

Did Sona and Uttara Come to Lower Burma ?

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There is a tradition firmly believed by the Theravādins that after the third Saṅgāyanā in the 3rd century B. C. the Sāsana was taken by nine groups of mahā-theras to various countries within and beyond India. The Mahāvamsa and most chronicles of Burma and Thailand that have anything to do with Buddhism mention this, probably all having the Mahāvamsa as their source. The mission to Ceylon was led by Mahinda Thera, Asoka's son; the mission to Suvannabhūmi, the “Land of Gold”, which the Burmese identify as Lower Burma, was undertaken by the theras Soṇa and Uttara; and the thera Mahārakkhita was sent to the country of the Yona (“Ionian”, i. e. Greeks or perhaps Hellenized Iranians). Western scholars take the mission to Ceylon more seriously than the one to Lower Burma because it is mentioned in the chronicles of Ceylon, and communication between North India and Ceylon in Asoka's time is confirmed by his inscriptions, while, the scholars maintain, the exact location of Suvannabhūmi cannot be determined. On the other hand, missions to the Hellenized states to the west tend to be accepted as fact, since Asoka himself says he sent embassies to states as distant as Egypt and Syria, in spite of the fact that Asoka's embassies are not known to be connected with the missionary work of the theras, and that, in any case, Greek and Latin sources say nothing of the Buddhist missions, or, for that matter (excepting the Greco-Aramaic inscription of Kandahar), of Asoka or his embassies.

Let us examine the possibility of the coming of Soṇa and Uttara to Lower Burma in the 3rd century B.C.

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Throughout the period of European colonialism, Southeast Asia was regarded as very much of an appendage of India and China, and it was given the names of both India and China (Indo-China) or that of Further India or East India. Except for Siam all the countries that comprise the present-day Southeast Asia were colonies, and even Siam had to cede a large portion of her eastern territories to France besides conceding extra-territorial rights to all European and American powers as a price of her independence. Up to World War II it was customary for scholars to assume that there was little that Southeast Asia had contributed to the civilization of Asia and that there was little worthy of scholastic attention until the arrival of civilizing influence from India and China. Indigenous chronicles were regarded as fairy tales and were the butts of intellectual jokes, so much so that nationalists accused foreign rulers of teaching their compatriots to despise their own culture and civilization.

This was natural. More funds were available for archaeological explorations and excavations elsewhere. Then, as now, Southeast Asia was a fertile ground for commercial exploitation, not for excavation, by foreigners and natives alike, and scholars were the last people in the world capable of influencing government policies anywhere. Nationalists were too busy agitating to insist on excavations to prove their past. Indian scholars who were not politicians satisfied their nationalist aspirations by claiming without proof that Asoka's conquest of Kalinga and Kanishka's establishment of the Kushan empire in western India caused "waves" of Indian refugees, colonizers and adventurers to emigrate and colonize practically all of Southeast Asia. Commerce was another theory put forward by scholars for the Indian migrational waves, without taking into consideration the return traffic by the seafaring Malays or Indonesians who are known to have blazed the sea trail to China and to have gone and actually colonized and settled in Madagascar. Intermarriage was another reason given for the theory of Indian settlements, though there is trace of neither Indian blood nor common dialects having been left behind.¹ In short, these one-way traffic theories were exactly what European powers, particularly the Portuguese, the French and the Dutch, had been doing in