

HISTORICAL SITES IN BURMA

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First Edition 1972
10,000

Sarpay Beikman Press
Printed in the Union of Burma.

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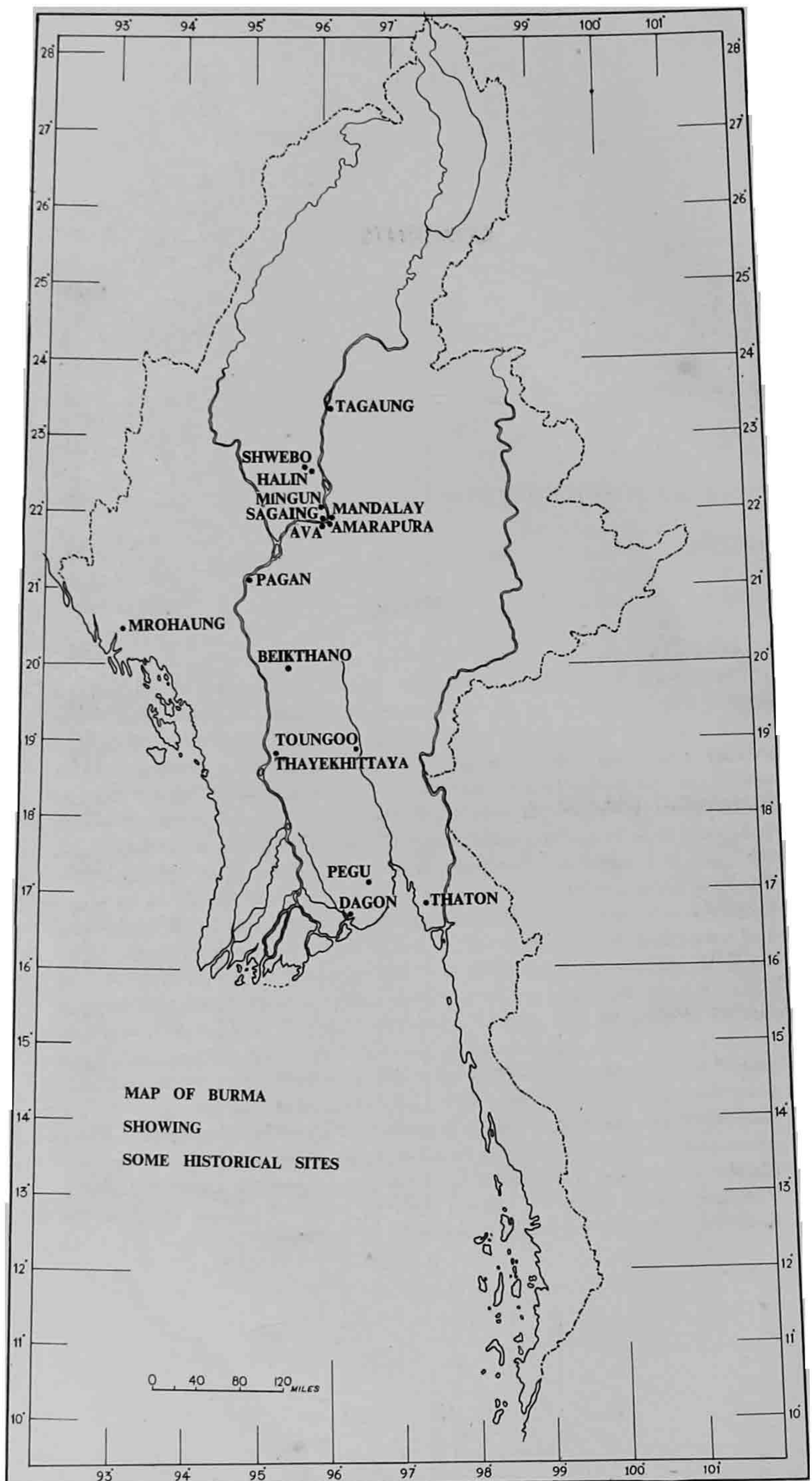
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ERRATA

Page 95, Caption: delete Kirttimukha frieze.

Page 148, Line 30-31: for 16 feet by 8 inches, read 16 feet 8 inches

Page 148, Line 32: for 1814, read 1824.



MAP OF BURMA
SHOWING
SOME HISTORICAL SITES

PREFACE

This book is intended to acquaint readers with some of the notable historical sites in Burma. It will be noticed that the ancient sites are distinguished more by their monumental remains of religious significance than by any other perceptible vestiges. There are two main reasons for this peculiarity. Firstly, the Burmans, being professedly Buddhists are wont to lavish their surplus wealth in building religious structures, the act of which is deemed to be one of the surest ways of attaining merit in accordance with the tenets of Buddhism. Secondly, most of the secular buildings, especially dwelling houses, were never built of durable materials like brick or stone because structures of timber, bamboo and thatch are suited to the hot climate and easier and more economical to build than masonry structures. The materials are also available in abundance throughout the country. At the same time the Burmans are by nature humble or modest and feel quite at ease in abiding by the age-old custom of living in wooden houses while masonry structures are exclusively dedicated to religious purpose. Even palaces were invariably built of timber till the nineteenth century and only a few masonry apartments were added later to the Mandalay palace. Gilding was, however, reserved for both ecclesiastical and royal buildings. Thus innumerable pagodas belonging to all ages are to be found throughout the country and it is no wonder that Burma is popularly known as the ' Land of Pagodas '. It is therefore natural that the religious edifices come to the forefront in presenting the historical sites in Burma.

On the other hand it is not intended to recount here the history of the nation in any degree of comprehensiveness nor to dwell at length on the architectural details of every monument worthy of mention. As in many countries Burma has its history mingled with traditional lore and beliefs. The founding of cities and the erection of religious monuments, sometimes assuming important landmarks in the history of the country, are generally cloaked with hoary traditions to emphasize their antiquity or importance. For example, many pagodas are popularly attributed to Asoka and some modern stupas to Alaungsithu. Refutable associations need to be discounted ; but sometimes the traditional background with sentimental undertones goes a long way to understand the vicissitudes of a developing nation and the evolution of its monumental and sculptural arts. Such traditions as were of consequence in moulding public sentiments are therefore mentioned for what they are worth.

The historical periods of the different sites are presented in a more or less chronological sequence. However, in cases where the sites pertain to more than one historical period they are treated in the later periods when they have attained more prominence in the history of the country, allusions being made to their original significance. A few of the sites are difficult of access, but it is not proper to leave them out for this reason alone : their inclusion, it is hoped, would afford the reader a fuller perspective of the ancient sites throughout the country and thus fulfil the purpose of this book.

Grateful appreciation is here placed on record of the joint efforts of U Thein Maung of the Defence Services Historical Research Institute and U Paw Nyein, Head Photographer, Directorate of Archaeological Survey, in taking the colour photographs. The black-and-white reproductions are selected from the photographic archive of the Archaeological Survey the current accessions to which are made by the staff photographers, U Paw Nyein, U Kyaw and U Aye. Thanks are due to all of them for their creditable contribution.



Spouted pot from Beikthano.

BEIKTHANO

Ancient sites in Burma are generally associated with fabulous traditions and folklore handed down from generation to generation since ages past. Beikthano is not an exception. [It is traditionally believed to have been founded some 2,400 years ago by Princess Panhtwar descended from a still legendary dynasty of Tagaung in Upper Burma.] The fall of the city is attributed to a mightier king, Duttabaung of Sriksheṭra, who sacked the city, subdued the princess, took her captive and eventually married her. In the present stage of historical research in this country the personalities characterized in the legend are beyond authentic identification. However, (the existence of an ancient city called Beikthano (Vishnu City) is testified by the ruins which stand to this day and indicates that the legend may have sprung up from a nucleus of true facts.)

(The ruins lying twelve miles west of Taungdwingyi in Magwe district are not easily recognized by casual passers-by but the elderly local people remember that the fort walls stood much higher than now about half a century ago before the bricks were quarried for building roads and railway tracks.) Apart from the interesting tale of the city the local people could give no proper account of the city complex and the urn burials which they often discover in and around the city walls. In fact, its character, its culture and its past life and glory remained shrouded under a misty veil of myth and legend till recently when archaeological excavations were conducted.



Remains of a monastery exposed at site 2, Beikthano.