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# Arts of Asia



THE ART OF CENTRAL THAILAND, 1350–1800  
CLASSIC FURNITURE FROM CHINA  
THE QUEST FOR KOREAN CHESTS  
INSCRIBED JADES OF THE QIANLONG COURT

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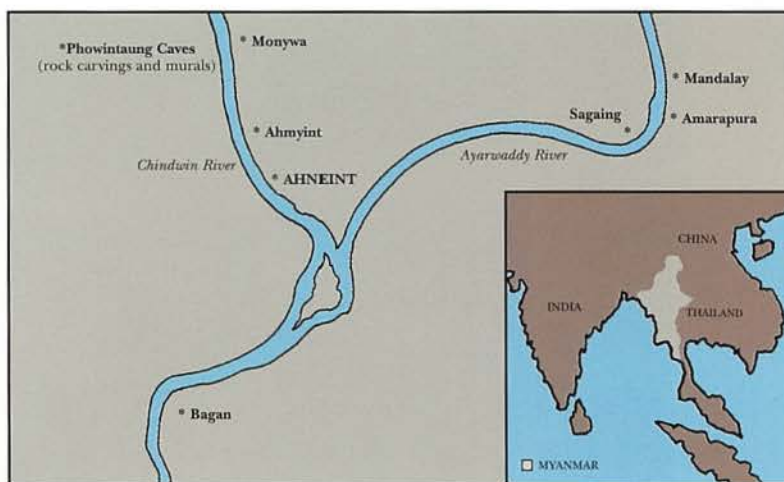


# THE STUPAS AT AHNEINT, MYANMAR

## “Village of the Rhino”

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Photographs by the author



Location map by the author (not to scale)

OVER THE centuries, vandalism, decay and seismic activity has meant that out of the thousands of shrines at extensive religious sites such as Bagan, Sagaing and Sri Kshetra, only a few have survived in their original form. At least 90 per cent of the older structures have been regularly repaired by local builders, many of whom are devoid of any sense of conservation as practised abroad. Unhampered by restraining laws or planning regulations, a pious donor, or energetic monk, can hire anyone of dubious training to renovate a stupa of his choice. Despite the superlatives of tourist propaganda, a discerning eye can often pick out the resulting shoddy craftsmanship at many a restored shrine.

To the Myanmar, new is beautiful, and an ancient pagoda can be stripped of its surviving exquisite stucco embellishments, and transformed into a mirror image of the Shwe Dagon (formerly Kyaik Lagun, the great Mon shrine and premier pagoda) at Yangon; examples of this type of transformation abound. Although in its present form this stupa only dates from the 18th century, nevertheless, it is held to be the ultimate in pagoda design. This relentless need to beautify has also meant that antique images are frequently regilded, or early bronzes polished.

At the Ahshay and Ahnauk Shwenatha temples at Bago, priceless pre-1000 AD stone carvings of Buddhas have recently been smothered in crude mosaic, the features and clothing “modernised” so that they are now garishly new. It may come as a shock that the culprits of such vandalism are usually the elderly trustees and monks of the “old school”, to whom conservation is a totally alien and foreign concept.

Another insurmountable barrier is the centuries-old notion that any damaged or discoloured object from an earlier age is *khite te* (had become contaminated and therefore attracts misfortune). The Myanmar have two alternatives for such a situation, embellishment or destruction; unfortunately, the latter course has often been taken in the belief that it would nullify the bad luck. Predictably, over the millennium,

countless archaeological artefacts have been lost.

It would seem that the main aim of trustees, in many religious institutions the world over, is to attract pilgrims to their shrine in the belief that they will boost their coffers. In Myanmar, generating huge drawing power, is the large number of *Sutaung pyai phayar* (wish-fulfilling Buddha images) which have suddenly materialised. This is a recent phenomenon and almost every shrine now boasts of one. But one should bear in mind that, assuming a wish is to be granted, one has first to give liberally.

The national trend of renovation is especially noticeable at Bagan where after the disastrous earthquake of 1975, the Archaeological Department, and some private individuals, have “improved” the shape of the *shikhara* (the superstructure of a temple said to symbolise the sacred Mount Kailasa of Hindu mythology) and increased its height. This has occurred at several of the larger temples spanning the years 1000 to 1300. It is possible that this was done with a view to impress; comparisons with pre-1975 photographs will confirm this statement.

Fortunately, in the little backwater called Ahneint, or the Village of the Rhino near Monywa, a large cluster of shrines from the 17th and 18th centuries have remained relatively unscathed. They have also miraculously escaped earthquake damage. Although the superb stucco decorations at Bagan have been well documented, at Ahneint, no survey has been undertaken. Unhappily, time is not on the side of these buildings, as the inclement weather and neglect will continue relentlessly to hasten their destruction.

At this Arcadian site, a charming legend has it that a rhino (allegedly Gautama Buddha in one of his numerous incarnations) was swept down the Chindwin River and managed to scramble up the bank. To this day, two pagodas of an uncertain date and named after the event, can still be seen. The pair are known as Kyant Tet (where the rhino climbed ashore) and the Kyant Sin (where the rhino returned to the river). It is also called Kyant Ku (where the rhino

swam).

The word Kan Neint (the original name for the village, now shortened to Ahneint) translates as “a low bank”, as it is almost on the same level as the river. Its sister village, four miles to the north, is called Ahmyint or “high bank”. This region, which is in the dry zone, is liable to annual inundation from the Chindwin River, during which many of the stupas become islands in a sea of muddy water. The area abounds in artefacts from the later Stone Age, indicating early settlements. Here, isolated amongst thorny scrub jungle, ancient trees and toddy palms, there are pagodas and temples of a unique design. Huge bricks from various ruins litter the ground, an indication of its once affluent past. A few inscriptions from the Bagan period (1000–1300 AD) and later, can be seen half buried in the sesame (*Sesamum indicum*) fields.

Local tradition has it that at its inception, in the misty past, Ahneint comprised nine villages, nine *celiyas* (large solid pagodas), nine *gu* (cave temples; structures with chambers for images and worship), nine monasteries and nine lakes; of the last two, few now remain. The figure nine is considered particularly potent in the East and was especially favoured by kings and courtiers. A region celebrated for its religious and secular amenities in such magical numbers meant that it was an auspicious site and it thrived, until the fall of the Bagan dynasty in about 1300. Archaeological evidence suggests that it became a flourishing riverine town sometime during the 12th century, when Narapatisithu (reigned 1173–1210) built the Thon Lu Ah Ba Phayar Hla pagoda, now known as the Thon Ban Hla.

Ahneint, providentially, has still not been included in the tours for foreign tourists, heading for the extraordinary rock-cut caves of Phowintaung, on the west bank of Monywa. Neither is it listed among the places of pilgrimage for the Myanmar. If this situation continues, many of the pagodas will escape unsupervised and disastrous renovations by the pious. This in itself is a blessing in disguise, as such “benefactors” tend to smother the delicately carved stucco or-





The Pyatthat Phayar with its unusual *sein taung* (diamond mountain) roof decorations

namentation with thick *htone* (whitewash), thereby ruining them forever.

Shrines in Myanmar consist of two types, the *celiya* (solid stupa), and the temple, known as either *gu* or *kala kyaung* (literally "Indian monastery", an indication that architecturally, the design was introduced from India). The temple usually consists of a square base with porches, passages and chambers, but with a roof terminating in a stupa. Although the majority are built with four entrances, each generally facing the cardinal points, some with single doorways are also known.

Among the structural embellishments, unlike the usual varieties to be seen throughout the country, those at Ahneint are distinctive. While a few of the more massive pagodas were built during the Bagan period, judging by the architecture and dated murals, the heyday of erecting the smaller shrines occurred sometime during the 17th and the 18th centuries. Presumably this was a period when, for a time, the region enjoyed renewed prosperity, and predictably, affluent Buddhists converted their surplus wealth into constructing pagodas in the time-honoured way.

Although there are numerous religious structures at Ahneint, barely fifteen still re-

tain some of their fine stucco work and old wall paintings. However, for our present purpose, only two of the more outstanding buildings will be described in detail.

For those with an interest in pagoda structural design, the site of the Tan Daing Shay monastery, a huge compound of about 15 acres will be relevant. The complex was commissioned by a wealthy man named Nga Phyu Thin, and the extant dedicatory inscription is dated 1333. Although the wooden constructions have long since vanished, within the grounds are the Pyaung Pyar Gyi and the Lay Myet Hnar pagodas. There is also the Sutaungpyi (wish-fulfilling) pagoda of an unknown date, in the centre of the village. It contains murals, several finely carved stone umbrellas of the 17th century, and inscriptions.

In design, one of the most remarkable temples is the Pyatthat Phayar, which is situated north of the village in an isolated spot. But as a dedicatory inscription has so far not been discovered, it is unclear if this is its original title. In all probability it became known locally by this name as it resembles a *pyatthat* (*prasada*; a structure with numerous receding roofs, seen on religious and palace buildings alike).

The temple, with its solitary doorway

which faces the auspicious east, lies smothered in dense vegetation. It is the only shrine which has at the entrance to the enclosure wall, a pair of stone guardian *devas* in *anjali mudra* (gesture of greeting; intended to welcome the pilgrims). Both are now headless, while at the time of my visit, there were several decapitated Buddha images strewn around the overgrown courtyard, evidence that vandals had recently been in the area. This, despite its reputation as the haunt of snakes.

The single doorway, with its finely worked pediments and door jamb, is ornamented with *sein pan* (diamond-shaped decorations). A terse inscription in the vestibule states that the murals within were completed in 1707. Sadly, huge sections have become stained, or have flaked off due to damp caused by the rain seeping in.

Remarkably, the little temple is not square but built in the *kho nan cho* style; this is a local trend which is apparent in almost all the religious structures of the period. Beginning at the base of the temple are a series of *cho* (literally "to bend" into irregular corners, pleats and folds of identical measurements). As these progress vertically into terraces, the multi-angles are retained in ever decreasing dimensions. The graduating levels so formed would have once culminated in a pinnacle with a gilded *hti* (customarily a cone-shaped umbrella of lacquered metal).

The terraces are decked out with pointed masonry ornaments called *sein taung* (diamond mountain), now unadorned, as the stucco has peeled away. Fortunately, a few remain to confirm that the missing motifs were of the *kyay khway* (curling ornaments) variety. In shape, each projection resembles the pronged embellishment to be found on the head of a *vajra* (thunderbolt of Indra) and it is these pieces which produce the distinctive, Khmer-like appearance of this edifice. Observing it at twilight, it could almost pass for one of the temples at Banteay Srei in Cambodia.

Regarding the *kho nan cho* design, there are several fanciful traditions, one being that it was based on the palace of Buddha, when he was the king of doves during one of his incarnations; hence the *kho nan* (palace of the dove).

A more satisfactory explanation is that the architectural concept was borrowed from the Mon (a distinct ethnic group from the Myanmar, whose civilisation flourished in the southern half of the country; at Bago, their former capital, the roofs of the audience halls of Kambasathadi, the recently constructed palace, conforms to this pattern—it was based on artefacts and surviving architectural styles of the period).

Existing masonry examples, and accounts in poems and chronicles, suggest that the *kho nan cho* feature was fashionable during the 16th to the 18th centuries. At the Pyatthat Phayar, not only does the architectural design make it one of the outstanding structures in the region, as far as I am aware; it



has not been met with elsewhere in this form.

The second building of interest is to be found at the Zaydeedaw Taik, an unusual complex of nine pagodas and temples with impressive stucco decorations and wall paintings. Sadly, several have been disfigured with gaping holes left by treasure hunters. The huge paved compound, and shrines with innovative architectural designs, are particularly striking. While some of the temples contain murals from the 17th century, commissioned at the time of construction, another, with examples presumably painted over the originals, is dated 1839; this form of artistic vandalism was often perpetrated by a well-meaning donor.

The base and two top terraces of the principal structure are octagonal, but radiating like a star with a small *ceitya* at each point. Along the encircling lintels are sculpted interlocking motifs known as *naga lein* (intertwined dragons). The building ascends in a series of diminishing bands, each ornamented with repeating circular floral arrangements known as *hmaw tan*; these are clearly mould produced. In the bell section, interlocking heart-shaped tendrils enclose *bhodi* (Banyan: *Ficus indica*) leaves, with the tips either pointing up or down. Above these, the conical spire rises in a series of *phaung yit* (bands), remarkably like the ringed pinnacles of Thailand. At ground level, lions guard all the corners of the structure. What little remains of their decoration is impressive.

The four entrances to the chamber within are notable for their kinnara (a creature half-human and half-bird) pediments, which are flanked by horn-like *saing baung* (a variant of the Thai *hang bong*) projections. Between the horns are four curling ornaments associated with doorways and the backs of thrones. Each access ornament is distinct, with the area of the tympanum, below the pediment, displaying either karavika (crane) birds or naga (dragons). The stucco embellishments suggests that there were several craftsmen working on the nine pagodas of the Zaydeedaw Taik complex, as the quality of many of the motifs varies in excellence.

As for the craftsmen, such as architects, workers in stucco, artists, carpenters and woodcarvers who created these religious structures, the majority travelled around the kingdom, finding work along the way. Among those employed at Court, many were *ah si ah set nandaw ahloke thamar* (hereditary workers of the palace). They lived at the capital in their own *ah su* (groups), in quarters named after their profession. There were also small communities of artisans in the larger towns, who enjoyed a steady stream of commissions. For the craftsmen at Court, private work was permitted with the consent of their departmental head.

Disturbingly, being an artisan, especially those connected with the building trade, had its drawback as they were liable to be dedicated as *phayar kyun* (pagoda slaves). This was one of the most callous and devas-



A temple in the Zaydeedaw Taik complex

tating acts perpetrated by “compassionate” Myanmar Buddhists in their unrelenting search for *kutho* (merit; in our politically correct world, with its human rights and anti-discriminatory laws, such actions would appear to be at the expense and misery of others).

Once registered as pagoda slaves, not only the entire family, but their descendants, for all time, became social outcasts; this meant that they could only marry among their own “caste”. The psychological trauma must have been immense.

Beginning from the Bagan period, contemporary inscriptions trumpeted the ability of donors to dedicate large numbers of slaves. Bizarrely, in 1179, in an excessive display of piety, Abinandathu, a high-ranking official at the Court of Bagan, dedicated not only himself, but also his wife and two sons, together with slaves, to the Tainggyut temple. Than Tun also mentioned a king consigning some of his children to this appalling fate, but he failed to identify the ruler, nor did he provide a date.

An inscription of 1198 claimed that Narapati-sithu, the king who built the massive pagoda at Ahneint, allegedly dedicated one thousand slaves (of various professions), five hundred of whom were Myanmar and five

hundred Indians, together with five hundred cattle. The fortunate “recipient” was the Dammayazika pagoda. Obviously, this was an extravagant royal donation and must have had an effect on the Treasury.

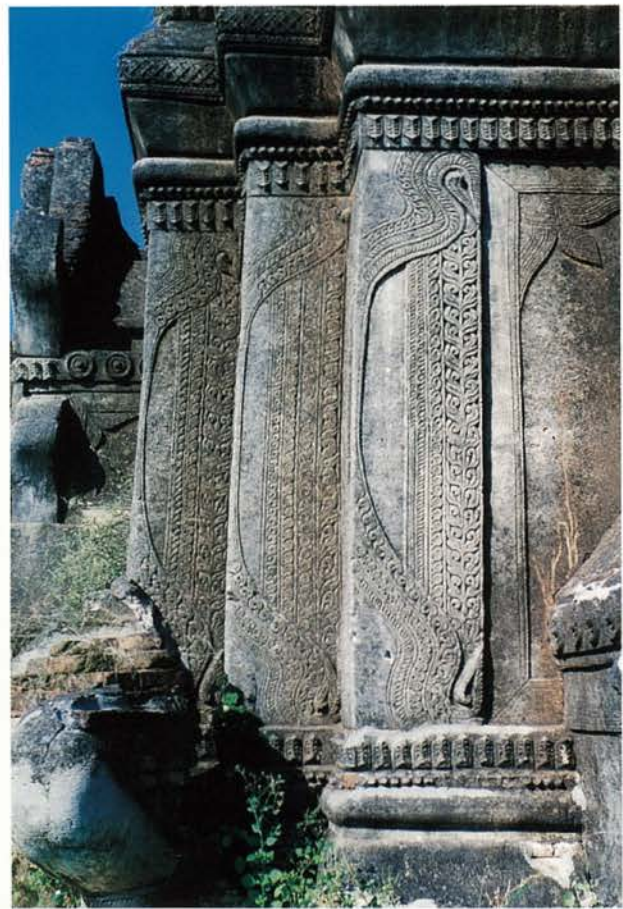
Conveniently, Than Tun provides us with the value of the silver *tical* used at the time. According to him, a slave could be procured for thirty *ticals* of silver, or twenty bushels of paddy. A good horse was worth forty slaves, while the price of an elephant was fifty slaves. Land, on the other hand, was cheap, 1.57 acres could be acquired for one *tical*.

Understandably, the farsighted donors of religious buildings made sure that among the slaves were craftsmen, such as the vitally important masons, brickworkers and carpenters. They and their progeny were sworn to maintain the edifice they were dedicated to until the coming of Maitreya (Arimittiya, the future Buddha) at some unimaginable time in the future. And to make sure that these slaves did not desert their posts, their names were deliberately inscribed on the dedicatory inscriptions for all to see. Although Than Tun claimed that the majority were contented with their lot, and presented convincing evidence to support it, his statement is difficult to accept.





Elaborate embellishments on one of the Zayeedaw Taik pagodas



Stucco decorations on lintels and pilasters

Is it little wonder that when opportunity presented itself, either during civil disturbances, or when the ruling family no longer held absolute power, these artisans, seething with resentment, either defaced or destroyed the damning parts of the inscriptions. They were then able to melt away and assume a new life.

Until well into the 1970s, the thousands of smaller ruins at Bagan, many mere rubble, stood as testimony to this deliberate abandonment and desertion. And who can blame the pagoda slaves? Had they been loyal and accepted their fate, as Than Tun implies, surely all the surviving stupas would still be in a pristine condition. Here it must be pointed out that from the 1980s onwards, the majority of the ruins at Bagan have been rebuilt by public subscription and generous backing from the government. This is to the intense disapproval of purists in Myanmar and abroad.

Craftsmen, including those connected with the building trade, carried *letthon parabaik* (pattern books) containing architectural plans and designs. As early as the Bagan period, contemporary epigraphic evidence revealed that translated works from India in the creative professions were available. In many a dedicatory inscription, artisans are invariably listed, with the majority of names indicating an Indian origin; they were usually Tamils. These lithic sources also reveal that there was a large Hindu community, presumably escapees from the subcontinent, from the worst of the appal-

ling Muslim persecutions between 1000 and 1206. Visual evidence in murals and other works of art, confirm that Indian influence, particularly in costume, was overwhelming at Court and among the people. It is understood that over the centuries, information in these foreign instruction manuals were added to or amended to suit local requirements.

In 1846, after a huge fire destroyed part of Amarapura, the then Myanmar capital, it was discovered that among the losses were a large number of irreplaceable treatises on various crafts. An anonymous scholar then took upon himself the huge task of borrowing similar known works from others around the region. He had them copied and assembled into one volume; this treatise has survived and is now in print. Many of the lost manuscripts were copies which had been handed down for generations.

Volumes on *parabaik* were made from native paper which was either left in its natural buff state, or painted black or white. Ink, paints, charcoal or steatite "pencils" were used where appropriate.

Pattern books could also be on *pay* (palm leaves: *Corypha umbraculifera*), with the text and motifs etched with a stylus. Such volumes were usually 8–10 inches in length, and about 2–3 inches in width. These were smaller in comparison to the larger and standard-sized *pay sar htoke*, which measured 21 inches.

The Myanmar have always been a literate race, and over the centuries have sup-

ported communities of workers in the production of paper and palm leaf. Depending on the subject and type of document, the services of other artisans, such as scribes, artists, lacquerers, silver and gold leaf workers, were sought. A finished volume also relied on carvers in wood or ivory, to produce the protecting *kyan* (boards), and weavers to create the *sar pu lway* (wrappers with reinforced strips of bamboo) and elaborate *sar si kyo* (binding ribbons) with devotional messages.

In old Myanmar, there was no differentiation between the words for cement, plaster and stucco, all three were known collectively by the traditional name of *pan law ingaday*; today, only the word *ingaday* (cement) is used. A mason was called a *payan the*, and the architect was known as the *bithuka*.

Although excavated fragments of stucco show that the craft was known to the Pyu (1st to 9th century AD), it reached its apex during the Bagan period. At this once vast and thriving metropolis, an enormous variety of deftly crafted architectural decorations still cling precariously to ruined structures; the craftsmanship has never been surpassed. Even though the examples at Aheint are not in the same league, they are, nevertheless, survivors from a period which has barely been investigated.

Interestingly, several old recipes for the preparation of stucco have survived. The earliest is claimed to be the version used during the second half of the 11th century on the Shwezigon pagoda at Bagan. Among



the unexpected ingredients were milk, cooked glutinous rice, honey, cutch, bael fruit (*Aegle marmelos*), sand, lime and glue. It was maintained that when dry, it became “*kyauk ah lar mar the*” (as hard as rock).

Another variation can be found among the components from the recipe in the manual copied in 1847:

*Kaw yae* (glue from boiled buffalo hides)  
*Tin le* (an early name for *htan nyet* (jaggery/molasses), from the boiled juice of the palm tree.

Viscous liquid obtained by boiling the bark of the following:

*Ohn ton* (species of laurus: according to Judson’s Dictionary this is *Tetranthera laurifolia*)

*Let pan tayaw* (cotton tree: *Bombax malabaricum*)

*Lair hmo* (yellow-flowered cotton tree: *Cochlospermum gossypium*)

*Sha saung* (cutch: *Acacia catechu*)

*Thaphan khar* (species of *Ficus*)

All these constituents had to be mixed with sand, sifted red ochre (one account said “powdered old bricks”) and lime. Workers, called *pe the*, whose role was to mix the concoction, then pounded it. It was then pulverised further and left for about five days. The almost solidified material, to which a “coconut-shell full” of sesame oil was added, was then removed and crushed again about four times in a mortar. If the formula was followed correctly, the results produced a malleable material with the consistency of beeswax or putty which hardened when dry. There are warnings in the manual regarding the over use of any particular ingredient, as it was liable to cause cracking and flaking.

During preparation, and before work could begin, the craftsman rubbed his hands with sesame oil to prevent the lime in the stucco from “scorching” the skin. The oil also made the mixture easier to handle. An inscription of 1375, now in the Shwezigon pagoda, thoughtfully listed the cost of building a temple, it also recorded the prices current at the time for materials used:

35 *ticals* of silver for prepared stones [bricks were not listed and may have been omitted in error]

30 *ticals* for mortar

10 *ticals* for jaggery cement [the ingredients which included palm molasses].

The wages were:

35 *ticals* for the mason [presumably also the architect]

30 *ticals* for the bricklayers [numbers not recorded]

300 *ticals* for the artists who painted the interiors [in another inscription, the artists were merely given a suit of clothes each].

Over one hundred years earlier, the Shinbinbawdi pagoda inscription of 1237, recorded that for constructing a huge religious complex “Bokdalinga [an Indian], the mason, was rewarded with an elephant [worth fifty slaves] and four suits of clothes”.

Regrettably, during my fleeting visits I was not able to locate data regarding the cost of building the pagodas at Ahneint. However, in time scale, the nearest piece of information is to be found in the inscription of the Ananda Oakyaung at Bagan, built between 1775 and 1785.

It recorded that the three master masons [all brothers] who undertook the brick work were paid 600 silver *ticals*, the master masons who supervised the cement [and stucco] work also received 600 *ticals*, while their ten labourers received 50 *ticals* each. This seemed lavish by 14th century standards, considering the donor, Uthana Raja, although wealthy, was a mere archivist at Court.

In contrast, it is incredible to learn that in 1816, after building at Amarapura a huge gilded palace complex with its numerous ceremonial buildings, the remuneration received by the *Bithukagyi Mhadan Taik Wun* (chief architect) from Badon Min (reigned 1782–1819) consisted only of “two cows, one silk and one painted *pasoe* (long waist-cloth) and a bale of material for shawls”.

And he was expected to be grateful for this royal bounty. What is galling is that all these insignificant items were tribute gifts and cost this autocratic tyrant nothing.

At Ahneint, the quality of craftsmanship varies from pagoda to pagoda, indicating that these structures were built over a period of many years. When the economy flourished, devout benefactors could procure from the capital the expertise of the finest architects and craftsmen in stucco. During leaner times, they made do with whoever was available. As some of the motifs occur repeatedly on several structures, there is a possibility that these were the work of a group who may have stayed on in the area, until the religious zeal and finances of the faithful were exhausted.

Examination of the smaller decorations, such as geometric patterns, *palair thwair* (strings of pearls) or *ywet than* (leaf motifs), indicate the use of *pon khwer* (moulds); templates of metal were also employed. Although Htun Shein mentioned numerous *let net kariya* (tools), he only listed the *than let* (metal hand; used on cement), and *thit let* (wooden hand; designed for stucco only). These instruments were shaped like a slightly cupped human hand for scooping and spreading onto the brick facade and were the Myanmar versions of a trowel. A variety of scalpel-type devices *phauk htwi* (sculpted and carved) the stucco or cement.

On flat surfaces, background vegetal motifs, or hatching, were etched with a bamboo *ka nyit* (stylus), a favourite design “filler” being strands of circles within ribbon-like borders. That rows of leaves, lotus petals and other linear work were sometimes executed freehand is revealed by the variations in quality and spacing.

Where pagodas have suffered centuries of neglect, in places the original *thanakha yang* (cream) colour of the stucco can still be seen. In sections sheltered from the elements it appears as fresh as the day it was applied. Had this colour survived in its entirety, the buildings would have presented an unusual sight in modern day Myanmar, as the trend at the moment is to either gild with cheap and garish “*disco-shwe*” (imita-



The effects of rain and whitewash on stucco

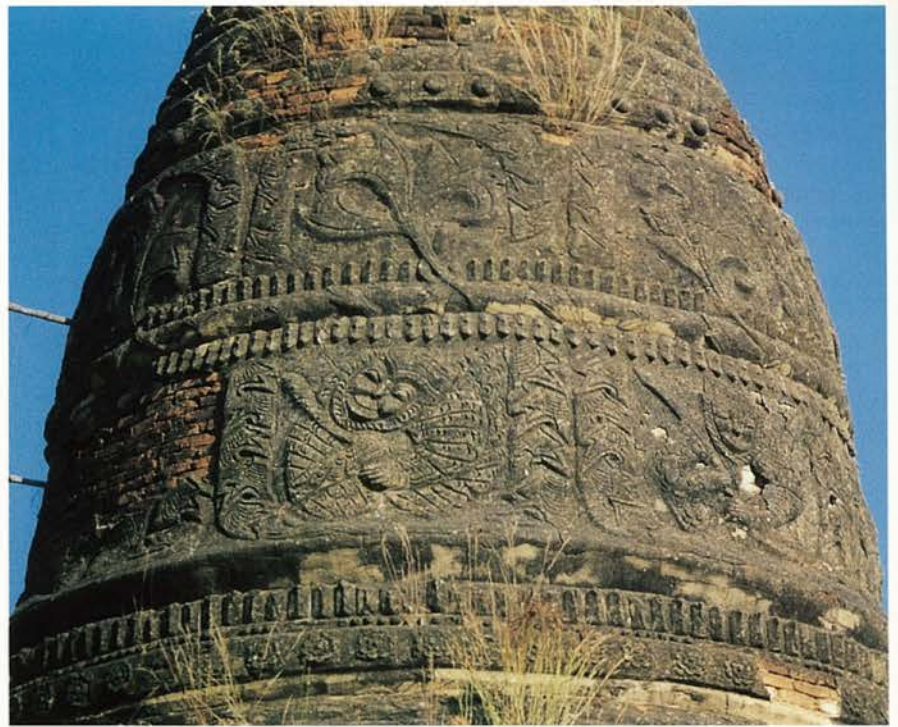


Delicate stucco work almost obliterated by whitewash





Bearded Manokthiha demon (a beast with twin bodies); a rare variation as such creatures are invariably depicted with human faces



Encircling guardian demons in armour on a stupa

tion gold leaf and paint from Japan) or apply thick whitewash to the entire structure, including those with rare terracotta plaques.

Regrettably, centuries of rain and the tropical sun have turned the exposed sections of cream to almost black. This has been caused by the algae which flourish during the monsoons and are dehydrated during the dry season, clinging grimly to the stucco.

In the construction of pagodas, almost every example is built with a section known as the *hkaung laung* (bell) and the *thabeik hmauk* (upturned begging bowl). This is the middle portion, and a largely unornamented area between the base and the finial. At Ahneint, on the other hand, the stucco artist has created here a variety of bold vegetal motifs, interspersed with the faces of *belu* or *yetkha* (*yakshas* demons). This bell-like segment is divided by a *yin se* (chest-band), either plain or decorated. On some, long leafy tendrils sprout from this divider and ascend onto the next register.

The demonic sentinels in the lower half of the bell have been deliberately arranged as if leaning over a balcony, and glaring down threateningly at the viewer. There is every possibility that the apparel they are wearing is in fact a *chat* (armour). This protective covering was of stitched pieces of either metal or lacquered leather, and was part of the standard uniform for the higher ranks of the period. Doubtless, the stucco artist felt it appropriate to depict the demons with armour, as their role was to guard the shrine. Foreign observers may find the presence of malevolent beings incongruous on a stupa. Nevertheless, it was believed that these monsters had been con-

verted by the gentle Buddha, and in gratitude had become the protectors of his shrines.

While some grasp spears, swords or halberds, others brandish *daung me* (tail feathers of the peacock) in each hand; the latter symbolism is an indication that they are capable of flight. In other parts of the country, although rows of demons encircling the bell section has been retained into modern times, alterations in design have also been made. Unarmed demons clutching looped garlands form a ring around the structure in a motif known as *belu pan swair* (demons holding garlands); this was a gesture intended to depict their now pacific nature. The original Indian alternative employed during the Bagan period, was the *Kirtimukha* (a lion-like or demonic face disgorging loops of pearls from the corners of its mouth). According to Colleen Beresford "this icon depicted, originally, a gluttonous person doomed to eat its own entrails in hell—these gradually evolved in to the more benign foliage and pearls". And as such, it later came to indicate sanctuary and symbolise good fortune. On occasions, the demons are omitted, and only the garlands used.

In the examples at Ahneint, almost all the bulging-eyed fiends are bearded, have bushy eyebrows and wear foreign looking caps. Many menace the viewer by baring their teeth in a grinning display; the long canines seen on later demonic faces are missing. One variant has stylised leaves issuing from his face and beard, strangely reminiscent of the Green Man (the spirit of the forest) of Europe. As Europeans and Indians are often depicted in unenviable situations in the murals within the locality,



Side view of a *daung-yin* finial with supporting kinnara

this is evidence that the Myanmar of the day envisaged foreigners as *ah yaing* (brutish and uncivilised), to be used appropriately as demons.

Not all the embellishments around the bell area are of malevolent beings, some are of multi-petalled flowers with two plume-





Kinnara with the *kyay kway* (curling) decoration beneath it



Kinnara with protruding tongue on the tympanum of an arch. One of the unusual features at Ahneint



A rare design of flowers and swags on the bell section of a stupa

like projections issuing from the centre; this pattern has not been observed elsewhere. The borders vary, with loops, usually *thazin khway pan tan* (curling sprigs of orchid), *palair tan* (pearl strands) and swags.

The bands which break up the tapering structure are composed of either

tightly-packed stylised lotus petals or multi-layered flowers. Others consists of elaborately plaited strips interspersed between rows of *ywair lon* (orbs).

It is in the areas around porticos, corner pilasters, arch pediments, lintels, niche-arches, and doorways that the *pan tau thamma* (carvers in stucco) or *ingaday pan tau pyinna the* (workers in cement and stucco) exhibited their prowess in this craft.

During the Nyaungyan period (1600–1752), ornamental figures made an appearance on the apex of the *mok* or *ta gair* (doorway). In the pediment area, known as *daung yin* (peacock's chest; similar to the *cho fa* of the Thai), which is a curving ornament on the edge of a roof, other decorative figures began also to be incorporated. One in particular is of a dancing kinnara, placed as if supporting the curving ornament which in this version resembles a hooded serpent. Although the craftsmanship is not of high quality, nevertheless, the artist has achieved a pleasing effect.

The kinnara's hands are depicted in the traditional dancing gesture, palms to the front, index finger and thumb touching, and the remaining fingers curled fully back. While some describe this as the naga profile, others call it the garuda (vehicle of Vishnu) gesture; the symbolism is unclear. The serenely smiling Buddha-like face is in

deep repose, and the downcast eyes dream of the fabled Himawunta (the Hemavat of Hindu mythology) and abode of such exotic beings.

Other variations in ornamentation are pairs of karavika and naga. Unlike representations in later versions the design of these two are exceptional. The crests, neck, wings and elongated tail feathers of the birds, hang in graceful loops, with the sharp ends pointing down. In later models, the terminals invariably point up.

Among the dragons, too, the three *ah mauk* (plume-like hoods) emerge from below the cheek, curl over the head, leaving the snout free; this characteristic design is one of the hallmarks of this creature from the 17th to the 18th centuries. In recent renditions, these hoods are replaced by complicated flame-like projections hiding the snout and rising to a point above it. At Ahneint, the undulating and scaly bodies of the dragons frame a few of the small doorways.

Some of the niche-arches display demons with globular eyes, seated on the coiled tail feathers of a pair of birds. Their hands are raised in a menacing gesture. Conversely, some stucco artists have opted for plainer symbols on these arches and have used the magical *kalatha oh* (vase of ambrosia, the Indian *kalasa* pot, also indicative of fertility).





Doorway with naga dragons



A portico, karavika (cranes) and a kinnara above



Terraced stupa with guardian lions



Guardian lion with stylised mane





Garuda in a threat gesture with exposed tongue

This was an apt symbol as the land was extremely productive due to the annual deposits of silt by the river.

What must surely be the most unusual decorative imagery characteristic of Ahneint, are the kinnara and the garuda. Their uniqueness is in the way the imaginative stucco artist has portrayed the animated faces—with a protruding tongue; close examination confirmed this description, and did not reveal that it was an inept attempt at portraying a beak. At this distance in time, one can only conjecture as to the original meaning of this curious expression, and that this was in all probability a threat display, similar to those of the Maoris of New Zealand.

While the kinnara are elaborately depicted, the garudas are relatively plain. The former are surrounded in a swirling mass of elegantly trailing, or curling feathers, with ornamental bands. Both hands are shown at chest level with fingers gracefully arched back. Long wing feathers sprout from the jewelled wrists. Each wears a tapering crown with a nimbus of fine feathers behind. An elaborate collar and strings of pearls complete the accessories.

Other imagery connected with pagodas are the guardian *chinthe* (lions). Throughout the country, although pairs of these beasts are to be found in profusion at religious locations, they in no way resemble the living animal and are highly stylised. These creatures are more often than not depicted sejant (seated on their hind legs). While the lions at Ahneint follow this traditional posture, the stucco artist has created them with unique embellishments. Although lions are usually sited at the main entrances to a pagoda, here they also appear at the four cor-

ners of many of the shrines. This was presumably for added protection.

The lion's bushy mane has been tamed and crafted into neat layers, with each intricately decorated section terminating in an upturned curl at the back. The remaining hair on the broad shoulders is transformed into a cape, and worked into tiny motifs in a variety of designs, mainly of a floral nature. Long flame-like ribbons, which twist upwards to the shoulders, symbolise the hairs around its ankles. Claws are spread and sharp, ready to attack those who came to the shrine with evil intent.

The hazard which the demons and these unusual guardians were meant to be confronting were the adversaries of religion and vandals. Regrettably, the virtuous souls responsible for these defensive security features did not take into account the uglier side of human nature.

As the prosperity of Ahneint plummeted and the inhabitants dwindled, shrinking the once prosperous habitation site into small villages, the shrub jungle began to encroach. Monastic lands and enclosures around ruins were farmed. More recently, during the late 1940s and early 1950s, the countryside around Ahneint came under the control of Myanmar Communists; disturbing stories abound. Despoliation of religious shrines has always been regarded as a heinous crime by the Myanmar, and dedicatory inscriptions regularly end with terrible curses. Despite these warnings, some peasants turned to breaking into the relic chambers for their precious contents. Cavernous holes in Buddha images, pedestals and the structures, still bear witness to their handiwork. Being in such an isolated area, the thieves had all the time in the world, picking off unguarded sites. No one dared to complain or else wisely turned a blind eye, besides who could they protest to?

According to the information from locals, agents working for the national and international antiques trade are said to appear regularly in the region seeking ancient artefacts. The looting of cultural objects in the surrounding pagodas has increased, and many a shrine now contains only headless images. The villagers are therefore naturally suspicious of strangers. Such destruction is now, of course, worldwide.

At the time of my visits, apart from fixing grilles to a few temples with murals, almost all the structures were still unprotected by the Department of Archaeology. This is understandable, as whatever little funds it receives have to be reserved for the hundreds of more prominent sites. Several of the Ahneint shrines with wall paintings are on the verge of collapse; some are being used for storage. With careful restoration by trained personnel, and without the application of the ubiquitous whitewash, the unique pagodas with their cream coloured stucco would most certainly become an attraction not only to tourists but also to all Buddhists.

The disappointingly few English titles in the bibliography will testify to the fact

that little has been written about this area. Surprisingly, even in the Myanmar language, there are no more than two indifferent articles on Ahneint. Meanwhile, the little Village of the Rhino slumbers on, its magically-charged pagoda guardians of stucco totally impotent against the apathy and vandalism of man.

But desecrators beware, in the Kema-waya pagoda inscription of 1207, the pious donor and wife of the noble lord Kingathu at the Court of Bagan, guaranteed that after death, such a person would be "immersed waist-deep in a slab of rock 60 days' journey square" for all time, "and upon whom the saving influence" of the compassionate Buddhas will be "exerted in vain".

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