

A Brief Account of the Old Town, Dagon (In the Context of the Town and the Shwedagon Pagoda)

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Abstract

This Paper focuses on the general study of an old town called Dagon which is situated in the lower part of Myanmar since the ancient times. It also attempts to reveal the account of Dagon connecting with the story of the Shwedagon Pagoda. The objectives of the paper are to explore the historical data relating to Dagon, to connect the town with the Shwedagon Pagoda and to explain about the emergence of Rankon (the End of Strife and Enemies, the War Finished) (Rangoon, name called in English) in new name. In revealing the account of Dagon, it is relied on the primary sources and the secondary documents, and the methods of narrating the events and linking the historical facts are applied. The study gains two results: discovery of the existence of Dagon as an old town which belongs to the Mons; and realization of the link between the town and the Shwedagon Pagoda. By studying the brief account of Dagon, it is recognized that Dagon existed as a town facing with struggles throughout the ages; and that the Shwedagon Pagoda, as an important role, involved in developing the historical events of town from Dagon to Rankon (Rangoon) (Yangon).

Key words: Account, Context, Dagon, Historical Events, Rankon (Rangoon) (Yangon), the Shwedagon Pagoda, Story

Introduction

In Myanmar, there existed the old cities and towns throughout its ages in accordance with the geographical setting and the ethnic settlements. Generally, as the stronger ethnic groups, Bamar and Shan established their cities and towns in the upper part of Myanmar; in the same way, Mon and Rakhine in the lower part of Myanmar. Based on feudal monarchies, their respective rulers attempted to develop and flourish the cities and towns for the successive existence of their groups. Here, it is noted that the old town of Dagon which is situated in the lower part of Myanmar and belongs to the Mon ethnic group gains prominence for its strategic location and its religious establishment.

The first thing of prominence is concerned with the location of Dagon. The Mons established their full strength at Bago Hanthawady in the lower Myanmar. To reach the Mon Capital, Bago Hanthawady, Dagon stands as an important entry and a stepping-stone. The second thing is concerned with the religious establishment. The narrative history of Dagon is closely associated with that of the Shwedagon Pagoda which is one of the sacred monuments in Myanmar. The place, i.e. Dagon, was known as Asitanjana or Okkalapa some five hundred years before the Christian era. According to a story (legend), two merchants, Taphussa and Bhalikka from Okkalapa went to India on a trading venture. They met the Buddha under the sacred Bo tree and offered the Buddha honey cakes. Having partaken of the cakes presented by them, the Buddha bestowed on them eight sacred hairs from His head. On their return, they were deprived of two hairs by the King of Ajjhata and another two by the King of Nagas (Serpents). Arriving at Okkalapa, they were greeted by King Okkalapa who held a great festival in honour of the sacred relics. With the help of Sakka, King of Devas, a site on the Theinguttara Hill outside the gates of Asitanjana was selected to lay the foundation of a pagoda for enshrining the hair-relics. From that time onwards, it became appeared the Shwedagon Pagoda began to exist in that place.

Thus, it is recognized that the historical account of Dagon is important for studying history of nation-building and for tracing back to the establishment of Buddhism in Myanmar.

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Because of its inherent opportunities, Dagon developed as Rankon (in 1755, town renamed by King Alaungmintaya of Konbaung period), Rangoon (in English pronunciation during the colonial period), and present Yangon, taking the position of strategic seaport in the modern times.

Data and Methods

The data used in this paper have been mainly collected from the primary sources and the secondary documents in National Library, Library of Department of Historical Research, Universities' Central Library, Library of University of Yangon, Library of History Department (University of Yangon) and Library of History Department (Dagon University). Examining the data collected, the paper is presented by the application of methods of narrating the events and linking the historical facts. For further realizations, the necessary explanations and remarks are included in presenting the account.

Findings

It is noted that the History of an old town, Dagon, stands up, to such an extent in the historical development of Myanmar which had been flourishing the monarchical system. It is observed that a hoary story of the Shwedagon Pagoda involves in developing the historical events of Dagon. It is also found that Dagon gains prominence as Rankon (the End of Strife and Enemies, the War Finished) after the capture of Myanmar forces from the hands of Hanthawady forces.

Discussions

“Dagon” (‘*kə! ’*ʰ in Myanmar word) is the original Mon name. The name was first given to the great pagoda, and thereafter to the neighbouring village and a town. In the Mon language, Dagon signifies “Athwart” and after the usual fashion, a legend had grown up connecting the name with a story of a tree lying “Athwart Hill-Top” which supernaturally indicated where the sacred relics of one of the Buddhas had been deposited. It also gives a derivation from Trikumbha-nagara or Tikumbha-nagara signifying “3-Hill City” (as found in an Inscription¹): Tikum, Takum and Takun (wʰur! wʰur! wʰur! in Myanmar words, in Mon pronunciation).² Another derivation is Tiloy (wʰur! ʰ in Myanmar word, in Mon pronunciation), “High Land”, on which the Pagoda was built.

In regard to the story of the Shwedagon Pagoda³, there existed the documentary evidences and the inscriptional evidence. The Pali commentaries mention that the Buddha accepted an interview of the two merchant-brothers, Taphussa and Bhalikka from Okkalapa; that the Buddha gave the gift of hairs to them; and that they deposited the hair-relics in a shrine on Theinguttara Hill to the east of Okkalapa⁴ or Asitanjana, their native town. It may be assumed that such Pali commentaries are re-told by later books without additional information.

Forchhammer⁵ in his notes has given a description of the inscriptions⁶ relating to the context of Dagon and the Shwedagon Pagoda:

¹ Stone Inscription, The Kalyani Sima, Bago

² The original name was Dagon, derived from the Pali Tikhumbha, meaning “Three Pots” and signifying that the city (nagara) was situated in a locality of three pot-shaped hills.

³ The town (city) of Dago and the Pagoda go together and the Pagoda takes its name from the town. The prefix “Shwe” means “Gold” in Myanmar and forms part of the name of the pagodas.

⁴ It was also known as Okkala (the classical name of Orissa in India)

⁵ Emil Forchhammer (the Epigraphist)

⁶ The Inscriptions engraved by the Mon King Dhammazedi (1472-1492)

“On the eastern slope of the hill upon which the Shwedagon Pagoda stands, and about fifty feet below the present platform, are three large stone inscriptions. ... The inscriptions were engraved by order of the Mon King Dhammazedi in A.D.1485. ... Though the Pagoda is said to have been founded before the Gotama Buddha had reached Parinirvana⁷, yet these inscriptions are the most ancient remains that have as yet been discovered on or about this sanctuary.”

In an examination of the Stones⁸, it is found that both the north and south faces of the North Stone contain the Pali text, both the north and south faces of the Middle Stone contain the Mon text, both the north and south faces of the South Stone contain the Myanmar text. And of each of the Stones the north face is the obverse and the south face the reverse. It is examined that both the Mon and the Myanmar inscriptions relate the events: the interview of the two merchant-brothers with the Buddha, the theft of the two hair-relics by the Naga King, the last days of the brothers and the repairs done to the Pagoda by the Mon Kings.

Besides, a Mon chronicle⁹ says:

“King Okkalapa continued to worship the eight hair-relics. After that time the line of thirty-two kings ruling at Lagun¹⁰ town became acolytes and worshipped the eight hair-relics. A long time after that, there being no one to worship and do repairs to the Lagun shrine, it fell into ruins and the place was covered with the growth of trees, bushes and creepers.”

“King Asokadhammaraja of Rajagriha¹¹ made a search for the place where the hair-relics were enshrined. Asokadhammaraja had the place cleared of trees, bushes and creepers, and after building a golden shrine, he died.”

“King Dwattaboung¹² of Sriksetra¹³ paid homage to the hair-relics, and having planted on the southeast corner of the shrine an umbrella, with a handle of emerald and leaves of diamond stones as an offering, he returned home.”

“King Anawrahtaminsaw¹⁴ of Bagan thought that he would dig up the relic-chamber and take away the hair-relics. While fifty men with spades in their hands, were digging, a terrific whirlwind storm arose, so that King’s soldiers and attendants were all frightened and Anawrahtaminsaw, having offered golden and silver umbrella and inserted on the northeast corner of the shrine a ruby of the kind found in Mount Vepulla, returned to Bagan.”

According to the story of the Shwedagon Pagoda, it is known that the first site of Dagon was built about 585 B.C. by two merchant-brothers who had received Gotama Buddha’s hairs and buried them on the summit of a hill and erected over them the Shwedagon Pagoda. As a trustworthy document¹⁵, it is found that the Pagoda was restored by sovereigns of the Mon Kingdom¹⁶; and that in the beginning of the 16th century, the Mon Queen Shinsawbu¹⁷

⁷ Final Release, Decease of the Buddha

⁸ The examinations of Mon text and Myanmar text were made by Dr. C.O. Blagden and Thiripyanchi U Mya (the Epigraphists).

⁹ *Slapat Wan Dat Kyuik Lagun*

¹⁰ It means Dagon town. It is also another name for Dagon in Mon language.

¹¹ King Asoka (c. 273-232 B.C.) of Magadha in the Majjhima Country (India Subcontinent)

¹² King Dwttaboung (443-373 B.C.)

¹³ The Ancient Pyu City, Hmawza (Pyay)

¹⁴ King Anawrahta (1044-1077), the first founder of Theravada Buddhism in Bagan in the upper Myanmar

¹⁵ King Dhammazedi’s Stone Inscription, 1485

¹⁶ Kingdom of Bago Hanthawady in the lower Myanmar

raised a large terrace and erected a new pagoda over the old stupa¹⁸, and she built a palace and resided at Dagon. Furthermore, according to a Mon History¹⁹, it is learnt that Shinsawbu built a town on the west of the Pagoda.

In the earlier times, Dagon remained of little importance in the lower Myanmar. It may be assumed that after Bago Hanthawady, Syriam and Dala have been deprived of their importance in commerce; Dagon which took possession of the Shwedagon Pagoda stood up itself as a port and came to achieve the commercial advantages and prosperity in the lower Myanmar. From the eyes of the western explorers and researchers, it is noticed that Dagon has been a town in the context of the Shwedagon Pagoda. For an instance, Albert Fytche²⁰ made a description of Dagon that:

“About two days’ journey from Pegu²¹, there is a Varelle or Pagode which is the Pilgrimage of the Pegues: it is called Dagonne, and is of a wonderful bigness and all gilded from the foot to the toppe.”

According to the description, it is known that the old town of Dagon, then, was a great place of pilgrimage for the people of Myanmar.

Passing times as a port in the hands of the Hanthawady forces, Dagon was seized by the Bamar forces of King Alaungmintaya²² in the early Konbaung period. King Alaungmintaya who launched a full-scale operation against the Bago Hanthawady forces took possession of towns in the lower Myanmar. As his victory of military campaigns, the King used to name the towns he seized. After his capture of Dagon in 1755, King Alaungmintaya renamed it Rankon (&efukef in Myanmar language and in Myanmar interpretation) as a symbol of representation of ending war, strife and enemies.²³

From the time onwards, Rankon (Rangoon in English pronunciation) has been under kings of the upper Myanmar. It was placed under the governance of Myowun (Governor of Town) throughout the Konbaung period. An earthquake in June 1768 resulted in the work of reconstruction of the Shwedagon by King Myedu²⁴. Fifty years after Myedu’s work of reconstruction, Rankon became a battleground. Following a series of border clashes, hostilities broke out between the Myanmar and the British.²⁵ A British expeditionary force took possession of Rankon in May 1824 and its commander, Sir Archibald Campbell established his headquarters at the Shwedagon because it offered a position commanding the countryside. In November 1824, Myanmar General Mahabandula established a ring around Rankon and launched his assault. However, unable to prevail against the strong British defensive position, Mahabandula decided to retire to Danubyu. The British troops were in occupation of the

¹⁷ Queen Shinsawbu (1453-1472)

¹⁸ Stupa in Sanskrit (Thupa in Pali) means mound, tumulus, monument erected over sacred relics.

¹⁹ *The Mon Paklat History*

²⁰ Albert Fytche is Lieutenant General and served as the Second Chief Commissioner (1867-1871) of British Myanmar (the lower Myanmar).

²¹ Bago Hanthawady

²² King Alaungmintaya (1752-1760), the first founder of the Konbaung Kingdom

²³ (a) “Royal Order of King Alaungmintaya, 10 June 1755”, Than Tun, Edited, *The Royal Orders of Burma, A.D.1598-1885*, III, A.D.1751-1781, Kyoto, The Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, 1985, pp.7-8, 98-99

(b) Ashin Ariyawantha Ardeiccaranthi, *Mahayazawinkyaw (The Celebrated Chronicle)* called *Razaindarazawaramandani* hand-written manuscript copied from palm-leaf manuscript, ^{third bundle}, Department of Historical Research, Yangon

²⁴ King Myedu (King Hsinbyushin) (1763-1776)

²⁵ The First Anglo-Myanmar War (1824-1826) in the reign of King Sagaing (1819-1838)

Shwedagon. After concluding a peace treaty in February 1826, they evacuated the Shwedagon.²⁶

Significantly, in 1841, King Tharrawady²⁷ founded a royal city on the south and west of the Shwedagon Pagoda. It is noted that the city was the supposed site of the ancient village of Okkalapa, a name which had also been applied in former days to a kingdom of the delta, presumably west of Dala. King Tharrawady destroyed the stockade of the old town of Rankon by the river. He threw up a bund around the site of his new town.²⁸

The story of Rankon (Dagon) has been traced up to the War of 1852²⁹ when the War was fought and Bago became part of the British Empire. From that date, works were put in hand which have almost entirely obliterated the old town or towns. Rankon with the Shwedagon was lost to the British.³⁰

Following the British acquisition of the lower Myanmar, they tried to turn their acquisition to economic profit and the Ayeyarwady delta developed into a rice-growing, rice-exporting region, particularly after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. Rankon (Rangoon in English pronunciation) was the main port of the developing export trade and its population increased two and half times³¹ between 1872 and 1901.³²

In 1874, the British Colonial Government handed the Rankon (Rangoon) over to municipal administration. Fraser³³ laid out the town on a plan called the Fraser's Plan.³⁴

Conclusion

It is a study on the brief account of an old town in the ancient times. The town has several names of derivation in Pali, Mon and Myanmar languages throughout the ages. From this study, it is resulted in discovering the existence of Dagon as an old town which belongs to the Mons; and realizing the connection of Dagon town with a historically long-standing pagoda entitled the Shwe Ti Kum (A large Hill covered with Gold, forming the small Three Hilltops descending from Himalaya Mountain Ranges in Indian subcontinent), later the Shwedagon Pagoda. It is noted that after the capture by King Alaungmintaya in 1755, Dagon continued to exist as a seaport in times of the colonized Myanmar and the independent Myanmar.

By studying the account of Dagon, it can be understood that Dagon existed as a town facing with struggles throughout the ages; and that the Shwedagon Pagoda, as an important role, involved in developing the historical events of town from Dagon to Rankon (Rangoon) (Yangon).

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²⁶ U Tun Aung Chain and U Thein Hlaing, *Shwedagon*, Yangon, The Universities Press, 1996, pp.5-6 (Hereafter cited as *Shwedagon*.)

²⁷ King Tharrawady (1838-1846) was also known as King Konbaung.

²⁸ W.G. Fraser, "Old Rangoon", *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, XXIV, I, 1934, pp.56-57 (Hereafter cited as Fraser, "Rangoon", *JBR*.)

²⁹ The Second Anglo-Myanmar War (1852-1853) in the reign of King Bagan (1846-1853)

³⁰ Fraser, "Rangoon", p.58

³¹ from 98, 138 to 248, 060 (2 1/2 times)

³² *Shwedagon*, pp.12-13

³³ W.G. Fraser, an officer of the Engineers in the Municipal Administration (formerly, a Major of the Royal Engineers)

³⁴ Fraser, "Rangoon", *JBR*, pp.58-59

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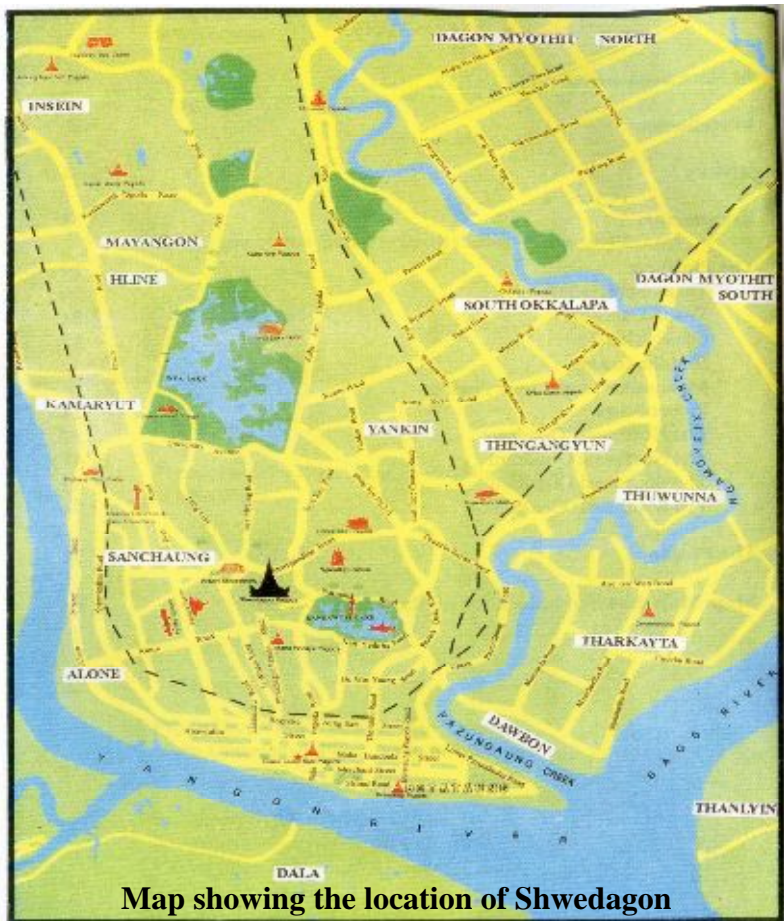
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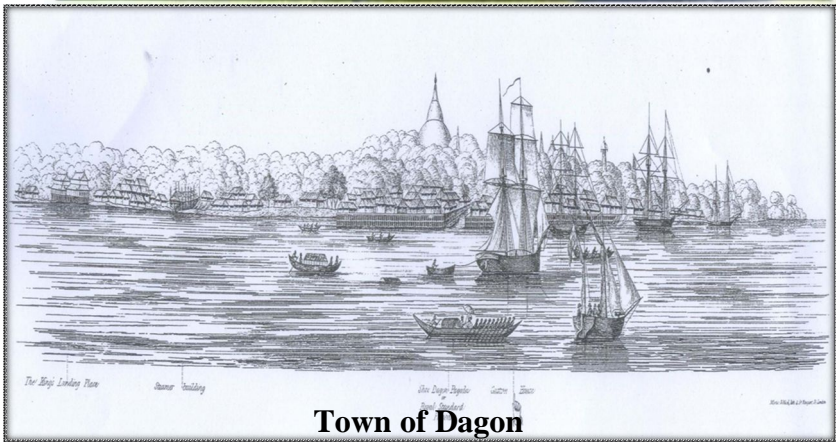
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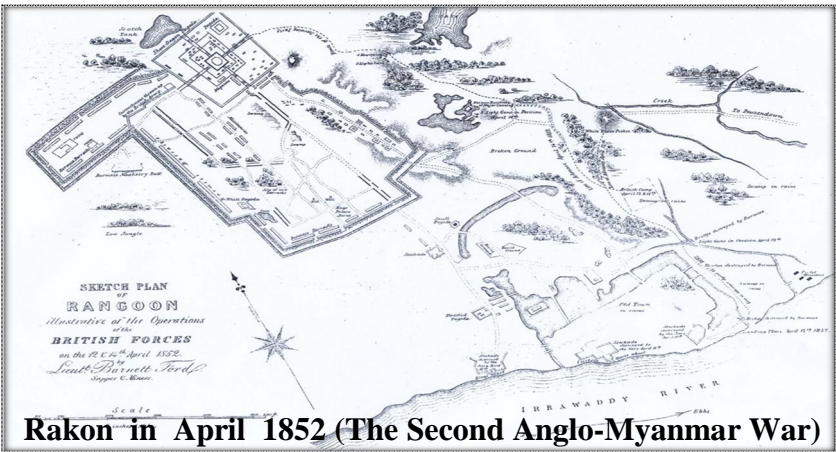
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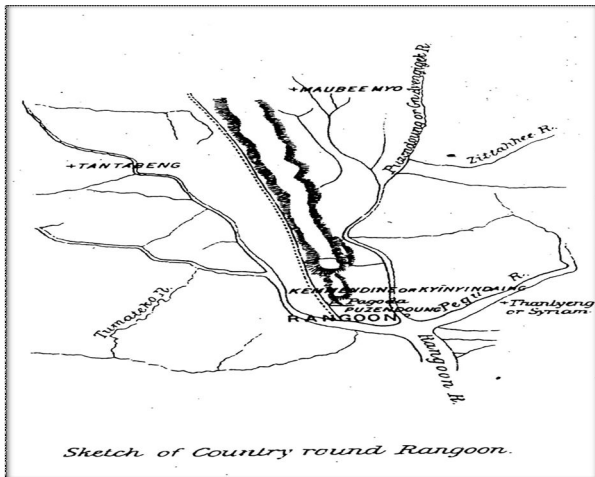
Map showing the location of Shwedagon



Town of Dagon



Rakon in April 1852 (The Second Anglo-Myanmar War)



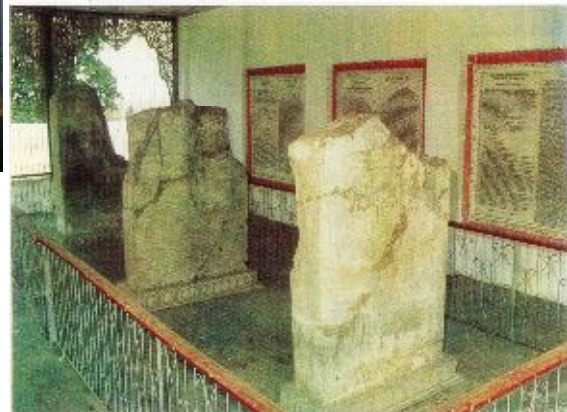
Sketch of Rangoon after 1853



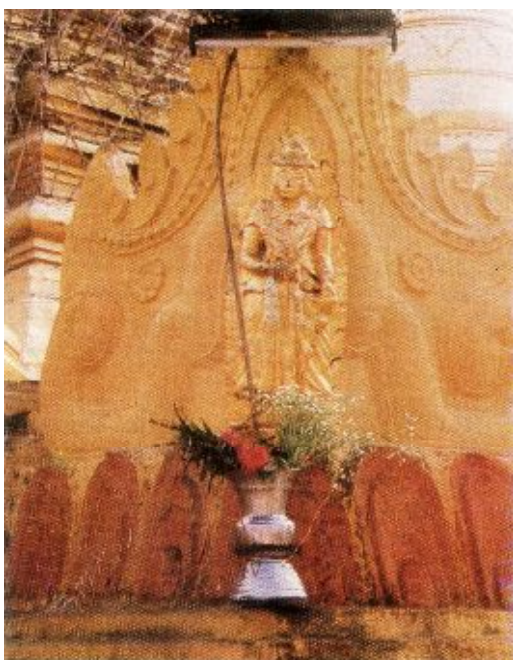
Shwedagon Pagoda, 1855



Shwedagon Pagoda at present time



Inscription of the Shwedagon Pagoda



King of Okkalapa