date to the 15th century, since nearly a dozen glazed tiles showing the demons of Māra datable to Dhammaceti’s reign were recovered at the base of the reclining image (Stadtner 2015a: 146).

These small stone images were likely donated by individuals. While there was an overwhelming preference for standard buddha images, this sculpture makes clear that Gavampati was a subject familiar to Pegu sculptors. However, it seems true that no large and impressive images of Gavampati appear to have been created during the very period when contemporaneous Mon inscriptions attest to the monk’s importance. This situation in Burma can be contrasted with northern Thailand where, for example, a large image of Gavampati (there known as Kaccāyana) was possibly on view within the compound of Wat Phra That in Haripunchai (modern Lamphun) by circa 1517 (Baker & Pasuk 2024: 45).

Whither Gavampati?

The reasons behind Gavampati’s eclipse are not altogether clear, but the monk



FIGURE 8: Stone image of Gavampati discovered at the base of an enormous reclining Buddha; 15th century, approx. 30 cm, open pavilion, Myathalyaung Pagoda, Bago
© Donald Stadtner

is largely unknown today in Myanmar, playing only an unspoken tangential role at the Golden Rock, or Kyaikhtiyo. There, Gavampati is merely reckoned as the brother of the “Thaton king”, who himself is remembered only as the first patron of the hair relics enshrined in the Golden Rock. A handful of recent sculptures at the Golden Rock depict the

Thaton king and his queen, the venerated *nat*-goddess Shwe Nan Kyin, but images of Gavampati are nowhere in sight. In truth, Gavampati was never associated with hair relics, but only with tooth relics, a category gradually supplanted by hair relics throughout Lower Burma. Indeed, although a few major stupas today still commemorate tooth relics,

such as the Shwezigon at Pagan/Bagan and the Kaunghmudaw near Sagaing, these are not associated with Gavampati but with Sri Lanka (Stadtner 2015a: 230, 237). With no longer any important tooth-relic stupas associated with Gavampati, the Fat Monk, inevitably receded in importance in the country following the Mon demise in the 16th century.

Perhaps a more important reason for Gavampati's diminished importance was the rise of an alternative myth accounting for the conversion of Burma. This legend originated in Inwa, or Ava, the capital of Upper Burma, and was first recorded in a Burmese text, the *Yazawinkyaw* (မဟာသမ္မတဝံသ), compiled circa 1520. The narrative stemmed directly from a Pali commentary, the *Puṇṇovādanasutta-aṭṭhakathā*. The location of the legendary events was transposed to Upper Burma, where the historical Buddha converted the nation's inhabitants at the legendary Sandalwood Monastery, a site identified near the Irrawaddy River between Pagan and Prome (modern Pyay) and now memorialized by a large stupa. This myth was also tied directly to two stone footprints that the Buddha is believed to have made on a nearby tributary of the Irrawaddy, today a major annual pilgrimage destination known as the Golden Footprint, or Shwesettaw (Pranke & Stadtner 2015).

This legend grew in popularity and eventually overshadowed the Mon traditions that highlighted Gavampati, beginning when the former Mon country was gradually Burmanized following the fall of Pegu in 1538. For example, even Gavampati's role in the foundation of Śrīkṣetra (see above) was omitted in the *Yazawin kyaw* and replaced

by a legendary king named Duttabaung, who had no connection to traditional Buddhist sources. Gavampati was included in the early 19th-century *Glass Palace Chronicle*, or *Hmannan mahayazawindawgyi* (မုန်နန်းမဟာရာဇဝင်တော်ကြီး), but only in a subordinate role vis-à-vis Duttabaung. The once-celebrated monk was merely lumped together with a *nāga*, a *garuḍa*, and others who conferred with Sakka (Indra) “about the founding of the city [Śrīkṣetra]”, prophesied by the Buddha and brought to fruition by Duttabaung. Burmese today associate Śrīkṣetra not with Gavampati and Kyanzitha but solely with Duttabaung, basing their views on the account expressed in the *Glass Palace Chronicle* (Stadtner 2015a: 210). The focus in the later Burmese chronicles was therefore squarely on Duttabaung, leaving Gavampati only a minor supporting role. The compilers of the *Glass Palace Chronicle* also noted that two late chronicles even omitted Gavampati altogether in the formation of Śrīkṣetra (Pe Maung Tin & Luce 1923: 14–15). In sum, by the Konbaung period the introduction of Buddhism to Burma became largely associated with the Buddha's visit to the Sandalwood Monastery in Upper Burma, thus casting Gavampati's role into the shadows.

However, perhaps the most relevant reason for Gavampati's eclipse was that Rāmaññadesa was inexorably settled by Burmese speakers for whom Gavampati was virtually unknown or associated with the defeated Mons. Although the triumphant Burmese eagerly embraced certain major former Mon hair-relic sacred sites—such as the Shwedagon, the Kyaikkhauk Pagoda near Syriam, and the Golden Rock—there was little enthusiasm for tooth-relic stupas. That

there are today no major stupas in Lower Burma commemorating tooth relics speaks to this. One instructive example was Pegu's towering Shwemawdaw Pagoda, a major pilgrimage site for all of modern Burma/Myanmar. In Dhammaceti's day the Shwemawdaw was revered for one of the 33 tooth relics dispersed by Soṇa and Uttara but, beginning in the 16th century, this myth was replaced by a legend associated with two merchant brothers and two hair relics conveyed from India to Burma, a narrative that clearly piggybacked on the Shwedagon myth in nearby Yangon (Stadtner 2011).

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Perhaps Gavampati, so closely associated with the Mons, had become too tainted by his connection with the *ancien régime* and a need was felt for fresh myths, especially those modeled on the popular Shwedagon foundation legend based on hair relics. A senior Burmese historian, Tun Aung Chain, once joked to me that the Burmese perhaps furnished Pegu's Shwemawdaw Pagoda "with a legend à la Shwedagon which gave prominence to down-to-earth traveling merchants rather than to sky-flying Gavampati". Perhaps there is some truth to this whimsical observation.

helped me sort out the enigmatic evidence concerning the Shwemawdaw relics and the dispersal of the 33 tooth-relics. For photographs of Gavampati images in the Bagan Archeological Museum, I thank Thein Lwin. Tun Aung Chain contributed only indirectly to this article, but I would be remiss not to acknowledge his longtime guidance.

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