Cultural Heritage Sites in Myanmar

Pyu Ancient Cities: Halin, Beikthano, Sri Ksetra

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Department of Archaeology and National Museum, Ministry of Culture, Myanmar.
Pyu Ancient Cities: Halin, Beikthano, Sri Ksetra
Criteria under which the property is nominated

(criterion ii) : Over a prolonged period of interaction between indigenous societies with Indic cultures to the west starting after the 2nd century BCE, Buddhism achieved its first permanent foothold in Southeast Asia among the Pyu cities, where it was embraced by all classes of society. The development of Pyu Buddhist urban culture had widespread and enduring impact, following the onward transmission of Buddhist teaching and monastic practice into other parts of mainland Southeast Asia.

(criterion iii) : The Pyu Ancient Cities marked the emergence of the first historically-documented Buddhist urban civilization in Southeast Asia. The establishment of literate Buddhist monastic communities arose in tandem with the re-organization of agricultural production, the specialized production of manufactured goods, the construction of religious monuments in brick, and the development of unique mortuary practices.

(criterion iv) : Technological innovations in resource management, hydraulic engineering, agriculture and manufacturing of brick and iron at the Pyu Ancient Cities created the preconditions leading to significant advances in city planning and building construction, resulting in the creation of urban prototypes which later proved critically influential for later city formation in Southeast Asia.

Proposed Statement of Outstanding Universal Value

The three Pyu Ancient Cities of Halin, Beikthano, and Sri Ksetra developed and flourished over a period of more than 1,000 years between ca. 200 BCE and 900 CE in the Dry Zone of the middle Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy) River basin within the territory of what is today modern Myanmar. Covering a combined area of over 5,000 hectares, located within buffer zones of a combined additional area of almost 7,000 hectares, the highly-intact moated-and-walled urban settlements, set within a vast irrigated landscape, contain the remains of monumental brick Buddhist stupas (reliquaries), other ritual structures, palace-citadels, burial grounds, water management features and early industrial production sites.

The Pyu Ancient Cities provide exceptional testimony of the introduction of Buddhism into Southeast Asia two thousand years ago and the attendant economic, socio-political and cultural transformations which resulted in the rise of the first, largest, and longest-lived urbanized settlements of the region up until the 9th century. The Pyu showed a striking capacity to assimilate the Indic influences and swiftly move into a significant degree of re-invention. They created a special form of urbanization, the city of extended urban format, which subsequently influenced urbanization in most of mainland Southeast Asia. These earliest Buddhist city-states played a seminal role in the process of transmitting the literary, architectural and ritual traditions of Pali-based Buddhism to other societies in the sub-region where they continue to be practiced up to the present.
Together, the three cities provide material evidence of the early, mature and late stages of the Pyu civilization, characterized by the emergence of literacy using Indic Brahmi-based script to transcribe Buddhist texts into Pyu vernacular languages, the establishment of Buddhist monastic communities, distinctive mortuary practices, skillful water management which enhanced agricultural productivity and ensured food security, sophisticated metal- and stone-working, and long-distance trade in manufactured goods. Stable conditions brought about by prolonged economic prosperity and enduring social order fostered innovative developments in construction technologies, city planning, agriculture and industrial production. The model of urban culture established by the Pyu Ancient Cities in the first millennium continued to influence subsequent cities throughout Myanmar and in a wider area of mainland Southeast Asia for the next one thousand years.

Pyu Ancient City: Halin (95° 49’ 7” E, 22° 28’ 12” N)

The ancient brick-walled city at Halin is remarkably large: nearly 3.2 kilometers from north to south and 1.6 kilometers from east to west, encompassing a total area of more than 500 hectares. The walls have crumbled down and the debris strewn about almost at ground level. Traces of a moat are seen on all sides except the south. Halin, 540 hectares, lies 13 kilometers southeast of the modern town of Shwebo and 9 kilometers northeast of Wetlet, Sagaing Division within the 1,000 kilometer square basin of the Mu River Valley. The walled site is located between the Ayeyarwady and Mu rivers with its moats and canals aligned with the prevailing land slope from northeast to southwest. There is a depression to the south now occupied by the Halin-in or lake.
Pyu Ancient City: Beikthano (95° 22' 46" E, 20° 0' 14" N)

The ancient brick-walled city of Beikthano is shaped more nearly like a square. The brick fortification walls encompass the city area on the north, east and south sides, and presumably also on the west although the western wall has not yet been confirmed by archaeological excavation and may never have been constructed as this side of the city is bounded by two large lakes. Its north-south length is nearly 3 kilometers and its east-west length is 2.8 kilometers long. The whole walled area of Beikthano city is some 900 hectares in area.

Beikthano is approximately 18 kilometers west of Taungdwingyi Township, Magwe District, Magwe Region. The ancient walled site lies immediately north of the village of Kokkogwa, with the village of Innywagyi on the northwest and the Shweyaungdaw stupa on the northeast just outside the city wall. The ancient city commands that part of the fertile rice and garden cropping lands of the Yin Valley, an area of approximately 2,294 square kilometers, where four perennial streams converge. Its water resources were therefore greater than any other part of this river valley.
Pyu Ancient City: Sri Ksetra: (95° 17' 24" E 13° 47' 54" N)

Sri Ksetra, the largest and most elaborately constructed city of the Pyu, lies in the Nawin River valley in the Pyay Township, Pyay District, Bago Region. It is roughly circular in shape, with a north-south diameter of 4.44 kilometers and an east-west diameter of 3.96 kilometers. Its walled area embraced a vast area of 1880 hectares. It is encompassed by a high fortification wall constructed of large, fired bricks, the circumference being 13.68 kilometers long, with triple walls on the southeast side. The walls of Sri Ksetra are well-preserved; some sections of the massive wall still stand to a height of 4.6 meters.

Sri Ksetra is located just on the south-western rim of the wide Nawin Valley with its rich soils derived from alluvial deposits providing an area of some 3000 square kilometers of continuous farmland. The walled site of Sri Ksetra is immediately adjacent to the Myinbahu mountain range. Sri Ksetra is approximately 5.8 kilometers east of the city of Pyay (Prome) Township. This area has long been known as mye-lat or middle land between the Dry Zone of Upper Myanmar and the wetter land to the south.
Synthesis

The socio-political transformation of the Pyu Ancient Cities was consequent upon the syncretic assimilation of Buddhism and development of new norms of architecture, monumental sculpture, and epigraphy stimulated by South Asian interchange. This was coupled with a socio-economic transformation based on the control and distribution of water resources to meet the needs of the developing urban centers and for expanding agriculture. Complex and comprehensive use of natural local resources is also demonstrated by the presence of areas of specialized and production, which in the case of brick and iron reached unprecedented scale. Characterized by the hierarchical reorganization of labour and occupational specialization, these advancements led to an extended period of economic prosperity based on commerce and trade as well as to a long-lasting cultural efflorescence eloquently testified in the tangible remains of the Pyu Ancient Cities.