

The Culture of Beikthano(Vishnu)

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Abstract

The Pyus, a Tibeto-Burman people, came down into Myanmar from the North-East and settled first at a site that would later be called Beikthano in Ayeyarwady valley. Beikthano developed gradually, from a small village to a city, in the course of successive stages of evolution. This complex development involved numerous inputs, from Indians, Khmers and Mons. Such inputs intertwined with the Pyus' indigenous beliefs, customs and ways of life, formulating what would ultimately be known as the Pyus' defining religious beliefs, arts and crafts, as well as trade, commerce patterns and techniques needed for the construction and building of cities. Beikthano located on trade routes between India and China, sustained trade relations with South and North India, Yunan, Funan and the Mon's regions. These interactions enabled Beikthano to advance its economic fortunes. But such achievements were largely local in their broader impact. The weakness of the town rulers prevented them from consolidating neighboring villages, towns and city states into wider realms as would become the case later on in Myanmar's history. Beikthano remained the target of frequent assaults from neighboring city states and other unions of the states. This was the case in the 3rd and early 5th centuries, when Beikthano experienced two great attacks from its neighbors. These attacks did not prove fatal, and Beikthano remained a significant site in the early historic development of the Pyus from the early first millennium A.D. well into the thirteenth century.

Beikthano, the site and its environments

Beikthano (Vishnu), (Lat. 20° 00' N and Long. 95° 23' E) is situated to the north of Kokkogwa, 16.09 kilometers on the northwest of Taungdwingyi, Magwe District. Other Pyu cities include Halin, to the north of Beikthano and Sriksetra to its south. Scholars assume that

Beikthano, Halin and Sriksetra were major Pyu cities while Tagaung, Maingmaw or Pinle, Waddi, Taungdwingyi and The'gon were lesser Pyu urban sites. All are located in Myanmar's central belt (Fig.1). Pyu cities were mostly constructed on the alluvial soil of fertile valleys. Beikthano also was built between Taungdwingyi valley and the Yin valley, near the pace track of the Yin and Yanpe streams. The average height of the Yin valley is about 137.2 meter above sea level. The height of its western area is 121.92 meter above sea level, although the northern and southern areas are higher than others. The average altitude of Beikthano is 101.2 meter high above sea level. The alluvial soil of Yin valley originates in the Bago Yoma range, to the east of the Yin valley bounded by the Bago Yoma foothills on the north. On the south and west of the Yin valley there are highlands and valleys (Fig.2). The streams commencing on the eastern Bago Yoma, flow to the western lowlands. Yin, Sadoun, Yanpe and Taungu are the areas longest and the biggest streams. Many small creeks pour into these four streams. Beikthano has a wall only on three sides. On the west, there is a tank big enough to form a natural defense (Fig.3). It seems that the Pyus as well as the Chinese, wanted a natural defense when feasible, to protect at least one of the city sides.

Background History and Excavated Sites (Table 1)

Beikthano came to official notice in 1896, when engineers building a road found brass cups and silver coins which they traced to Indian sources. The first and only attempt to probe its past occurred as early as 1905 when Taw Sein Ko, Superintendent of the Archaeological Survey, laid bare two low mounds south of the city. The discovery of burial urns and nothing else discouraged further excavation, and as the claims to exploration of Sriksetra and Bagan were deemed to yield more fruitful results, no further attempt was made to explore this site.

Another site situated in the Mahamyaing forest reserve in the Upper Chindwin Valley, is also traditionally known as ancient Beikthano city. L. de. Beylie' was another person to explore Beikthano in 1907. Later on, during 1958-1963, 25 sites, during 1995-99, 10 sites, during 2002, 1 site, during 2003, 10 sites, during 2008, 5 sites and during November 2009 to January 2010, 3 sites were excavated by the Archaeology Department, Ministry of Culture. The following table shows the period of work devoted to each site and the respective excavators who took charge of the field-work:-

The 25 sites excavated during 1958-1963, were serially numbered KKG 1 to KKG 25, as the area falls within the present village-tract of Kokkogwa. During 1996 - 2003, 21 sites were further excavated here. These were serially numbered BTO 1 to BTO 21, short hand for Beikthano. Two names for one archaeological site are confusing. During from 2 February 2008 to 9 April 2008, 5 sites were excavated here and during from November 2009 to January 2010, 3 sites are excavating here.

City Wall and Citadel area (Fig.4)

The City Wall (taking lakes in the west as part of the formation) is almost a square with the corners on the southeast and southwest a bit rounded. The north wall is not straight. The north-south alignment of the east wall is 13° inclines to the west. From the middle it slopes about 10° until it meets the lake on the west. The north-west corner was angular. Once a railway line was laid through the northern part of this old site, to connect Taungdwingyi with Pathanago on the Ayeyarwady River. The line was not used but the bricks of the east wall were used to build it. As there are many cart tracks breaking through the wall, it is hard to know which the original gate opening was.

The citadel area of Beikthano is situated just at the north-west of the city. It is a compact area measuring 450 x 360 m, with the long axis running approximately north-south.

Gates

The excavated gates at Beikthano, like those at Dhanyawadi, Vesali, Sriksetra and Halin, are curved inward. These contrast to the gate of the Beikthano's citadel, which are constructed at right angles on the east side of the citadel wall.

The Square Type Plan Buildings

The square type building plan of Beikthano, other Pyu cities and early Indian cities are roughly divided into three groups – as follows:

- Group 1 : Square type of building plan, with an interior circular core which could not be a chamber.
- Group 2 : Square type of building had square walls only, without any core inside nor any chamber or any other pattern in the interior.
- Group 3 : Square type of building with a smaller interior chamber like square wall plan

Bricks

Beikthano also benefited from the baked bricks and stucco industry, and the work of masons and sculptors. The large number of excavated brick mounds proves the presence of numerous brick making enterprises which would have been essential given the size of the city's walls and the needs of palace construction.

Brick making technology was likely an Indian import, carried by merchants and migrants. Beikthano's largest brick sizes resemble those found at ancient Indian sites.

Finger Marked Bricks

Bricks with finger marked designs are found at Beikthano and other ancient Myanmar

cities, representing a cultural tradition coinciding with the construction of Mon and Pyu cities in the early centuries of the first millennium.

Bricks with Rice Husk

Most of the husk found in bricks and brick debris excavated from the foundations of buildings inside the city and out, indicates the centrality of agriculture in Beikthano's economy. Fired bricks hardened inside and out depended upon clay mixed with paddy husks, shaped in the form of bricks prior to being burnt. Much husk was required for making baked bricks, which was provided by rice mills, attesting to the presence of agriculture and rice consumption. Soil fertility determined whether the needed rice consumption was met by trading rice merchants or from local fields.

According to some scholar's research in grain type it is said the variety of rice cultivated in Beikthano were as similar as that rice named Japonica grew in Mekong delta region. The paddies in Japonica were grown by rain water while paddies in Beikthano were cultivated by irrigation. Therefore the theory of growing rice in Japonica is for the time being is contrasted to that theory that found in Beikthano. In examining sort of grain in Beikthano was decided by measuring the husk of rice found on the bricks of structures in that city. Therefore a query here appears to ask that the brick used in the constructions of Beikthano were either local made or imported one. Hence U Aung Myint assumed that the original type of husks of rice was changed due to shrinkage during the bricks were baked. So, according to U Aung Myint assumed that the original measurements of husks of rice on the bricks are not sure.

Pottery

Beikthano evidence excavated by the archaeological department indicates evolving standards of pottery making, reaching high levels of competence. The excavated pottery evidence has been grouped into five categories – funerary urns, storage jars, and cooking pots, eating bowls and drinking cups. The urns category also covers alms bowls, water pots, cylindrical vessels and gourd-shaped ones. Pottery was made from clay, in a complex process that began when earth was ground smoothly, mixed with water and than mixed yet again by hand which prepared the clay for further treatment. The more the clay was mixed, the more suitable it became for the compactness needed for pottery making, since such mixing hardened the clay. Potshards found in the area indicate both the compacted and the less compacted clay variety. Most pots were medium grained red colored, a type of clay used for storage jars, cooking vessels, shallow bowls and spouted vessels. Finely levigated clay was used for miniature pots, sprinkler vessels and bowls, often finished with a red slip. Lamps and shallow bowls were handmade, but most pottery was made on the fast wheel, evident in

the parallel ridges and fine concentric striations on the outside surface. More than 90% of the pottery remains recovered inside and outside the city, were likely wheel made.

Burial Urns

Such burial urns, one of the defining features of Beikthano culture, were found in and around the structures at site Nos. KKG 1,6,9,11,12,14,17,18, 21 and 24 and BTO 4,5,6,7,9,10,15,16,19 and 20. Stargardt noted that the drum-shaped form (cylindrical urn) of some burial urns recalls the “Dongson” bronze drums of Vietnam and Yunnan. However, the drum shaped design resembles the betel pot of later Myanmar eras, in my opinion that the latter were a descendant of such drum shaped pots.

Rouletted Wares

Pottery fragments bearing wheel- made designs on their surface were recovered at Beikthano. Those resembling rouletted ware found in Beikthano and Halin were also found in Taxila in northern India, and Arikamedu and Hastinapura in southern India. Rouletted wares were used in Taxila from 100 BC to 100 AD, representing a culture originating in the Roman Empire which then spread gradually to northern and southern India. Trade routes between the Roman Empire and India antedated the Christian era. I am assuming that northern India was the first to engage in trade with Rome, before southern India followed suit. During this period, the land route was more heavily used than the sea route.

Bell

Like the Buddha image, the bronze bell is very important recent find for interpreting the culture of Beikthano. It is simple type, with a small ring at the top but no clapper. It was uncovered at BTO- 13. Beikthano’s only excavated bronze bell to date, it is similar to the bell of Prakash in Central India. Indian scholars’ date of the Prakash’s bell was to the 2nd century B.C. to the 3rd century A.D.

Stucco Carving

All the stucco objects which are fragments of architectural moldings were recovered from KKG- 21 belonging to later period of partial occupation of the city, about the 11th century A.D. Similar stucco objects were found in Halin. They were the same workmanship as those on the temples of Bagan period and the irrefutable evidence of a datable earthen libation jar together assign these objects to a date between the 12th and 13th centuries A.D.

Clay Sealing

Clay sealing with the name Samghasiri in Southern Indian script (Brahmi) was found

in KKG 2. It is perhaps of the 2nd century AD; the name bears a relationship to that of Bodhisiri, niece of the royal treasurer, who made numerous endowments at Nagarjunakonda in the 3rd century AD and similar names of donors ending in siri are found in the Amaravati inscriptions of the 1st century AD. viz. Dhammasiri, Dighasiri, Hagsiri, Nadhasiri, Nakasiri, etc. Palaeographically the writing may be ascribed to the 2nd century AD. Such findings substantiate linkages between Beikthano and Southern India.

Silver Coins

Silver and silver alloy symbolic coins known as Pyu coins, have been recovered in Beikthano and other first millennium sites in Myanmar. Coins are widespread at 6th -13th century AD Mon Dvaravati sites in central Thailand, and were among the finds at the 1st -5th century AD Funan site of Oc-ao in Vietnam. They are also found in Bangladesh. Most probably they were used as medium of exchange, though the designs are generally considered to be auspicious or sacred motifs.

Buddha Image

The recently discovered bronze Buddha statue in the Beikthano context is most interesting. The figure is seated in pralambanasana or European position with the right hand in the Vitarka mudra and the left hand resting on the knee. The find encourages a possible terminal date for Vishnu as an operational center. The site was apparently still occupied for unknown purposes during the Bagan period and is of course inhabited today as well. The terminal date therefore is likely to be the 7th century AD at the very least, rather than earlier. The hair style and face of this image resembles a relief in the Lemyathnar Temple in Sriksetra which suggests a provisional date for the Buddha figure around the sixth or seventh century AD. One Buddha image was found in 1996. It is seated in pralambanasana, a posture with both legs pendant often described as “European style” and deposited at a monastery at Kokkogwa, a village outside the southern wall of Beikthano.

Whether the Beikthano Pyu was Buddhist, Hindu or followers of other persuasions is also problematic. Two stone slabs in Yoni form found at Beikthano indicate some Hindu allegiance. One was found at the northeastern corner of the citadel’s exterior, the other, with a groove, and broken in two was uncovered at KKG 2. A square brick platform found between BTO 6 and 7 might be a spiritual structure, because of the clay lamps and two stone slabs, as well as fragmentary animal and human bones, burial urns, terracotta beads and iron pieces found at the structure’s base. It is this combination of varied materials that provides traces of Buddhist, Hindu and animist practices and beliefs. The rectangular square with a circular core hints at the presence of a ceti but whether a stupa for purposes of worship and adoration was actually superimposed upon the platform is unclear. The buried urns, however, are evidence

of religious concerns expressed in this structure in Beikthano era.

Iron Objects

Nails, door bosses, sockets and strips of iron were obtained from KKG 2. The objects are in different stages of corrosion and most of them are reduced to pieces of various sizes. Iron sockets were also found at KKG 9, 13 and 15. Only one specimen of an iron arrow-head was found from KKG 15.

Beads

The function of beads was coeval in Beikthano with the art of pottery. Beikthano's inhabitants, like human beings everywhere, were fond of ornamentation, but gold or silver utensils were not found in excavations. Large quantities of terracotta and semi-precious stone beads were found.

The Beikthano Pyu made various multi colored beads, worn by being organized in serial order, perforated in the middle. Beads were found in every Beikthano excavated mound, evidence of their wide manufacture and use. Beikthano's bead industry also differed from that of other Pyu cities, like Halin, Sriksetra and Maingmaw or Pinle, where beads perhaps had different functions. In those cities the beads' color diverged from those in Beikthano, and was made from various precious stones.

Conclusion (Fig.5)

City states similar to the Greek states existed in Myanmar. The distinctive city-states in Myanmar were Beikthano, Sri Ksetra, Halin, Maingmaw or Pinle and others. Although these cities seemed to be coeval, they in fact differed from each other in their date and identifying features.

Whether their inhabitants were indigenous or non indigenous remains unresolved. But we are fairly certain that their inhabitants were likely to be Pyu. The Archaeological department nowadays insists that the Pyu had lived in the Ayeyarwaddy valley from Pyay (Sriksetra) in the south, to Halin in the north. The period of their existence most probably stretched from the second century BC to about ninth century AD, the evidence being provided by one of their capitals that was destroyed in 832 AD. Their inhabitants belonged to the Tibeto-Burman language group. The oldest documents of Pyu culture were found in Beikthano.

This city's form and style are important for understanding Southeast Asia's pre history, although it shapes seems not to have been unique in this region. Ancient cities of this format can be found in Myanmar, Cambodia, Thailand and Indonesia. Their identifying features are a fortified main inner city, surrounded by an extended outer city area. In this area were

located craft neighborhoods grouped around a religious monument and one or more markets and tracts of farm land, irrigation, tanks, and canals and farming villages that serviced the population residing at the city's inner core. When the city was at the height of its prosperity and development, its population density must have been substantial.

The distinctions between rulers and ruled suggest that there would have been social stratification in the city's population. Class divisions likely existed distinguishing the poor from the rich. The excavated evidence also substantiates the existence of professional differentiations, which determined various groups' livelihood.

The city's socio economic basis was agriculture, enabling the consumption of rice and meat. Sophisticated irrigation systems brought water from streams through canals, to irrigate the fields. Water was stored for lengthy periods in wells and tanks that supplied the city's drinking needs as well as other uses. Beikthano's upper classes used metal plates and pots in their daily lives while the poor used ceramic pots and plates. This indicates different patterns of living standards determined by the people's economic status.

The majority of people lived in wooden and bamboo houses. As those were made of perishable materials, the evidence for their format and structure has disappeared. But the Pyu were sophisticated architects and knew how to construct elaborate buildings. An example of their technological prowess can be seen in the forms of KKG 2 and KKG 3 in Beikthano, which have no counterparts in the other Pyu cities.

Regarding KKG 9 and KKG 11 within Beikthano, opinions are divided. Both structures shared the same form and were constructed with pillars. Stargardt, relying on excavated documents and radio carbon dating information, opines that those two structures were pre Buddhist structures. Otherwise they would have been indigenous Pyu constructions. Peter Bellwood said that the structures of Beikthano were simultaneously constructed after the arrival of Indian cultural influences. He conceptualized those structures as not being indigenous Pyu inventions, but reflections of the Indian cultural influence that shaped their existence. When the Archaeological Department (Upper Myanmar) excavated the site in 2003, they discovered structures with pillars which resembled the pillars associated with KKG 9 and KKG 11. The structures were BTO 13, 19, and 21.

Thought KKG 9 and KKG 11 contain eight pillars, BTO 13 consisted of 22 pillars and BTO 21 had 24 pillars. Although BTO 19 was a main hall, no pillars were found in it. This leaves open the question of how the Pyus thatched their main structure without the help of pillars. A Halin structure with 84 pillars was found during excavation in Halin. The superintendent of archaeology, U Myint Aung, assumes that the structure was used for public gatherings. KKG 9, KKG 11, and BTO 13, 19, and 21 apparently were rest houses for monks and novices, and conventional halls. Similar structures like the ones described above can be found in India.

Though the Beikthano Pyu was able to construct sophisticated and extensive structures, their technology harbored some weaknesses. However, among the structures excavated up to now, KKG 2 and KKG 3 remain the most distinctive and are the best examples of Pyu architectural knowledge. These two structures underscore Beikthano's distinctiveness when compared to other cities of the period. The forms of structures put up in Beikthano resemble those found in Halin and Sriksetra.

The excavation evidence indicates that the southern wall of the Beikthano palace was reconstructed after having collapsed due either to erosion or enemy attacks. Beikthano city's authorities constructed a second palace wall, for the second time, thereby creating another wall that reached the city's southern wall. What the objectives or purposes of this secondary construction in fact were remains unknown. It appears in the aerial photo, and ground check also indicates that there was a double wall on the western part of the palace wall. Owing to erosion, the outer wall has collapsed leaving behind few clues.

The palace's protection from invading enemies on the western side was significantly weak. Hostile invaders could enter at the junction of Inn Gyi and Gyogarkan tanks. Enemies could enter from the southwest of the city. After destroying the Palace's southern wall, enemies would have been inside the palace and thus able to capture its rulers and authorities. To avoid such a dire possibility, succeeding rulers constructed a double wall on the palace's western side. Furthermore, a brick wall from south of the palace in a southerly direction was also apparently built. This wall was also apparently constructed to prevent water flowing through channels from Inn Gyi and Gyogarkan tanks during the monsoon, so as not to reach the city's eastern wall. As majority thought that wall was built straightly without any bend.

Numerous ornament earthen beads, earrings and necklace were found in Beikthano . Lower quality and price stone beads and a necklace made of silver sheet were also discovered. Precious ornaments like gold, silver and armlet were not found. Such valuable objects, as well as different beads and images of animals were found at Maingmaw or Pinle, Halin and Sriksetra. Figures of animals and polished stone beads found in Pyu cities were also found in Taxila in northern India. The distinct feature in Beikthano excavation is the discovery of kohl stick. But no mirrors were found in Beikthano, though such mirrors were found in Halin as well as an object resembling a mirror found in Taxila.

The northern Indian culture arrived at Beikthano earlier than the southern Indian culture. This can be seen in the finding of rouletted wares in Beikthano, which were used in Taxila in 100 BC, quite similar to Beikthano's rouletted wares. In addition to this, many of the pottery designs found at Beikthano resemble similar designs made in Taxila c. 300 – 100 BC. The quite similar design of a stone slab mould in Beikthano was also found in Taxila in large amounts, where they were used around the time of the early Christian era. Plans of the stupa form structures at Beikthano are more like Taxila's structures than those of Nagarjunakonda's.

These stupas were built at Taxila in c. 100 BC.

In Beikthano, ashes of the dead were buried with the urns. Some inhumation was apparently also practiced. Beikthano urns were delineated during the manufacturing process. When Beikthano urns are compared to those of other cities, they exhibit the highest quality of workmanship. However, stone or brass urns were not found.

Though Beikthano's defensive system was secure for a time, it is in fact poor when compared to that of other cities. The city's wall was constructed on filled earth, in repose position. The measurement of the highest space is only 2.44 m. Evidence pointing to moats is fairly rare. This suggests that hostile forces faced only slight obstacles when attempting to enter the city. High and massive city walls and moats were constructed during the monarchical period to better safeguard the city's security. However, the mechanism associated with constructed gate-ways and their bent and narrow formats lessened the chances of massive sudden invasions. The mechanism allowed the city's defenders to drown their enemies as they attempted to enter the city. Beikthano has an area of 8.81 square kilometer, and incorporated agrarian land and water tanks within city wall. This insured the city's ability to withstand longer sieges, as it was supplied with water and food in war time when surrounded by hostile forces.

In the realm of religion, Beikthano's population practiced creeds of animism, Buddhism as well as Hinduism Paraphernalia on animism, with small brick platforms, image of women organ on slab, stupas, monasteries and rest houses with pillars like KKG 2, KKG 9, KKG 11, BTO 13 and 21 are evidence of the existence of the above mentioned creeds. In addition, a bronze image of Buddha, a small bronze bell, and bronze lamps, testify to a variety of cultic activities.

What is unusual is that with the exception of a seal of Samghasiri, literary documents are absent from this highly developed city culture. Beikthano had contact with Amaravati in Southern India, proved by that seal that resembles similar seals found in Amaravati.

Moreover coins known as Pyus' coins testify to Beikthano's trade relations with its neighboring entities. The coins, trade routes and other excavated evidence indicate the city's far flung connections. Though some scholars think that these coins were minted at Funan in second century AD, the bulk of the coins, including Beikthano's were discovered in subregions of Myanmar, which perhaps indicates that they were minted in those sub regions. The latter case is the stronger one.

Beikthano was destroyed by attackers from Sri Ksetra in the 5th century AD, but there is evidence that its population continued to occupy the site well into the 13th century AD. Our need for a clearer grasp of Beikthano's culture and varying fortunes suggests the need for further research. Such research should be comparative, emphasizing both the continuity and change in the site's historical development. The evidence also facilitates further theorizing of

this society's pluralistic religious life. Beikthano is one of the Orthogenetic cities.

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Table 1

The Excavation at Beikthano

Site No.	Period	Director
KKG-1 and 2	11 June 1959 to 1 September 1959	U Aung Thaw
KKG-3 and 4	11 December 1959 to 4 March 1960	U Aung Thaw & U Myint Aung
KKG-5, 6, 7 and 8	27 August 1960 to 29 September 1960	U Myint Aung & U Bo Kay
KKG-9 and 10	15 January 1961 to 20 March 1961	U Sein Maung Oo
KKG-11, 12 and 13	22 January 1962 to 19 March 1962	U Myint Aung
KKG-14 to 25	14 October 1962 to 3 April 1963	U Myint Aung
BTO-1 to 10	1995-1999	U Kyaw Oo Lwin & U Myo Min Kyaw
BTO-12 to 21	1 June 2003 to September 2003	U Thein Lwin
BTO-22 to 26	2 February 2008 to 9 April 2008	Daw Aye Mi Sein
BTO-27 to 29	November 2009 to January 2010	U Thein Lwin

The Famous Pyu Cities in Myanmar

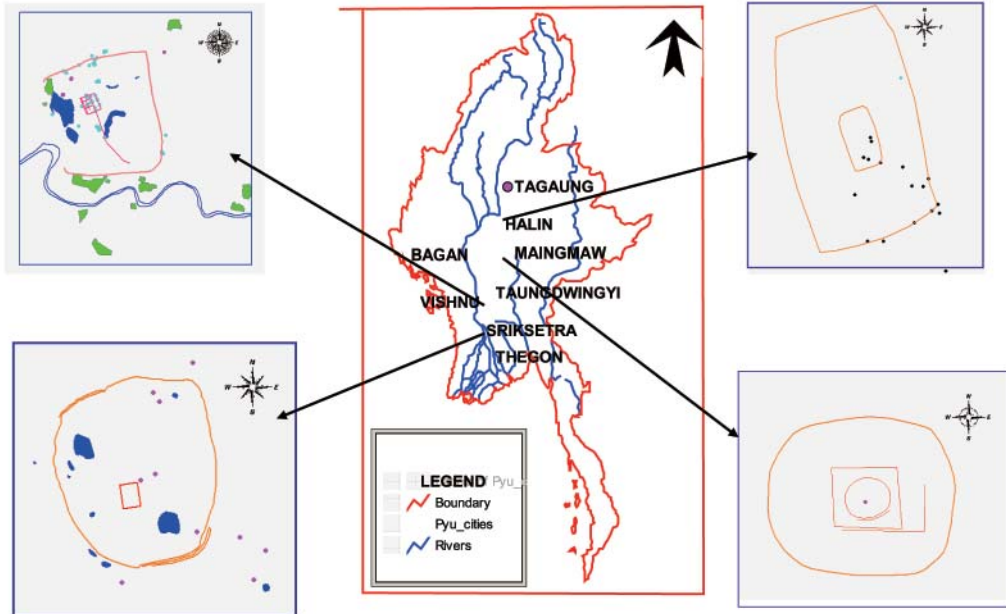


Figure 1

Yin Valley with Vishnu

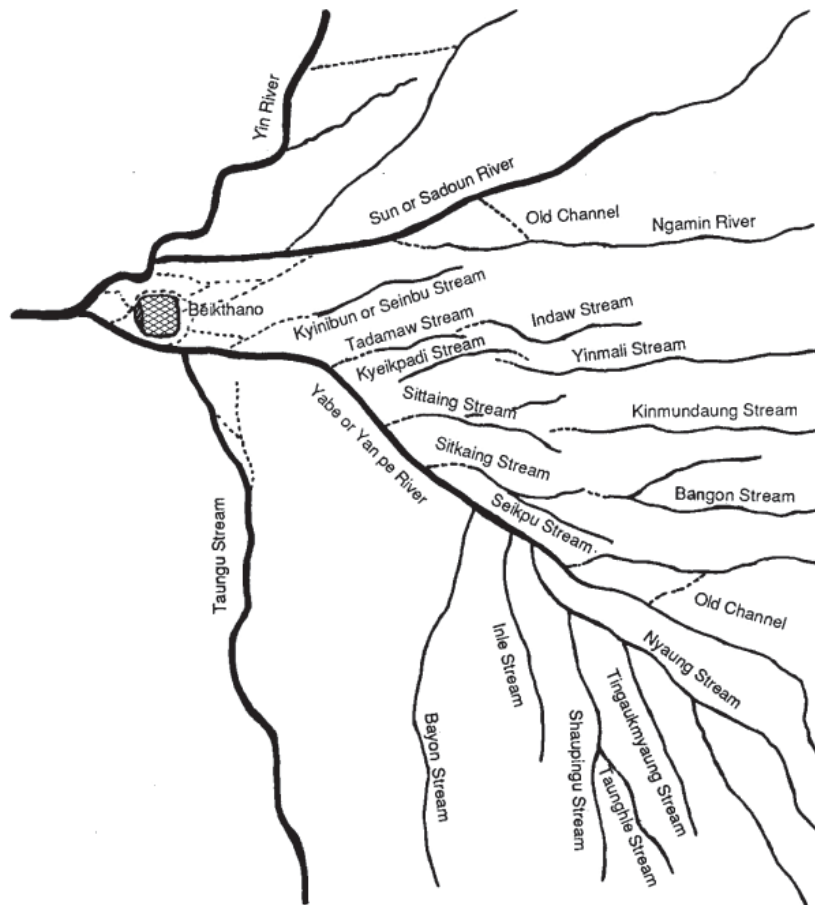
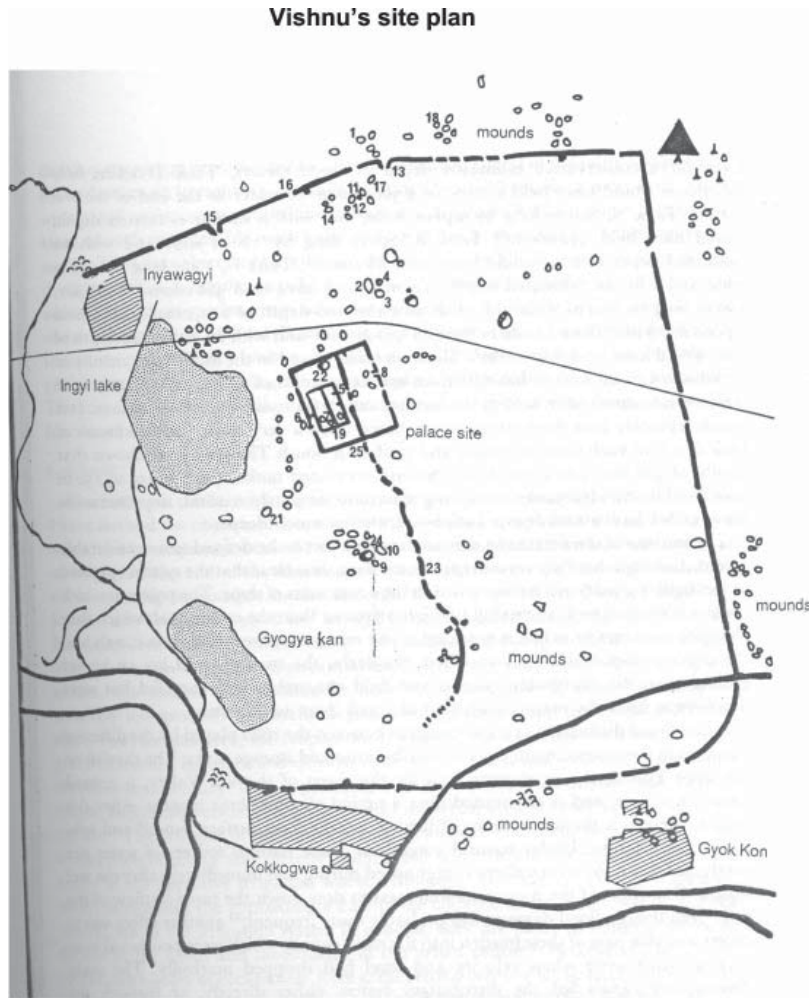


Figure 2

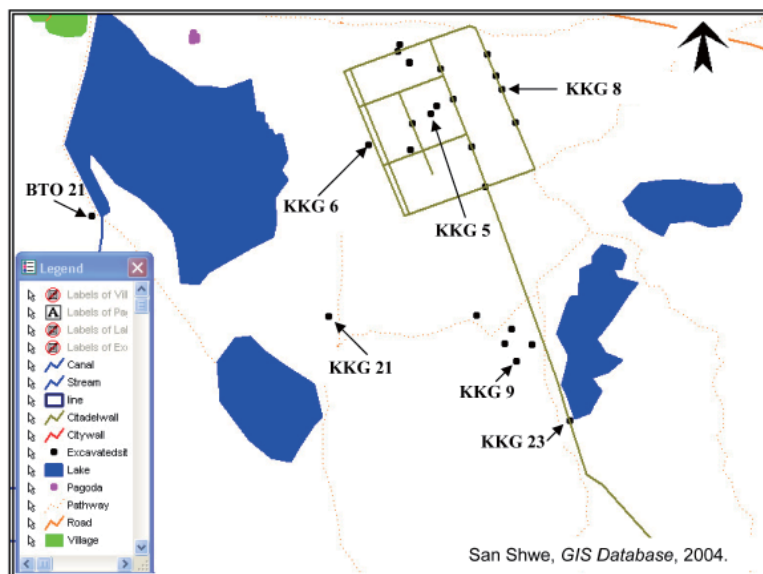


Aung Thaw, *Beikthano*, p. 71

Figure 3

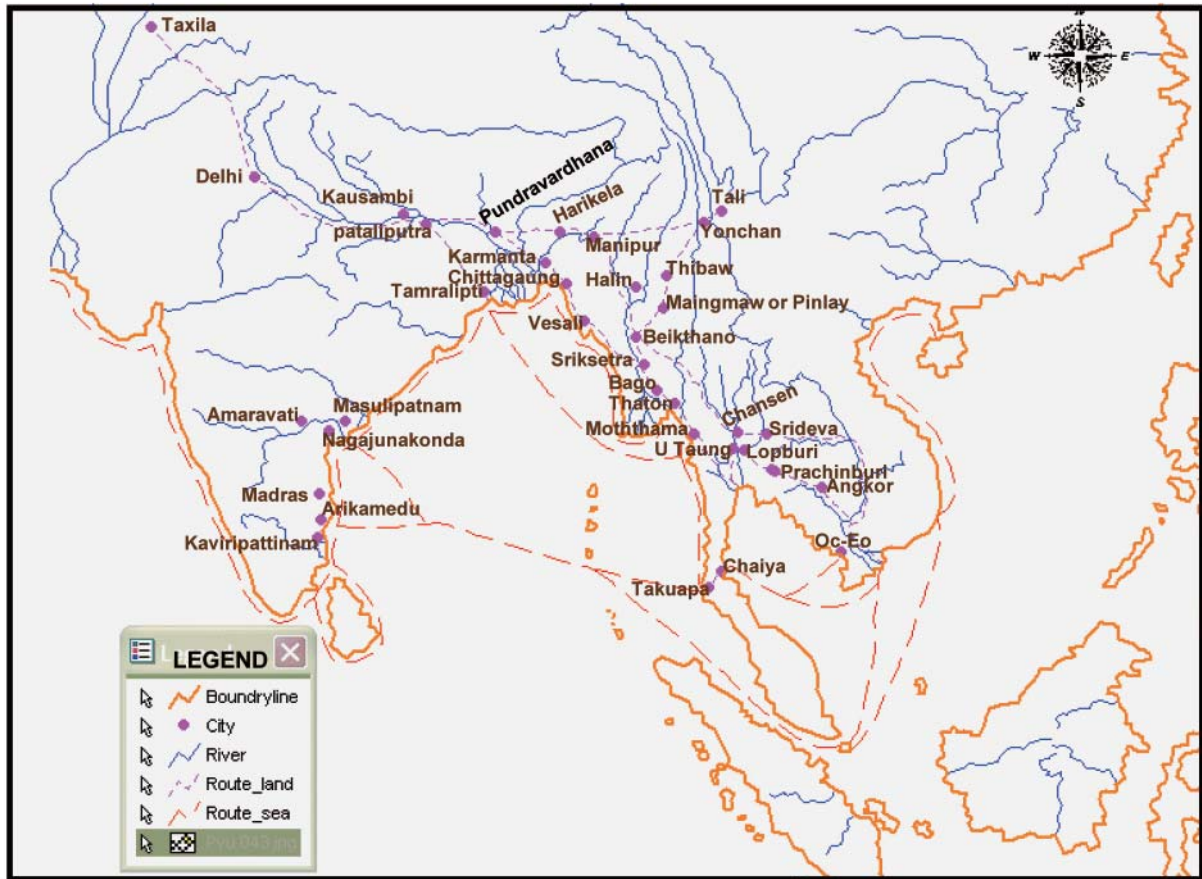
15

Figure 12
Citadel area of Vishnu



San Shwe, *GIS Database*, 2004.

Figure 4



The Trade Routes among Pyu, China, India & SEA in Ancient Period

Figure 5